

Raif Badawi and Blasphemy in Saudi Arabia

“FREEDOM OF SPEECH is the air that any thinker breathes; it’s the fuel that ignites the fire of an intellectual’s thoughts.”

– Raif Badawi

Seanna Watson

A few years ago, I put a sticker on my front door that says, “People have rights, ideas do not.” But throughout history people have been imprisoned, tortured, and killed for expressing criticism of ideas that others hold sacred. These days, in more liberal countries (such as Canada), the consequences are minor. But in more theocratic societies, the penalties can be severe. One of the most blatant and odious recent examples of violation of basic human rights is the imprisonment and punishment by torture of Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia.

Raif Badawi is a 31-year-old Saudi writer and founder (in 2008) of the “Free Saudi Liberals,” a website and online forum about politics and religion. He was imprisoned by the Saudi government in 2012, for the crime of “insulting Islam through electronic channels.” He was subsequently accused of “apostasy” – a crime which, under Saudi Arabian law, carries an automatic death sentence. In 2013, he was sentenced to 7 years in prison and 600 lashes (Saudi Arabia being among the 33 countries in the world where judicial corporal punishment is still practised). Earlier this year, Badawi was

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convicted of the crime of apostasy, and sentenced to 1,000 lashes, 10 years in prison, and a fine of 1 million Saudi Riyal (the equivalent of about \$340,000 CDN). The Saudis might try to claim that they are being merciful by not executing Raif Badawi by beheading, according to their law, but it’s important to note that actually receiving the prescribed 1,000 lashes at 50 per week for 20 weeks is

likely to be fatal, even for a healthy person, and Badawi is not in good health.

Badawi’s lawyer, Waleed Abulkhair, has also been imprisoned for the crime of setting up a human rights organization called “Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia.” In 2014, Abulkhair was convicted of “breaking allegiance with the ruler,” and, after he was denied a license for his organization, he was found guilty of “setting up an unlicensed organization.”

And so we have the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – a place where the violators of human rights are in power, and the defenders of human rights are in jail. And yet, the government of Saudi Arabia styles itself as a promoter and defender of “true” human rights. Though they failed in their bid last June to be elected as the

head of the UN Human Rights Council, the UNHRC did officially recognize the Saudis' "Religious Freedom Conference" hosted in Jeddah, not far from where Raif Badawi is imprisoned. And, despite the fact that, according to UN Watch, the Saudi government has so far this year beheaded more people than ISIS, in September Saudi Arabia was put in charge of the committee responsible for selecting members of a key UNHRC panel responsible for setting standards and reporting on human rights violations. (Meantime, the Saudis tirelessly decry the idea of "interference" when other governments object to flagrant human rights abuses in what they consider to be their "private affairs.")

So, what can we do? Raif Badawi received the first 50 lashes of the 1,000-lash punishment in January. There have been worldwide protests by Amnesty International, working with other groups (including CFI Canada); in February, Amnesty International Canada was able to hand-deliver a petition, signed by nearly 100,000, to the back entrance of the Saudi Embassy in Ottawa. Amnesty and CFI Ottawa have continued to protest in front of the Saudi Embassy, weekly from January through June, then monthly for July and August.

Though scheduled to continue weekly for the next 19 weeks, each subsequent round of lashes has been postponed – sometimes the explanation of "medical grounds" has been provided, and sometimes no reason has been given. In June, the Saudi Supreme Court upheld Badawi's sentence, and it was feared that the lashes might resume again, but the weekly

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floggings continue to be postponed.

At the government level, only a few have been courageous enough to risk insulting the Saudis. In March, Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallström set off a diplomatic incident when she condemned Badawi's flogging as a "cruel attempt to silence modern forms of expression," the end result of which was a termination of Sweden's decade-long arms deal with the Kingdom. Here in Canada, Quebec premier Philippe Couillard denounced the treatment of Badawi (as did Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre) and the Quebec government granted Badawi a "selection certificate" which would speed up the immi-

gration process, making it easier for him to join his wife, Ensaf Haidar, and their children, who currently reside in Sherbrooke. Meanwhile, the city of Sherbrooke made Raif an honorary citizen. Predictably, the Saudi government has objected to all this "interference," saying "The Kingdom does not accept at all any attack on it in the name of human rights, especially when its constitution is based on Islamic law, which guarantees human rights." And there are certainly supporters of this position to be seen in the media and online, defending Saudi Arabia's right (or even duty) to punish a person who has violated the laws of his country and been convicted of a crime in accordance with the rules of that justice system.

And yet, despite all the bluster and protestation from the Saudi government, Raif Badawi is still alive, and has not been flogged since January. (Though the unjust imprisonment, separation from his family, and facing the prospect of



Members of CFI Ottawa and Amnesty International protest across from the Ottawa Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. [Photo by Diane Bruce]

**What do we want? FREEDOM!
Who do we want if for? RAIF BADAWI!
When do we want it? NOW!**

a flogging each week must surely be taking a toll on him.) Perhaps the Saudis are at least somewhat embarrassed by the negative attention, even as they insist that they are not doing anything wrong. Statements from the Saudi Ministry of Justice have indicated that Badawi’s case is still being reviewed by the Supreme Court. However, on October 27, Ensaf Haidar announced that she had received information from a reliable source that the Saudi authorities were planning to resume Badawi’s flogging “soon.” Haidar’s source also said that the flogging would be administered inside the prison, instead of in the public square. Could this be an indication that the Saudis may be coming to an understanding that engaging in public flogging is not appropriate for a nation that fancies itself to be a pillar of the world community? (Though on the other hand, the lack of public oversight for a flogging behind closed doors does raise concerns.) Amnesty International’s protests continue; meantime the European Parliament has awarded Raif Badawi the Sakaharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, along with a message to Saudi King Salman from Parliament President Martin Schulz, “to free [Raif], so he can accept the prize.”

Other key world leaders such as the US, UK, and Canadian federal governments have been silent for the most part, perhaps in a demonstration of the relative importance of acquiring petroleum and selling arms vs protecting human rights. The response of the previous federal government to letters to Prime Minister Steven Harper and the Office of Foreign Affairs was conciliatory but non-committal. But recently Ensaf Haidar posted a selfie taken with her and Prime Minister Elect Justin Trudeau. So we can hope that the government of Canada will now officially take a principled position of leadership and demand that the Saudi government release Raif so he can join his family in Sherbrooke.

Seanna Watson is a semi-retired electrical engineer, currently serving on the Board of Centre for Inquiry Canada as Chair of Education.

Find out more about Raif Badawi at RaifBadawi.org, and read his book *1,000 Lashes: Because I Say What I Think* (an English translation of some of his blog posts).

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