Spain deports whistle-blower Mohamed Benhalima to Algeria to face execution

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A death sentence against Algerian whistle blower and activist Mohamed Benhalima was announced by an Algerian military court, only two months after Spain's PSOE (Socialist Party)-Podemos government denied his asylum application and deported him. Benhalima was made aware that the death penalty had been handed down against him on May 8, although his lawyers report that the sentence was imposed in absentia, while Benhalima was still in Spain.

Benhalima, a former officer, fled Algeria for Spain in 2019, after learning that his name was on a list compiled by the Algerian authorities of servicemen wanted for their involvement with the *Hirak* movement. He had taken part in mass anti-government protests triggered in February 2019 by former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement of his fifth presidential candidacy. While the demonstrations forced Bouteflika out of office in April of that year, the military regime he headed remains in power.

In Spain, Benhalima built a reputation on social media as an opponent of the Algerian military regime. He amassed more than 345,000 followers on his Twitter, Facebook and YouTube pages, where he posted videos exposing and denouncing corruption in the Algerian armed forces.

Benhalima's deportation is a damning indictment of Spain's nominally "progressive" PSOE-Podemos government. It is a blatant violation of international law, which forbids deporting individuals to a country where they risk suffering torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The PSOE and Podemos are sending an unmistakable signal that they will act brutally to avert any challenge from below to the existing social order.

According to Amnesty International, Benhalima entered Spain on September 1, 2019 on a Schengen Zone visa, applying for political asylum in February 2020. He was given a temporary residence permit, which he later renewed, making it valid until November 2021. However, in August 2021, he received summons to a police station in Bilbao, Spain. Fearing deportation back to Algeria, Benhalima fled to France, but was later arrested and sent back to Spain.

On March 14, 2022, Benhalima was detained by Spanish authorities. They filed an expulsion order against him for allegedly infringing Article 54.1.a of Spain's immigration law, claiming that he participated in "activities contrary to public security or which may be harmful for Spanish relationships with foreign states."

This was based on flimsy allegations that Benhalima is tied to the Algerian Islamist opposition group Rachad, which Algiers listed as a terrorist organisation last year. UN Special Procedures human rights experts stated in December 2021 that the definition of "terrorism" in the Algerian Penal Code was too imprecise and undermined human rights.

An Algerian court had already sentenced Benhalima in absentia in January and March 2021 to 20 years in prison, for charges of alleged "participation in a terrorist group" and "publishing fake news undermining national unity," among other accusations.

Four days after Benhalima's arrest in Spain, he applied for asylum a second time, while detained in an internment camp in Valencia. At 17:35 on March 24, he was then told his second application had been unsuccessful; just three minutes later he was notified of his expulsion. Two hours after that, Spanish authorities forced Benhalima aboard a plane back to Algeria, where he was detained on arrival.

Benhalima appeared in a clip on Ennahar TV on March 27, in which he appears to "confess" to having conspired against the state and says he had not been ill-treated in custody. Just two days before his deportation from Spain, Benhalima had warned that he would likely be forced to make a false confession if detained by the Algerian

regime, most likely be because he had been "subjected to severe torture at the hands of intelligence services."

On March 21, 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had written to the Spanish government calling for Benhalima's case not to be expedited, arguing that the risk of torture was credible, and that the Algerian regime's criminalisation of political opposition is well known.

In March, while detained in Valencia, Benhalima had told Spanish media outlet Levante EMV: "If I return to Algeria, they're going to violate my human rights. Prison and torture are waiting for me. First, I will have a trial for having revealed corruption in my country … Then I fear that they will torture me in a military prison, that I'll suffer sexual violence, or even that they'll kill me and then say that I caught coronavirus."

Benhalima is the second Algerian whistle blower to be deported from Spain and then imprisoned in Algeria in under a year. Last August, former border patrol officer Mohamed Abdellah—who sought asylum in Spain after exposing alleged corruption, bribery, fraud, and cross-border arms and petrol smuggling by high-ranking officers of the Algerian Gendarmerie—was forcibly returned to Algeria by the PSOE-Podemos government.

On his arrival in Algeria, Abdellah was handed to the intelligence service and taken to the Antar barracks in Algiers, notorious as an interrogation and torture site. As of January this year, Abdellah was being held in isolation at the Blida military prison, awaiting trial for undermining state security and the reputation of the army. Since then, there has been little information on his whereabouts.

The PSOE-Podemos government's decision to deport Benhalima has been widely acknowledged in the bourgeois media as a goodwill gesture to the Algerian dictatorship. Algerian–Spanish relations have been tense since PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez recognised Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara in mid-March.

The Western Sahara is a sparsely inhabited former Spanish colonial possession on Morocco's south-western border, with considerable mineral and phosphate deposits, which Rabat has long sought to bring under its administration as an "autonomous region."

After Spain ended its long-standing stance of neutrality in this dispute, Algeria, which has backed the pro–Sahrawi independence Polisario Front, withdrew its ambassador from Madrid. Just five days later, the PSOE and Podemos expelled Benhalima from Spain, in an apparent attempt to curry favour with Algeria, which provided more than 40 percent of Spain's natural gas imports in 2021. This comes as the European Union and NATO campaign for an energy embargo against Russia, the EU's major oil and gas supplier, amid the war in Ukraine.

The treatment of Benhalima and Abdellah gives the lie to claims by the PSOE-Podemos government, as part of the NATO alliance, to be defending "democracy" and "human rights" in Ukraine against Vladimir Putin's Russia. The Spanish government has no problem violating the rights of asylum seekers and tacitly condoning the arbitrary detention, torture and murder of political prisoners.

The PSOE and Podemos already have the blood of thousands of refugees on their hands. By blocking off "legal" routes to enter Spain, they forced desperate migrants to make perilous boat journeys across the Mediterranean to mainland Spain or the Atlantic to the Canary Islands, leading to thousands of deaths at sea. Taking its cue from the far-right Vox party, it built prison camps on the Canary Islands, separated children from their parents, and summarily deported thousands of asylum seekers without even examining their cases.

By deporting Benhalima, the PSOE and Podemos aim to terrorize workers and youth in Algeria opposed to the regime. They aim not only to block renewed eruptions of class struggle threatening the existing regime in Algeria, which is complicit in their anti-refugee policies. After Podemos and the PSOE have deployed tens of thousands of heavily armed police against strikes by metal workers and truckers over the last year in Spain itself, it is apparent that the target of this escalation of police-state terror is the entire working class.

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