

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 14, 2018

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We write to you to in support of activists and supporters of the women's rights movement detained in Saudi Arabia. At least three women's rights activists and three men associated with the women's rights movement are currently detained. Four other women's rights activists arrested since May 15 have been released, though the conditions of their release have not been made public. Although the State Department spokesperson recently expressed some concern about these detentions at a press briefing and noted that the administration is "keeping a close eye" on Saudi Arabia's proposed reform program, we urge you to take these arrests up directly with Saudi authorities further and forthrightly condemn the persecution of these activists.

Saudi Arabia, at the direction of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has initiated what appear to be promising reforms, including a long overdue end to the kingdom's longstanding ban on women driving (set to begin June 24). However, it is clear that the Saudi government is still cracking down on activists and bloggers, including those who support women's rights and are seen as pushing for too much, too quickly. Saudi rights defenders said that authorities ordered activists to keep quiet about the end of the driving ban, even after the public announcement that the ban would be lifted. The Kingdom also continues to detain blogger Raif Badawi on absurd charges of apostasy (as well as his lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair) despite widespread international condemnation.

Conspicuously, the latest wave of crackdowns coincided with the Crown Prince's recent trip to the United States during which he offered rhetorical but welcome support for women's rights reforms in Saudi Arabia. During his interview with 60 Minutes on March 19, he said: "Saudi women still have not received their full rights. There are rights stipulated in Islam that they still don't have. We have come a very long way and have a short way to go."

Local state media outlets identified the long-time rights advocates Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, and Eman al-Nafjan among those arrested. Al-Yousef, 60, is a retired professor of computer science at King Saud University, and a leading activist in the longstanding campaign against the male guardianship system. Al-Nafjan, 39, is an assistant professor of linguistics at a university in Riyadh, and the author of a popular blog on Saudi society, culture, and women's rights. In 2013, she and al-Yousef led a protest against the driving ban by filming as they drove by police stations in Riyadh and were both briefly detained. Saudi authorities detained al-Hathloul, 28, in November 2014, as she attempted to drive into Saudi Arabia from the United

Arab Emirates while live streaming to bring international attention to the issue. She was held in a juvenile detention center for 73 days.

The Saudi government has accused the detained activists under thin pretenses of “suspicious contact with foreign parties” and “undermining security and stability” of the state. The accusations appear to be based directly on their activism. If officially charged and convicted, they face lengthy prison terms. Saudi rights defenders report that the activists are currently being held incommunicado.

Support for human rights has long been a cornerstone of American foreign policy. These blatant rights violations on the part of a close ally reflect extremely poorly on the United States. As such, we urge you to communicate these concerns to the Saudi government.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



BERNARD SANDERS
United States Senator



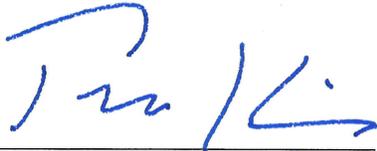
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