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Mauritania: Judicial harassment of woman human rights defender Mariem Cheikh

On 21 April 2020, woman human rights defender **Mariem Cheikh** was charged with "racist comments through social media" by the West Nouakchott Public Prosecutor. If found guilty, she could face up to 1 year imprisonment and a large fine. She was placed under judicial supervision and is now required to report weekly to the office of the National Security Directorate.

[Mariem Cheikh](#) is a human rights defender and member of the NGO Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), which aims to eradicate the practices of slavery. She is a blogger known in Mauritania for her posts denouncing the economic, cultural, and social exclusion of descendants of former slaves who are deprived of their basic human rights.

On 13 April 2020, Mariem Cheikh was arrested by the police in Riadh, a suburb of Nouakchott. She was taken from her baby, who she is still breastfeeding, and detained in the office of the National Security Directorate. Her whereabouts remained unknown until 16 April, when her husband was allowed to meet her, albeit only for ten minutes and in the presence of the police. On the same day, Mariem Cheikh was allowed to meet with her lawyer. Despite a recent surgery, the woman human rights defender was denied medical consultation.

Mariem Cheikh was only informed of the charges against her 8 days after her arrest. On 21 April 2020, she was presented before the West Nouakchott Public Prosecutor's Office. Her lawyer had not been notified about the hearing in advance. He only managed to attend after receiving a call from the defender's husband who found out about the hearing on the same day. Moreover, Mariem Cheikh was not allowed to see the statement on the case prepared by the police. She was charged with "racist comments through social networking sites" under Article 23 of the 2016 cybercrime law. If found guilty, she could face up to 1 year imprisonment and a fine of up to 2,000,000 ouguiyas (approximately 49,440 euros). The defender was placed under judicial supervision. She is now required to report every Thursday to the office of the National Security Directorate. Her first court hearing has not been scheduled yet.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned about the arbitrary detention of Mariem Cheikh, her placement under judicial supervision and the charges brought against her. It believes that she has been targeted for her peaceful and legitimate human rights activities and her exercise of the right to freedom of expression, as she regularly posts on social media denouncing the economic, cultural, and social exclusion of descendants of former slaves who are deprived of their basic human rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Mauritania to:

1. Immediately drop all charges against Mariem Cheikh and lift her judicial supervision, as Front Line Defenders believes that she has been targeted for her legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Mauritania can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.