



President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz

Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Ministère du Secrétariat Général à la Présidence

Nouakchott, Mauritania

Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned nongovernmental organizations, urge you to ensure the immediate release of Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir, who is still in detention more than one and-a-half years since an appeals court ordered his release. His family and lawyers say his health has suffered gravely during his incarceration and continues to deteriorate.

In January 2014, authorities arrested Mkhaitir days after he published an article online denouncing what he considered the misuse of religion to justify discrimination among castes in Mauritania.

In December 2014, after a year of pretrial detention, a first instance court in Nouadhibou sentenced him to death for apostasy and insulting the Prophet Muhammad. However, in 2016, the Court of Appeal in Nouadhibou requalified his offense as “non-belief.” In November 2017, while Mkhaitir remained in detention, the court reduced his sentence to a fine and two years’ imprisonment, which he had by then served.

Instead of releasing him, authorities transferred Mkhaitir to solitary confinement in an undisclosed location. His lawyers have been denied permission to visit him. According to his family, he suffers from physical pain, psychological trauma, and glaucoma that could leave him blind if authorities continue to prevent his access to appropriate medical care.

Mkhaitir has been able to receive very occasional visits. According to the latest information at our disposal, he has no interaction with other people except his guards and occasional visitors.

This month, Mauritians will elect a new president. The prosecution of Mkhaitir for exercising his freedom of speech and his continued illegal detention weighs on your legacy. For now, it remains within your power to secure Mkhaitir's release, thereby sending a message of support for human rights and the rule of law.

We respectfully call on you to take immediate steps to ensure that Mkhaitir is set free and to ensure his safety and well-being upon release.

We would welcome your comments on this letter and on any other matter pertaining to human rights and rule of law issues in Mauritania.

Sincerely,

Action des Chrétiens pour l'Abolition de la Torture (ACAT) - France

Amnesty International

Anti-Slavery International

Committee to Protect Journalists

Ensemble Contre la Peine de Mort

FIDH within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Freedom Now

Human Rights Watch

Minority Rights Group

OMCT within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

PEN America

Reporters Sans Frontières