Campaign in Solidarity with Feminist Political Prisoners in the Middle East and North Africa

June 2019

The aim of this campaign is to demand the immediate and unconditional release of a diverse set of women political prisoners who oppose patriarchy and religious fundamentalism, defend women’s rights, human rights, labor rights and the rights of oppressed minorities.

It is incumbent upon feminists and socialist feminists around the world to step forward and take a more active role in opposing the oppression, torture and murder of their sisters in the Middle East and North Africa.

The women featured in this brochure are not passive victims. They are thinkers, writers and leaders who can help expand the struggle for women’s emancipation and social emancipation.

Solidarity with them is a concrete way to oppose the capitalist authoritarian and imperialist or sub-imperialist powers that are promoting exploitation, repression, misogyny, racism and war in the MENA region and around the world.

How Can You Help?

* Reprint this brochure on your website, weblog or facebook page.

*Organize an event in your city to promote this campaign and to draw connections to feminist, anti-racist, and labor struggles in your country.

For more information, contact the Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists

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Syria

The Assad regime has been able to continue its mass executions and its brutal war against Syrian revolutionaries with impunity. Thus, the names and fates of many women political prisoners are not known. Religious fundamentalist forces have also killed revolutionaries, including Arab and Kurdish women activists and fighters. It is almost certain that Syrian socialist feminists, Samira al-Khalil and Razan Zaitouni were killed by religious fundamentalist extremists in Ghouta after their abductions in December 2013. The fate of Tal al-Mallouhi remains uncertain. The Syrian poet and blogger was arrested in 2009 for threatening the security of the state without evidence. She has since then surpassed her sentence and yet remains detained.

Since the Syrian popular uprising began in March 2011, approximately 118,000 individuals have been arrested or forcibly disappeared, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Over 104,000 of those, or slightly more than 85 percent, were taken prisoner by the Syrian government.

The brutality of the Assad regime seeps through all fabrics of life in Syria. Its cruelty is particularly expressed inside its prison cells. The regime has 13 “intelligence” departments, each divided into numerous prisons. The most notorious are the Adra and Saydnaya prisons. In a report surfaced in 2017 detailing the secret hanging of 13,000 prisoners, a former guard of the Saydnaya prison described it as “the end of humanity”. Mass executions, daily torture and sexual abuse await both male and female political prisoners in Syria.

The physical torture comes in two forms. The first includes the use of certain techniques and specialized instruments to maximize the amount of pain inflicted on the prisoner. The German Chair, for example, is designed to stretch nerve muscles to the point of visibility and cause severe damage to the backbone and in some cases break it. The second form is the humiliation and degradation of prisoners via sexual violence. A report released last month by Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights details the use of water hoses, enforced sterilization and genital mutilation against male prisoners. Female prisoners are often electrocuted, beaten with horse hoses and raped systematically, which sometimes leads to unwanted pregnancies. An eye-witness reports the use of rats and rodents by soldiers during the sexual assault of an inmate resulting in her death.
Iran

Nasrin Sotudeh is a prominent human rights attorney who was arrested and imprisoned on June 13, 2013 and faces a 12-year prison term without the possibility of parole (out of a reduced 18 year sentence) for charges against her as “collusion against national security,” membership in a human rights organization that opposes the death penalty, “promoting corruption and depravity among people” and appearing in public without a headscarf. She was arrested for taking on the legal cases of the “Girls of Revolution Avenue” (women who publicly removed their headscarves) and for opposing the Iranian judiciary’s latest decree that prevents political activists and dissidents from choosing their own attorney. Sotudeh had been awaiting trial for crimes of the judiciary’s latest decree that prevents political activists and dissidents from choosing their own attorney. She was arrested again on January 20, 2019.

Senadah Emadi is a women’s rights and children’s rights activist who has been imprisoned since May 2015 and serving a seven-year prison sentence since November 2016 for charges such as distributing flyers against the death penalty, “promoting corruption and depravity among people” and appearing in public without a headscarf. She was arrested for taking on the legal cases of the “Girls of Revolution Avenue” (women who publicly removed their headscarves) and for opposing the Iranian judiciary’s latest decree that prevents political activists and dissidents from choosing their own attorney. Sotudeh had been awaiting trial for crimes of the judiciary’s latest decree that prevents political activists and dissidents from choosing their own attorney. She was arrested again on January 20, 2019.

Zeynab Jalalian is a Kurdish political activist who was arrested and imprisoned in 2008 for her activities with the political wing of the Kurdish Workers’ Party. She received a death sentence which was later commuted to life in prison on the possibility of parole. Since her arrest and imprisonment, she has suffered from systematic abuse, torture and solitary confinement for refusing to “confess” to armed activity. She has been on hunger strike for more than two years, as of December 2016, due to deliberate lack of treatment by prison authorities and the state.

Turkey

Füsun Öztürk professor of political science, signed a joint declaration for peace in Turkey in 2016 against the military operations of the state. She has been sentenced to prison for one year and three months. The statement was signed by 2212 academics from over 50 universities.

Saudi Arabia

Women have been imprisoned and put on trial for opposing the discriminatory male guardianship laws that prevent women from exercising most human rights. They have been charged with committing “terrorism,” “endangering national unity” or “undermining the reputation or prestige of the state.” 10 women and rights defenders (Loujain Al-Hathloul, Aziza Al-Yousef, Iman Al-Najafan, Nouf Abdelaziz, Dr. Hatton Al-Fassi, Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Shammari, Soheila Azadi, Mahshid Shafiei and Shaida Anazi) are being tried separately but on similar charges for allegedly communicating with human rights organizations. Their hearings have not been public as journalists and diplomats were not allowed to attend. They have been tortured and sexually harassed or assaulted. Some have been temporarily released but await trial. In addition Israa Al-Ghomgham a human rights activist from the Shi’i region of Qatif has been in detention for the past three years. Loujain Al-Hathloul is known both for her role in the women to drive movement and in opposing the Saudi male guardian-ship system. On 1 December 2014, she was arrested and detained for 73 days after an attempt to cross the border in her car from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Saudi Arabia on charges related to defying the female driving ban in the kingdom. In September 2016, along with 14,000 others, Al-Hathloul signed a petition to King Salman asking for the male guardianship system to be abolished. On 4 June 2017, she was arrested, detained and later released on bail. In May 2018, she was charged with conspiring against the state and faced a 20-year sentence on charges including “founding and managing an armed terrorist group,” violating the law on assembly and demonstrations ‘founding and managing an armed terrorist group,” violating the law on assembly and demonstrations and “disseminating propaganda for a terrorist organization.” She has been an active member of the women’s movement and was an expert in human rights and gender issues. She was on hunger strike for more than four months and ended her strike on May 26.

Ala’a Al-Aidroos is a rights activist and writer from the Shi’a majority eastern province of Qatif. She launched a global awareness campaign following the rape of 5-year-old girl by her father, a Saudi cleric, in 2015. She helped to lead the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. She “attempted to deliver to the Royal Advisory Council a 14,700-signature petition asking to end the guardianship regulations but she was refuted and told to mail it.” In May 2018, Al-Yousef was detained by Saudi authorities, along with Loujain Al-Hathloul, Iman Al-Najafan, Aisha Al-Manane, Madeeha Al-Ajroush and two men involved in women’s rights campaigning. Saudi authorities accused the arrested activists of having “suspicious contact with foreign parties,” providing financial support to “hostile elements abroad” and recruiting crimes. As of November 2018, they were being held in the Dhahban Central Prison. In late March 2019, she and other female prisoners presented their defence and described physical and sexual abuse they had endured in captivity.

Palestine

Shireen Issawi is a human rights lawyer and prominent advocate for Palestinian prisoner rights from occupied East Jerusalem who has been in solitary confinement since April 2012. Issawi launched a global awareness campaign following the rape of 5-year-old girl by her father, a Saudi cleric, in 2015. She helped to lead the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. She “attempted to deliver to the Royal Advisory Council a 14,700-signature petition asking to end the guardianship regulations but she was refuted and told to mail it.” In May 2018, Al-Yousef was detained by Saudi authorities, along with Loujain Al-Hathloul, Iman Al-Najafan, Aisha Al-Manane, Madeeha Al-Ajroush and two men involved in women’s rights campaigning. Saudi authorities accused the arrested activists of having “suspicious contact with foreign parties,” providing financial support to “hostile elements abroad” and recruiting crimes. As of November 2018, they were being held in the Dhahban Central Prison. In late March 2019, she and other female prisoners presented their defence and described physical and sexual abuse they had endured in captivity.

Algeria

Luiza Hanoune is an Algerian politician, poet, political scientist and a lawyer by profession. She is the head of Algeria’s Workers’ Party (Parti des Travailleurs Algérien, PTA) which she co-founded in 1989. It was in the 1970s at the university where she first became politically involved in the struggle for women’s rights and equality in Algeria. She was imprisoned by the government several times for her political activism prior to the legalization of political parties in 1988. In 2004, she became the first woman to run for President of Algeria and the first female candidate for presi- dent in the Arab world. In the context of the revolutionary pro- cess taking place in Algeria, she has been arrested and accused of “conspiring against the authority of the state and the army”. She has been in jail since May 9th.

Shahid Atef, a women’s rights activist and political leader, was imprisoned and released along with fellow activist Eman Al-Najafan in 2013 for driving through Riyadh by them- selves. They were forced to sign a pledge that they would not drive again. That year, Al-Yousef launched a global awareness campaign following the rape of 5-year-old girl by her father, a Saudi cleric, in 2015. She helped to lead the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. She “attempted to deliver to the Royal Advisory Council a 14,700-signature petition asking to end the guardianship regulations but she was refuted and told to mail it.” In May 2018, Al-Yousef was detained by Saudi authorities, along with Loujain Al-Hathloul, Iman Al-Najafan, Aisha Al-Manane, Madeeha Al-Ajroush and two men involved in women’s rights campaigning. Saudi authorities accused the arrested activists of having “suspicious contact with foreign parties,” providing financial support to “hostile elements abroad” and recruiting crimes. As of November 2018, they were being held in the Dhahban Central Prison. In late March 2019, she and other female prisoners presented their defence and described physical and sexual abuse they had endured in captivity.