

Saudi woman sentenced to 34 years in prison for Tweeting “oppositional” political views while living abroad

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By Roy Batty

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The Saudi Arabian government sentenced a woman to 34 years in prison this week as punishment for Tweeting her political opinions while she studied abroad in the United Kingdom.

Salma al-Shehab was studying for her doctoral degree at the University of Leeds School of Medicine in the United Kingdom when she Tweeted out some of her political beliefs regarding human rights issues.

When she went to visit family in her home country of Saudi Arabia in January of 2021, she was arrested and charged with sedition, disrupting public order, using a social media site to undermine national security, and more.

The Saudi government initially sentenced al-Shehab to six years in Saudi prison, but after she appealed the sentence, it was increased to an unprecedented 34 years. The sentence is the longest ever handed down to a non-violent protester in Saudi Arabia.

The move has alarmed human rights advocacy groups around the world, who fear the Saudi government is becoming increasingly oppressive to its female population. Al-Shebab's Tweets included criticism of some measures the Saudi government has recently taken, including male guardianship laws, which require women to be governed by male relatives in certain aspects of their lives.

A University of Leeds spokesperson responded to al-Shebab's harsh sentencing in a statement. "We are deeply concerned to learn of this recent development in Salma's case and we are seeking advice on whether there is anything we can do to support her," the statement reads. "Our thoughts remain with Salma, her family, and her friends among our close-knit community of postgraduate researchers."

Reports this week claim al-Shebab may have been reported to the Saudi government via an app called Kollona Amn (We Are All Security), which allows Saudi citizens to report others who speak out against the government or otherwise break the law.