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Iraq: Human rights defender Sherwan Sherwani sentenced for six years imprisonment

On 16 February 2021, the criminal court of Erbil in the Kurdistan region of Iraq convicted human rights defender **Sherwan Sherwani** of ‘threatening national security’ and sentenced him to six years imprisonment.

[Sherwan Sherwani](#) is a Kurdish journalist and human rights defender. He is the chief editor of Bashur magazine and an active member of the human rights organisation 17 Shubat. Sherwan Sherwani’s work as a journalist covers human rights issues in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, particularly focusing on corruption issues in the Kurdish government and on prisoners rights in the Asayish prison’s – Kurdish security organisation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The human rights defender regularly participated in peaceful demonstrations to promote the social and political rights in the region.

On 16 February 2021, the criminal court of Erbil convicted Sherwan Sherwani and his colleagues of ‘threatening national security’ and sentenced the human rights defender to six years imprisonment. The court’s decision was based on evidence taken from a group chat between Sherwan Sherwani and his colleagues, in which they spoke about corruption issues related to oil wells in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. According to Sherwan Sherwani’s lawyer, the evidence used to convict Sherwan Sherwani and his colleagues was fabricated, and when the lawyer asked to further discuss this evidence, the judge answered that “the court has no time.” Sherwan Sherwani and his colleagues gave their testimonies in the Kurdish language. The judge did not speak Kurdish, so the human rights defender and his colleague testimonies were translated to Arabic. According to Sherwan Sherwani’s lawyer, the authorities used the translation process to fabricate the testimonies.

On 7 October 2020, several police officers raided Sherwan Sherwani’s house near Erbil and violently arrested him. The police officers were in plain clothes and some of them were masked. According to Sherwan Sherwani’s lawyer, the police pointed guns directly at Sherwan Sherwani in front of his family. During the raid the police confiscated some of the human rights defenders personal items including his two laptops and his notebook. After the raid, the authorities refused to let the family or the lawyer know where they had taken Sherwan Sherwani and his whereabouts remained unknown for 19 days.

On 11 October 2020, the Kurdistan regional government’s international advocacy coordinator tweeted that Sherwan Sherwani and his colleagues were involved in foreign funding with the aim of destabilising the country, endangering the lives of judges and encouraging violence during anti-government protests. On 26 October 2020, when the human rights defender was allowed to meet with his lawyer for the first time, he told him that during his incommunicado detention he was subjected to severe beatings, regularly placed in solitary confinement and he was tortured to confess to charges he never committed.

The whereabouts of Sherwan Sherwani and his colleagues remain unknown, the authorities refused to let the lawyer know Sherwan Sherwani’s whereabouts after his conviction on 16 February 2021. Since his detention, no family visits have been allowed and the human rights defender has no access to his lawyer. Before his detention, Sherwan Sherwani had been frequently harassed and was arbitrarily detained by the Kurdish authorities in February 2019 regarding his peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned regarding the conviction and sentence of human rights defender Sherwan Sherwani. Front Line Defenders believes that Sherwan Sherwani has been convicted and sentenced solely regarding his peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

Front Line Defenders urge the Kurdish authorities to:

1. Immediately release Sherwan Sherwani and quash his conviction as Front Line Defenders believes that he has been targeted solely as a result of his legitimate human rights work;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Sherwan Sherwani, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the '*Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment*', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the torture of human rights defender Sherwan Sherwani, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
4. Inform Sherwan Sherwani's family and lawyer of the place of his detention, and allow them immediate and unfettered access to him;
5. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Kurdistan Iraq and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

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