

URGENT ACTION

POLITICAL LEADER IMPRISONED FOR SPEECH

On 27 April 2020, the trial of the leader of the opposition Algerian political party, Union Démocratique et Sociale (UDS), Karim Tabbou, has been postponed to 1 June 2020 due to regulations related to COVID-19. After an unfair trial characterized by lack of notification for the defense and a collapse of the defendant in the court room, an appeals court sentenced Karim Tabbou to one year in prison for speech related charges.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Minister of Justice Belkacem Zeghmati

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Your Excellency,

Karim Tabbou's trial was yet again postponed to 1 June 2020, as part of regulations from the authorities to control the spread of COVID-19. Karim Tabbou has been imprisoned for more than 8 months now and had suffered dire health conditions in prison prior to slow recovery as reported by his lawyers who continue to pay him visits.

Karim Tabbou was first arrested on 11 September 2019 and charged with "undermining the morale of the army" punishable by up to 10 years in prison under article 75 of the penal code. More than two weeks after this arrest, he was released on 25 September 2019, supposedly pending trial. To his surprise, he was immediately arrested again the next day for a video that he had published in April 2019. This time, he was charged with "inciting to commit acts of violence with the intention of harming national defense" and "harming national unity" by preparing and publishing videos on social media. For these speech-related set of charges, Tabbou was first tried before the Sidi M'hamed first instance court on 11 March 2020. The court sentenced him to a fine and 12 months in prison, 6 months of which were suspended. He was due for release on 25 March 2020 having already served the six months in prison. However, a day before the due release date, on March 24, the Ruisseau Court of Appeals upheld his conviction in a trial that violated fair trial principles including denying the defence reasonable time to prepare their argument and access to case file before the trial and returned him to prison where he remains until now.

Karim was only notified of the trial the same morning, when he was then transferred from Koléa prison to the appeals court without his family or lawyers' knowledge. His lawyers were only notified of the trial by a colleague who happened to be at the courtroom at the time. Karim collapsed at the court room due to a spike in blood pressure and his lawyers rushed to court to find him at the courtroom's infirmary. They boycotted the trial after the judges refused to postpone it and pronounced a verdict in absentia in a flagrant violation of his due process rights.

I therefore ask you to immediately and unconditionally release Karim Tabbou and quash his conviction as he is a prisoner of conscience. Pending his release, I call on you to ensure he has access to adequate health care and protection from the risks of infection with COVID19. I finally call on you to investigate the conditions of his arrest and detention and release all other prisoners of conscience in Algeria.

Sincerely,

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In July 2013, the Algerian authorities refused to grant Karim Tabbou's opposition party legal status. Tabbou has been an active figure of the Hirak movement since its beginning. His activism and political opposition made him a target of the authorities who arrested him in September 2019. Karim Tabbou has been in solitary confinement for six months since his arrest in September 2019. He is only allowed a one-hour break per day without contact with other prisoners. Despite suffering alarming health condition that solicited a public statement from a group of Algerian doctors warning about the dangers of keeping him in prison and mobilization to demand his release, he remains in prison to date. According to his lawyers who visited him on 25 March 2020 immediately after the appeal verdict, he was showing signs of weak health in prison including a partial facial paralysis. His health has improved now but like many other prisoners, he runs the risk of the spread of COVID-19.

In February 2019, peaceful mass protests started in Algeria marking the beginning of the now famous Hirak movement. The protests initially started to call former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika not to run for a fifth term. The Hirak street pressure forced Bouteflika's resignation in April 2019 and staged peaceful mass protests around the country.

As new presidential elections were announced for 12 December 2019, the Hirak continued to oppose these elections and demanded radical political change. Eventually, the authorities began to crackdown on activists, opposition, journalists and protesters. Karim Tabbou is not the only political detainee in Algeria. Many other individuals suffer the same fate for expressing opinions or participating in protests, such as journalist Khaled Drareni and civil society activist Abdelouahab Fersaoui, currently held in pre-trial detention for speech. These arrests send a deliberate and frightening message to demonstrators, including political and other civil society activists, that anyone who dares to oppose or criticize the government will be punished.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Arabic, French or English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 24 June 2020.

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Karim Tabbou (He/him)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde28/2092/2020/en/>