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Ali Hussein Sibat must not be executed

By Raja Kamal and Tom G. Palmer

Commentary by

Despite genuine efforts by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to reform and modernize the kingdom, the pushback from those who resist modern civilization is shocking and villainous. The horrifying case of a former television presenter from Lebanon, Ali Hussein Sibat, is just one example. Sibat is a Lebanese citizen and was the host of a call-in television show broadcast from Lebanon but that was aired throughout the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia. He is also a Muslim. During his broadcasts, Sibat gave advice to those who called in during his show – and he made predictions about their future.

In May 2008, during a religious pilgrimage to Mecca, Sibat was arrested by the Saudi religious police and charged with sorcery. He was coerced into confessing, and then tried without a lawyer. His coerced confession was used against him and he was sentenced to death in Medina on November 9, 2009. He may be executed any day now.

Amnesty International and other human rights organizations are calling for the immediate release of Sibat and others arrested and charged with similar “crimes.” Whatever one thinks of Sibat’s television show, no one should be punished, and certainly not killed, for what he is charged with. If this killing is not stopped, the soil of Saudi Arabia will be stained by a crime: the crime of murder. That murder will leave behind a grieving widow and five children. Sibat’s execution must be stopped.

This case illustrates the tremendous power of the religious police in Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah faces an uphill battle in his struggle against extremists; not only the Al-Qaeda terrorists who kill innocent people, but the religious police and judiciary, who kill innocents as well. Each time the king has tried to reform his state, the extremists have stepped in his way. For example, a few months ago, when the king inaugurated the first coeducational university in Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST), he faced a storm of criticism from religious leaders. In the end, the school opened and one of the most vocal critics, Sheikh Saad bin Nasser al-Shithri suddenly resigned from the Council of Senior Clerics. That was certainly a step in the right direction.

Yet, as the case of Sibat and others sentenced to be murdered for “apostasy or “witchcraft” proves, resistance from the extremists continues. King Abdullah has an opportunity to make a bold statement, as he did when he faced down the clergy in the controversy over KAUST. The king and his supporters need to act decisively to eliminate the power of the extremists to carry out improper arrests, level false charges, coerce testimony, and conduct unjust trials, especially those culminating in murder. Sibat and others in his situation are being made into human sacrifices by the extremists in order to maintain their own power.

What’s next? Arresting a child for reading a Harry Potter book?

The positive dialogue that has already started between the Obama administration and much of the Arab and Muslim world has created an opportunity for Washington to voice concern about Sibat. President Barack Obama has repeatedly spoken about his commitment to human rights. He should encourage King Abdullah to take a stand for justice and end human sacrifice.

Lebanon also has a responsibility to speak up for and to protect its own citizens. The government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri has a special relationship with the ruling family of Saudi Arabia. That’s why the government needs to show that, as the representative of a democratic Arab country with a strong broadcasting industry, it will support freedom of expression – particularly that of Ali Hussein Sibat and others who broadcast from Lebanon. The murder of Sibat will not only leave five children fatherless; it threatens everyone whom the extremists think they can reach, whether in Saudi Arabia or beyond.

King Abdullah could show his courage by facing down the extremists and releasing Ali Hussein Sibat to Lebanon. And if he does so, he should receive the support of the other nations of the world.

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