



Yemen Releases Journalist Obama Tried to Keep Behind Bars

In an embarrassing turn of events for the Obama administration, the president of Yemen freed a wrongly imprisoned Yemeni journalist whom President Barack Obama “once personally lobbied to have remain in jail,” according to [McClatchy Newspapers](#).

On July 23, Yemeni president Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi fulfilled a longstanding pledge to pardon [Abdulelah Haider Shaye](#), a renowned journalist who was arrested twice in 2010 — once being held in solitary confinement for 34 days with no access to an attorney — and eventually, in 2011, convicted by a kangaroo court and sentenced to five years in prison.



After a public outcry about Shaye’s conviction, then-Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh was prepared to pardon the journalist.

“Some prominent Yemenis and tribal sheikhs visited the president to mediate in the issue and the president agreed to release and pardon him,” Abdulrahman Barman, Shaye’s attorney, told the *Nation’s* [Jeremy Scahill](#). “We were waiting for the release of the pardon — it was printed out and prepared in a file for the president to sign and announce the next day.”

Before Saleh could affix his John Hancock to the pardon, however, he received an urgent telephone call from the president of the United States. According to a [White House summary of the conversation](#), Obama “expressed concern over the release of” Shaye because of his alleged “association with AQAP [Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula].”

Shaye did, in fact, have much greater access to AQAP leaders than most other journalists, but he did not use those connections to further AQAP’s cause. He used them to report on the group and, at times, to challenge their assertions.

“He was against violence and the killing of innocents in the name of Islam,” Shaye’s best friend, Kamal Sharaf, told Scahill. “He was also against killing innocent Muslims with pretext of fighting terrorism.”

That seems to be what got Obama’s dander up. Shaye had the temerity to report the truth about a December 2009 missile strike on a Yemeni village that made both the U.S. and Yemeni governments look very bad indeed. Scahill recounted:

The Yemeni government announced that it had conducted a series of strikes against an Al Qaeda training camp in the village of al Majala in Yemen’s southern Abyan province, killing a number of Al Qaeda militants. As the story spread across the world, Shaye traveled to al Majala. What he discovered were the remnants of Tomahawk cruise missiles and cluster bombs, neither of which are in the Yemeni military’s arsenal. He photographed the missile parts, some of them bearing the label



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“Made in the USA,” and distributed the photos to international media outlets. He revealed that among the victims of the strike were women, children and the elderly. To be exact, fourteen women and twenty-one children were killed. Whether anyone actually active in Al Qaeda was killed remains hotly contested. After conducting his own investigation, Shaye determined that it was a U.S. strike. The Pentagon would not comment on the strike and the Yemeni government repeatedly denied U.S. involvement. But Shaye was later vindicated when Wikileaks released a U.S. diplomatic cable that featured Yemeni officials joking about how they lied to their own parliament about the U.S. role, while President Saleh assured Gen. David Petraeus that his government would continue to lie and say “the bombs are ours, not yours.”

This, not Shaye’s alleged AQAP connections, is what led Obama to demand that the journalist be kept in prison despite his mistreatment and sham trial at the hands of the Yemeni government. Saleh, also embarrassed by Shaye’s reporting, acquiesced, and Shaye remained in prison until this week.

Although President Hadi announced nearly three months ago that he planned to pardon Shaye, “Yemeni officials said later that the release was delayed after U.S. officials objected,” reported McClatchy.

Somewhere along the way Hadi summoned the courage to defy Washington and do what he — or at least the Yemeni people — believed was right. “It was unclear whether Hadi had told American authorities in advance when Shaye would be released, but the White House said in an email Wednesday [July 24] that it was ‘concerned and disappointed’ by his release,” McClatchy wrote.

Asked about the administration’s response to Shaye’s pardon during an appearance on [Democracy Now!](#), Scahill replied:

First of all, we should — we should let that statement set in. The White House is saying that they are disappointed and concerned that a Yemeni journalist has been released from a Yemeni prison. The White House is citing his conviction, that he supposedly was a supporter of al-Qaeda, in a kangaroo court, a court that was condemned by every major international media freedom organization, every major international human rights organization, that it was a total sham trial, where he was kept in a cage during the course of his prosecution and was convicted on trumped-up charges. So, Mr. Constitutional Law Professor President is saying that this Yemeni court, that has been condemned by every international human rights organization in the world, is somehow legitimate.

Secondly, when I’ve asked the White House and the State Department for a shred of evidence that Abdulelah Haider Shaye was guilty of anything other than journalism, critical journalism, they won’t provide it. They just say what they often do: “State secrets. Trust us.”

Shaye is out of prison but not totally free. “He is under two years of house arrest and, after that, three years of a travel ban,” Yemeni-American activist Rooj Alwazir told *Democracy Now!* “He’s still not able to speak. He’s still not able to write. He’s not allowed to go anywhere without having security around him at all times.”

Still, the fact that he was released at all in the face of pressure from Obama — the same president who successfully prevented his release two years ago — is noteworthy, and organizations devoted to freedom of the press certainly noticed it.

The Freedom Foundation, a Yemeni press-freedom organization, called Shaye’s release “a victory for common values of media freedom, justice and human rights” and praised Hadi for ordering it “despite all the American pressures on him to keep him in prison.”



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And that is the story in a nutshell. Hadi stood up for justice and press freedom. Meanwhile, the Obama administration is “not on the side of press freedom around the world,” Scahill declared. “They’re on the side of locking up journalists who have the audacity to be journalists.”

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