

Recognition for Imprisoned Activist

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Syrian activists say the international award which imprisoned human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni received last week could boost the morale of rights campaigners in the country but is unlikely to have any impact on the authorities.

Bunni, 48, won the annual Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk on May 1. His wife Raghida Issa accepted the award on his behalf from Irish president Mary McAleese at a ceremony held in Dublin.

Bunni, a father of three, is director of the Centre for Legal Studies in Damascus and one of Syria's most prominent advocates of democratic reform. He has been a human rights activist since the early Nineties, when he began defending political prisoners in court and campaigned against the use of torture in detention.

In April 2007, Bunni was sentenced to five years in prison for spreading false information and joining a banned political group. He had been arrested in May 2006 after signing the "Beirut-Damascus Declaration", which was drafted by Lebanese and Syrian intellectuals and called on Damascus to reform its relations with Beirut.

The award given to Bunni is especially significant as only a handful of Syrian activists have been given such recognition in recent years.

Colleagues of the jailed lawyer said he was pleased to be given the award, as it honoured every activist and every victim of human rights abuses.

Mohammad al-Abdullah, a Syrian human rights activist based in Beirut, said the award was of great value. "It supports activists and helps them to keep on standing up for human rights. They won't feel they are alone in their fight," he said.

"We know the award won't affect the authorities' behaviour on human rights, but it's still an important step and one that is appreciated."

"We are very happy for Anwar and his family for receiving this honour," said a human rights activist in Damascus. "They all suffered a lot, and deserve to be honoured by the media, international organisations and many others."

Despite the praise from individuals, Syrian human rights organisations as a whole did not publicly acknowledge Bunni's award.

Abdullah suggested that these groups might not want to call attention to an award given by a western country, as that might cause problems for Bunni's family. He added that Syrian human rights movements

are generally weak on public relations and international outreach.

Nor did media in other Arab countries give wide coverage to the award, which the official Syrian media naturally ignored.

Bunni was one of the first activists to recognise the importance of media in human rights work and has publicised legal cases in Arab and western media, according to a Damascus-based human rights lawyer who has worked with him for several years.

“The most important thing that I’ve learned from Anwar is to stay hopeful and keep smiling despite all the worries and difficulties that we face in our work,” the lawyer said. “I’ve never seen him gloomy, even when I’ve visited him in prison.”

Six members of Bunni's family have been detained for political activities over the last two decades, including his brother Akram, who spent 16 years in prison for his work with the Communist Labour Party. Akram al-Bunni was arrested again in December 2007, along with 12 other activists from the opposition Damascus Declaration group.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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