

# Saudi Arabia Jails Two Prominent Rights Activist for 10 Years

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(Reuters) - A Saudi Arabian court sentenced two prominent political and human rights activists on Saturday to at least 10 years in prison for offences that included sedition and giving inaccurate information to foreign media.

Mohammed Fahd al-Qahtani and Abdullah Hamad are founding members of the banned Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, known as Acpra, that documents human rights abuses and has called for a constitutional monarchy and elections.

Riyadh, Washington's main Gulf ally, does not allow protests, political parties and trade unions. Most power is wielded by senior members of the ruling family and clerics of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam.

The case has drawn attention from international rights groups, which accuse the conservative Islamic kingdom of using its campaign against religious militants to stomp on political dissent.

[Saudi Arabia](#) has denied that charge and says it does not practice torture and has no political prisoners.

In an interview with Reuters in January, Qahtani said he anticipated being sent to prison and described a sentence of five years or more as "heavy".

Last year, Acpra issued a statement demanding that King Abdullah sack his heir and interior minister, Crown Prince Nayef, who they held responsible for rights abuses. Nayef died shortly afterwards.

## SENTENCE

Qahtani was sentenced to 10 years. Hamad was told he must complete the remaining six years of a previous jail term for his political activities and serve an additional five years. They will remain in detention until a judge rules on their appeal next month.

Acpra will also be disbanded and its funds confiscated, the judge ruled. Last year a court in Jeddah sentenced Acpra member Mohammad al-Bajadi to four years in prison. Another of the group's founders, Abdulkarim al-Khathar is on trial in Buraidah.

Unlike in most previous cases, the trial of Qahtani and Hamad was opened to the press and public, in what Saudi activists had described as a step forward for rights even as they decried the verdict.

More than 100 people attended the hearing on Saturday morning, mostly supporters and relatives of the defendants. More than 20 security officers with truncheons hanging from their belts were also present in the room, prompting a protest from the defendants' lawyer.

After the verdict, the police cleared the public from the court room as supporters of Qahtani and Hamad shouted that the trial was politically motivated.

On Thursday, an Interior Ministry spokesman said that activists, whom he did not name, had tried to stir up protests in the world's top oil exporting country by spreading "false information" on social media.

The only unrest to hit Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring wave of popular uprisings was among its Shi'ite Muslim minority. But there have also been small demonstrations by Sunni Muslims calling for the release of people held on security charges.

Qahtani said in January he had never been to prison but thought he was "psychologically ready" for it, and that his family, who are in the United States where his wife is attending university, were also prepared.