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## Saudi Rights Lawyer Sidelined

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License Revoked Over Advocacy for Rape Victim Who Faces Lashing

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JIDDAH, Saudi Arabia, Nov. 21 -- Saudi officials have revoked the license of human rights lawyer Abdul-Rahman al-Lahem, who has handled the country's most controversial cases and defended a gang-rape victim sentenced to jail time and lashes.

Lahem, 36, faces a disciplinary hearing Dec. 5 to determine the length of his suspension.

Lahem is accused by the prosecutor general of "belligerent behavior, talking to the media for the purpose of perturbing the judiciary, and hurting the country's image," according to an official letter he received Monday.

Since he started practicing law almost five years ago, Lahem has defended clients whom other lawyers refused, including a school administrator suspended for criticizing the religious establishment, a man convicted of promoting homosexuality for saying it was genetic, three political reformists seeking a constitutional monarchy, and the first Saudis suing the country's powerful religious police.

Lahem said that losing his license would be a blow to the country's budding human rights movement.

"If I am banned from practicing law, nobody will dare go up against the judiciary again," said Lahem, a slight man with a limp from a childhood accident. "If I win, it will open a new chapter for human rights in Saudi Arabia."

Lahem's license was revoked last week by the judiciary in the eastern town of Qatif, where his client, a 20-year-old woman, was being sentenced on a morals charge after she was gang-raped by seven men.

Lahem said he was banned from the courtroom for his refusal in September to allow his client to attend a hearing in which she would have come face to face with her rapists. "She tried to take her life several times after the rape, and I did not want her traumatized all over again," he said. The woman's name has not been published.

The Justice Ministry on Tuesday stood by its decision, saying Lahem was banned from the court for insulting the judiciary, opposing instructions and violating provisions of the law. It did not give details.

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy that does not allow political parties or civic rights groups. The official Wahhabi religious establishment follows a strict interpretation of Islam that prohibits unrelated men and women from mingling and does not allow differing schools of thought. The country follows Islamic law, and many laws are not codified, giving judges wide latitude in sentencing.

King Abdullah, who took the throne in 2005, has promoted greater freedoms and has called for judicial reforms and opportunities for women. But the judiciary is supported by powerful half brothers of the king, and change has been slow and sporadic.

The order revoking Lahem's license also criticized his statements to reporters during one of his cases, in which the court forced a couple to divorce after the wife's half brothers complained that the husband was of a lower social status.

Lahem has had various run-ins with the authorities during his five-year career.

He has been banned from traveling outside the country since 2004, when he defended jailed political reformists calling for a constitutional monarchy. He was also imprisoned twice, for criticizing the arrest of the political reformists as illegal and for his vocal defense of clients who were political prisoners. He was pardoned when Abdullah granted an amnesty to political prisoners when he came to power.

Lahem's most recent client -- dubbed by local media as Girl of Qatif, her home town -- and a male acquaintance were sitting in a car last year when they were kidnapped by seven men and raped at knifepoint. The victims were originally sentenced to 90 lashes for being alone in the car, and the rapists were sentenced to between 10 months and five years in prison.

After Lahem appealed, seeking harsher sentences for the rapists and calling the ruling against his client unjust, a superior court increased the sentences of both victims to six months and 200 lashes. The rapists' sentences were nearly doubled.

According to the English-language daily Arab News, the court told the woman her punishment was increased because of "her attempt to aggravate and influence the judiciary through the media."

Though he was disappointed with the verdict, Lahem said, he realized as he was driving from Qatif back to Riyadh, where he is based, that its excess was actually a sign of hope.

"That verdict signals the death throes of the judiciary's old guard. They can see the end is near," he said. "As black as it looked for me . . . I saw that the overkill in that verdict was a sign of desperation."

Lahem does not expect his case to be resolved for at least two months and plans to spend that time writing. "I have been so busy with all these

cases. Now I will have time to document the details of the last five years. They have changed the social and judicial history of Saudi Arabia."

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