



Middle East Studies Association of North America

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18 June 1991

President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali
President of the Republic
Presidential Palace
Tunis/Carthage
Tunisia

Your Excellency:

The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association again expresses concern regarding the case of Professor Moncef ben Salem, former head of the Mathematics Department at the University of Sfax, presently serving a three-year prison term. We wrote to you on April 9 concerning his case, and we enclose a copy of our letter. The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2300 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected International Journal of Middle East Studies. The association is committed to ensuring respect for academic freedom throughout the region.

We renew our expression of concern in the light of reports that the health of Professor ben Salem has been deteriorating because of the harsh prison conditions he has been forced to endure, leading to his hospitalization in April 1991. We respectfully ask that he be given all needed medical attention for his ailments.

We find the imprisonment of Professor ben Salem particularly troubling because we understand that his sentence was based on his having given an interview to a non-Tunisian publication in which he criticized the human rights situation in Tunisia. We respectfully request that your government publicly present any evidence to suggest that Professor ben Salem has committed an offence that is recognizably criminal according to international standards. In the absence of such evidence, we urge that he be immediately and unconditionally released. We are also concerned that Professor ben Salem be allowed to return to his academic duties, including travel for attendance at international conferences.

We respectfully recall to the attention of Your Excellency that no country anywhere in the world can justifiably claim a perfect record of respect for human rights and that the process of achieving greater protection for human rights around the globe necessarily entails criticisms of human rights violations. We respectfully call on your government to adopt the principle that human rights advocacy and public criticisms of human rights violations may not be used as grounds for criminal prosecutions or the imposition of criminal sanctions.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Anne H. Betteridge
Executive Director

cc: M. Abdullah Kallel, Minister of the Interior
M. Abderrahim Zouari, Minister of Justice
Ambassador Dr. Abdelaziz Hamzaoui