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UA 1/21, **UPDATE 1**, AI Index: MDE 29/3863/2021 of 19 March 2021
The original index is MDE 29/3481/2021 of 5 January 2021

MOROCCO

IMPRISONED ACADEMIC'S LIFE IN DANGER

On 4 March, Moroccan academic and human rights defender Maati Monjib started a hunger strike, despite suffering a chronic heart condition and diabetes, to protest his detention and his sentencing in absentia to one year in prison in two separate cases brought against him in relation to the exercise of his freedoms of expression and association, following years of unlawful digital surveillance and judicial harassment. On 27 January, Maati Monjib was unjustly sentenced for an earlier case to one year in prison and a fine of 10,000 dirhams without undergoing a hearing or receiving a summons or any notifications to his defense team to allow for a fair and proper trial.

Please ask the Head of Government to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Maati Monjib and drop all charges against him, as he is a prisoner of conscience solely detained for peacefully exercising his rights to freedom of expression and association.
- Pending his release, provide him with adequate health care necessary to ensure his heart condition is properly monitored and treated.
- Explicitly recognize the legitimacy of human rights defenders and publicly support their work, acknowledging their contribution to the advancement of human rights and to end the criminalization of their receipt of foreign funds to pursue their human rights work.

Write to:

Head of Government Saad Dine El-Othmani
Palais Royal Touarga
Rabat 10070
Morocco
Fax: 011 212 53 7771010
Twitter: @ChefGov_ma
Salutation: Your Excellency

Please copy:

Her Excellency Souriya Otmani
Ambassador for the Kingdom of Morocco
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Ottawa, Ontario K1G 3Y7
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Phone: 613 236 7391 or 613 236 6064
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Additional Information

In a statement that Maati Monjib sent out of prison through his lawyers on 4 March, he stated three major drivers behind his hunger strike. He wrote: "I begin a hunger strike starting Thursday, March 4, 2021 at 4:00 p.m. to express a distress call to public opinion following the persecution and injustice inflicted on me by the Moroccan political regime. I observe this hunger strike to protest: 1) My arbitrary arrest on 29 December 2020, 24 hours before the hearing was held in the most secret in the 2015 trial for "undermining the security of the state". A hearing that I wasn't summoned to. My defense was not informed. This trial was postponed until my arrest and ended up convicting me in absentia."

In this statement, Maati Monjib also mentions the defamation against him in "official media and those affiliated to the security services" which infringe his dignity and the presumption of innocence. He continued, "I declare to the national and international public opinion that I am completely innocent of the spurious accusations which seek to undermine my credibility as a journalist and opinion writer. The reason for all this persecution can be found in my writings critical of the regime and its political police and in my human rights defense activities such as my support for the detainees of the Hirak el Rif movement and the journalists unfairly detained under the guise of common law crimes."

In 2015, Maati Monjib went on hunger strike for 24 days when he was banned from travelling to Spain where he was scheduled to give a talk at a conference about Arab media in transition. His health deteriorated significantly during the hunger strike and he was hospitalized after losing consciousness. The authorities subsequently lifted the travel ban on 29 October 2015.

Maati Monjib and six other activists were investigated in 2015 under accusations of "threatening the internal security of the state" through "propaganda" that may threaten "the loyalty that citizens owe to the State and institutions of the Moroccan people" under Article 206 of the Penal Code. In the 2015 case against Maati Monjib and his six co-defendants, the police interrogation revolved around their receipt of foreign funds from the NGO Free Press Unlimited to conduct training sessions around the technique of StoryMaker, a secure storytelling app developed by Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Guardian Project and Small World News, which enables citizen journalists to publish content anonymously if they wish to.

According to Maati Monjib, his trial sessions usually last four or five minutes before the judge adjourns and announces the next hearing date. It has been postponed 21 times since 2015. In a letter sent to Amnesty International, the government mentioned that the reasons for the new 2020 investigation is deriving from the annual reports of 2015 and 2016 of Free Press Unlimited, which suggests that this new investigation is linked to the old case of 2015 about the receipt of foreign funding from that NGO to conduct training workshops for citizen journalists. These charges are related to legitimate activities that are protected under the right to association.

Under international human rights law, the right to freedom of association includes NGOs' capacity to engage in fundraising activities and to seek, receive and utilise resources from national, foreign and international sources. Restrictions on foreign funding that impede the ability of associations to pursue their statutory activities constitute an undue interference with Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Morocco is a party.

Maati Monjib is a prominent academic and human rights defender. He is a regular commentator on Moroccan politics in international media, think tanks and academic forums where he often shared opinions and analysis about the Moroccan authorities' infringement of human rights.