

UAE court jails five Internet activists

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A United Arab Emirates court on Sunday sentenced a blogger and four other democracy activists to prison terms after finding them guilty of charges including insulting the Gulf state's leaders. The State Security Court handed the blogger, Ahmed Mansoor (pictured), a three-year prison sentence and the four others each received two years. They have no recourse to appeal.

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The court, which acts as the State Security Court, also ordered the shutting down of the Hiwar (Dialogue) Internet forum which was used by the activists.

Mansoor was convicted along with Nasser bin Gaith, who lectures at the Abu Dhabi branch of the Sorbonne University, and activists Fahid Salim Dalk, Hassan Ali Khamis and Ahmed Abdul Khaleq.

The five, who were arrested in April, were accused of using the Internet to insult UAE leaders, of calling for a boycott of September's Federal National Council elections and over anti-government demonstrations.

Their trial was criticised earlier this month as "grossly unfair" by a coalition of seven rights groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which called for the five to be freed.

But the Supreme Court pressed ahead announcing its verdict.

The five defendants, described by sympathisers as reformists, had refused to show up in court, saying in a message delivered by a police officer that the court "did not enable them to defend themselves."

The defendants are said to be still on a hunger strike which they began earlier this month.

"This is a horrible decision. A complete miscarriage of justice," said Human Rights Watch representative Samer Muscati, who attended the trial.

"This shows that in the UAE you are not guaranteed a fair trial," he added, charging that the trial was "flawed from day one," and pointing

out that lawyers "couldn't cross-examine witnesses."

He also criticised the verdict as harsh, pointing out that previous cases in which people were charged based on Article 176 of the UAE's penal code were dealt with as misdemeanours, not at a security court.

Amnesty International said in a statement on Sunday it considers the "UAE5" to be prisoners of conscience.

"The defamation charges the UAE5 faced are not internationally recognisable criminal offences and the trial process has been grossly flawed from the outset," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa deputy director.

"The UAE's authorities must end this travesty of justice without further delay by ordering the immediate release of these five activists and expunging any 'criminal record' as a result of this inexplicable verdict."

Outside the court, Khalifa al-Nuaimi, a relative of bin Ghaith, said the verdict was "shocking and harsh."

"We expected a verdict of not guilty, based on the evidence presented," he said, claiming that only one of seven witnesses brought in by the prosecution linked the defendants to statements made on the Internet.

"We call upon our sheikhs to pardon them. They are their children," he said.

But around 200 people gathered in a park opposite the court building disagreed.

Witnesses said one crossed the street and struck Nuaimi in the face.

"This verdict in itself could be considered a pardon," said Hamad Jaber, who had come from the city of Al-Ain to join the rally against the activists.

"I was expecting more," he said, adding he had come to "protest the acts of Mansoor and his collaborators" for "threatening the security and stability of the country and insulting the leaders."

Government employee Mohammed al-Hossani, 33, also said the verdict was lenient.

"This was a case of incitement, not just a matter of expressing opinion," he said.

"We trust our leadership which gives the people what they deserve. It never failed us," he added, praising the oil-rich government that provides a cradle-to-grave care to its citizens.

Debate over the verdict quickly became rife on micro-blogging website Twitter.

"The flags of freedom fly half mast today in my country," read one tweet lamenting the verdict. "The activists today... won and the judicial system has lost," read another.

But many also hailed the verdict and denounced the defendants.

"Congratulations for the verdict against the five traitors," wrote one contributor.

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