

Four years on from the arrest of Alaa Brinji for tweeting: Saudi Arabia remains a prison for journalists

On May 14, 2018, the Saudi journalist Alaa Brinji will have spent four years behind bars for expressing his opinions, advocating for human rights, and publishing information about rights violations.

Brinji, who used to write for *Al-Bilad*, *Al-Sharq* and *Okaz* newspapers, is one of Saudi Arabia's best-known journalists. His arrest was accompanied by several violations of his rights, including initially being held incommunicado, denied contact with the outside world, and denied access to a lawyer throughout his trial.

Alaa Brinji was brought before the Specialised Criminal Court, the infamous Saudi court that deals with terrorist cases, and charges were brought against him that related to his having expressed opinions and published information about government violations of human rights. The charges were based on Twitter posts in which Brinji had backed the right of women in Saudi Arabia to drive, and supported human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience.

The Saudi government has since introduced changes, many of which Alaa Brinji called for and tweeted about, yet in March 2016 he was sentenced to five years in prison followed by an eight-year travel ban together with a fine. Three months later, in June 2016, the judge increased Brinji's jail term to seven years, claiming the original sentence had not taken account of charges of what he called "ridiculing Islam" and sending messages liable to harm "religious values", in accordance with the hardline official version of Islam.

The fourth anniversary of Alaa Brinji's arrest coincides with Saudi Arabia's ranking on the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders slipping from 168 last year (out of 180 countries) to 169 in 2018. And as the Saudi Crown Prince trumpets a new era of major reforms and promises to promote free speech, Brinji's continued detention calls into question the seriousness of the Crown Prince's assertions, and the likelihood of their being put into practice and prisoners of conscience being granted their freedom.

By continuing to detain Alaa Brinji, along with dozens of other journalists and bloggers, and by refusing his request for an appeal and obstructing his right of access to a lawyer, the Saudi government is confirming its intention to maintain its policy of silencing any and all opinion by means of arbitrary arrests, flawed trials and harsh sentences.



We demand that Alaa Brinji be allowed and enabled to appeal against the verdict passed on him for his peaceful and legitimate work as a journalist and as a citizen with the right to hold and express opinions and speak out in favour of reform and in support of human rights.

ALQST for Human Rights
European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights
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