

Joint statement highlighting the alarming escalation in use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia

10 October 2023

On World Day Against the Death Penalty, we, the undersigned Parliamentarians, express our concern at the alarming escalation in use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia, in flagrant disregard for the right to life and contradicting pledges made by the authorities.

Saudi Arabia has for years been among the countries carrying out the highest number of executions in the world. Yet despite a pledge in 2018 from Saudi Arabia's crown prince Mohammed bin Salman to reduce use of the death penalty, the rate of executions has continued to soar. Since the rise to power of Mohammed bin Salman and his father, King Salman, in 2015, the annual execution rate has increased by 82%. In 2022 alone, 196 individuals were executed, the highest annual figure in recent Saudi history, and 110 have been executed so far in 2023 (as of 10 October).

The main method of execution has traditionally been beheading, and in recent years has also included shooting. Yet in the absence of transparency, and with executions often carried out in secret, no reliable figures on the methods are available. But the cruelty of execution extends beyond the act itself, as families are frequently prevented from saying goodbye to their loved ones and learn only through the media that an execution has been carried out. They are also often denied the chance to mourn their loved ones in accordance with their religious practices, since the authorities in many cases fail to return victims' bodies to their families.

In November 2022 Saudi Arabia also resumed executions for drug-related offences, following a short-lived moratorium that the authorities said had been in place since January 2020. In further disregard for human life, the Saudi authorities have failed to uphold promises to discontinue capital punishment for those who were minors at the time of their alleged offences. Currently, at least nine individuals are on death row for offences committed when they were under the age of 18, some as young as 12. The majority were convicted by the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) under the draconian Counter-Terrorism Law for acts protected by the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including participating in protests and attending funerals, following grossly unfair trials that relied on coerced confessions.

Other individuals are currently at risk of execution on charges relating to freedom of expression, including peaceful social media activity, as the SCC and the Counter-Terrorism Law continue to be weaponised as tools for silencing dissent. Defendants are convicted on vague charges that criminalise peaceful opposition as "terrorist" offences that can carry the death penalty. In a country where judicial proceedings are notorious for their disregard for legal safeguards and the holding of trials in secret, it is crucial that the death penalty is abolished to ensure it cannot be exploited as a means to eliminate individuals who express dissent, and to prevent further tragic miscarriages of justice.

We call on the Saudi authorities to immediately revise laws that criminalise freedom of expression and peaceful activism and that allow death sentences to be imposed on peaceful dissidents and human rights defenders. We urge the authorities to establish a moratorium on use of the death penalty with the aim of working towards its abolition, and in the mean time limit application of the death penalty to only the most serious of crimes, and prohibit the execution of minors.

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