

Kurdish authorities arrest magazine editor

ERBIL, IRAQ: Reporters Without Borders calls for the immediate release of Hamin Ary, the editor of the Erbil-based Kurdish and Arabic monthly *Chirpa* (*Al-Hamsah* in Arabic), and the withdrawal of all the charges against him. He has been held since 7 May for reprinting an allegedly blasphemous article by Goran Halmat, a controversial Kurdish writer living in self-exile in Norway.

According to Erbil police chief Abdullah Khaliche Talate, Ary was arrested under article 372 of the Iraqi criminal code, which punishes "offences that violate religious sensibilities" and carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison.

Reporters Without Borders regrets that the criminal code has again been applied to a media offence in northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region instead of the region's Law 35, governing media offences, which makes no provision for the detention of journalists in connection with their work.

The media freedom organisation also condemns comments by the region's prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, implicitly calling for the restriction of media freedom. "His comments, designed to flatter and calm the Islamists, are very disturbing, especially coming from a senior politician."

Appalled

Reporters Without Borders is appalled by the intolerance and undemocratic methods of Kurdistan's Islamists, who use street demonstrations to achieve their goals instead of legal methods of protests. They could have brought a lawsuit against *Chirpa* and allowed the courts to decide.

Halmat's article, entitled "Me and God," was reprinted in the *Chirpa* issue that was published on 3 May. The article, which imagines a conversation with God and which was originally posted on Facebook in 2010, is deemed by Islamists to be "offensive to Islam."

Representatives of the Kurdistan parliament's rights commission and religious affairs commission met on 6 May with the Union of Ulemas, the Union of Journalists and the magazine's representatives to discuss the article's publication. Although *Chirpa* presented an apology, it was decided that the magazine would be suspended indefinitely.

Hundreds of people gathered outside the Sawaf Mosque in central Erbil that evening. The Union of Ulemas and Islamist parties, including Jama'a Islamiya, called for a major demonstration on 8 May to protest against the article.

Arrested, calls for Halmat's death

The next day, 7 May, Ary was arrested and Prime Minister Barzani condemned the article as an attack on Islam and criticised the lack of restrictions on media freedom in Kurdistan. In response, Jama'a Islamiya said it "trusted the prime minister to punish those responsible" and called off the next day's protest.

Around 2000 people nonetheless marched through the streets of Erbil calling for Halmat's death and an attempt was made to set fire to Zagros TV, which is owned by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), one of the region's two main ruling parties. Police intervened to disperse the protesters.

Halmat meanwhile said in an interview for *Lvin Magazine* that, when he wrote the article in 2010, he was targeting Mullah Krikar, the leader of the armed group Ansar Al-Islam, "Since then, it has been republished on the Internet without posing any problem," he added.

The article's publication in *Chirpa* came at a time of tension between Islamist groups and Kurdistan's government. Several weeks before it appeared, Islamist parties had begun protesting against the sale of off-the-rack clothes with inscriptions that have a religious connotation in Arabic, and they seem to have seized on the article as another way of attacking the government.

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