Resolution on women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia

2019/2564(RSP) - 14/02/2019 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 517 votes to 10 with 70 abstentions a resolution on women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia.

The resolution was tabled by the EPP, S&D, ECR, ALDE, GUE/NGL, Greens/EFA and EFDD groups.

Women's rights defenders

Parliament strongly condemned the detention of the women human rights defenders who campaigned for the lifting of the driving ban, as well as of all peaceful human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and activists, and expresses its shock at the credible reports of systematic torture against several of them, including Loujain al-Hathloul who has been nominated for the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, and eight other named women. It called on the Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release these women' s rights defenders and to facilitate their access to independent medical doctors. Members noted that reports maintain that Saudi interrogators have tortured, maltreated and sexually abused at least three of the women activists detained in May 2018. They also noted that since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud came to power in June 2017, many outspoken human rights defenders have been arbitrarily detained, or unjustly sentenced to lengthy prison terms simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression. They condemned the harassment, repression and torture of human rights defenders, including women's rights defenders, in Saudi Arabia, which undermines the credibility of the reform process in the country.

Parliament regretted the inefficient statements by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Member States on the cases of the women human rights defenders detained since May 2018. It called on the VP/HR, the EEAS and the Member States to:

- bring up the cases of Loujain al-Hathloul, and all other women human rights defenders in their dialogues with the Saudi authorities, and to demand their release. In the meantime, EU diplomats should call on the Saudi authorities to guarantee their safety and to pursue full investigations into the reports of torture. ;

- establish a unified position to ensure that the European diplomatic services in Saudi Arabia systematically use the mechanisms envisaged in the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders,

Male guardianship system

Parliament urges the Saudi Government to immediately abolish the male guardianship system, whereby authorisation from a male guardian is still expected in a number of areas, including international travel, accessing healthcare services, choosing one's residency, marriage, filing complaints with the justice system, and leaving state-run shelters for abused women and detention centres. Members pointed to the fact that under the male guardianship system, Saudi women are deprived of even the most basic control over their lives.

Gender-based violence

The resolution urged the Saudi authorities to adopt comprehensive legislation to specifically define and criminalise all forms of gender-based violence against women, in particular female genital mutilation,

rape, including marital rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment, and to remove all the obstacles women face in their access to justice. Members were deeply concerned about the prevalence of gender-based violence in Saudi Arabia, which remains largely underreported and undocumented, and which has been justified citing retrograde reasons such as the need to discipline women under men's guardianship.

Government web services

Members expressed concern over the government web services with which male guardians can track women, specify when and how they can cross Saudi borders, and get close to real-time SMS updates when they travel. They also noted the recent adoption of a law under which Saudi women can be notified by text message if they are being divorced, to protect them from having their marriage ended without their knowledge. Parliament emphasised that this law does nothing to address the fact that Saudi women can only obtain divorces in exceedingly limited cases, such as with their husband's consent or if their husband has harmed them.

Council common position

Members reiterated their call for the Council to reach a common position in order to impose a EU-wide arms embargo on Saudi Arabia. They called for:

- an embargo on the export of surveillance systems and other dual-use items that may be used in Saudi Arabia for the purposes of the repression of its citizens, including women human rights defenders;

- the adoption of the use of restricted measures against Saudi Arabia in response to breaches of human rights, including asset freezes and visa bans.

Members reminded Member States that their continued arms deals with Saudi Arabia are in contravention of the EU's common position on arms exports. They called on the VP/HR to report on the current state of military and security cooperation between the Member States and the Saudi regime.

Death penalty

Noting that Saudi Arabia has one of the highest execution rates in the world, Members called on the Saudi authorities to introduce an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty as a step towards its abolition. The average number of executions per year was at least 126 between 2014 and 2017.

Lastly, Members called for the Commission and Parliament to look into the lack of listings of Saudi Arabia within the EU transparency register.