



CAIRO INSTITUTE
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Human rights defenders in Bahrain: heroes of a forgotten revolution

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) express grave concern over the continuing crackdown on human rights defenders in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Amid the shameful silence of the international community on the ongoing human rights violations in Bahrain, reflected clearly at the Human Rights Council, it is only through the work of determined human rights defenders (HRDs) that the struggle for democracy in Bahrain is noticed.

Despite the clear recommendations published in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report in November 2011 calling on the Bahraini authorities to immediately release and commute the sentences political prisoners, most of whom are prominent human rights activists, this remains to be realized. In addition, those human rights defenders who are not in prison continue to face ongoing restrictions and violations, which include brief arrests, physical assault, death threats, attacks with teargas on their homes, smear campaigns, and travel bans.

As the BICI report outlines, major human rights violations were committed against peaceful protesters and those who supported them during mass demonstrations in 2011. Abdulhadi Alkhawaja, former head of the BCHR and former Middle East coordinator for Front Line Defenders, remains in detention following his arrest on April 9, 2011. Al Khawaja was sentenced to life in prison by an exceptional tribunal in June 2011 based on trumped-up charges of terrorist activity. He was severely tortured and threatened with rape while in detention, and currently sustains a broken jaw. Dr. Abduljalil Al Sigance, prominent blogger and Spokesman and Director of the Human Rights Bureau of the Haq Movement for Civil Liberties and Democracy, and Hassan Mashaima, the Secretary General of Haq, also remain in prison serving life sentences following their trial in front of an exceptional court on June 22, 2011. Both Dr. Al Singance and Mr. Mashaima suffer from severe medical conditions (paralysis and cancer respectively). The BICI has called for their release.

On January 29, 2012, 14 detained human rights defenders and political activists, including Abdulhadi Al Khawaja and Abduljalil Al- Singace, started a hunger strike to protest against their imprisonment and demand the respect for human and civil rights in Bahrain. Consequently, around 250 political prisoners announced their hunger strike in solidarity with the 14 activists and to demand their immediate release. Al Khawaja was hospitalized following a week of his hunger strike, but he informed his family that he will resume his hunger strike till “freedom or death.” Abdulghani Khanjar, the head of the Committee of Victims of Torture, and recognized blogger Ali Adulemam, were also sentenced to 15 years in prison and life imprisonment respectively on similar charges following their active participation in pro-democracy marches. Both defenders are currently in hiding.

Human rights lawyer Mohamed Issa Al Tajer also faces threats of re-imprisonment as he prepares to stand before court on March 20, 2012. Al Tajer was detained between April and August last year, and is facing charges of “illegal assembly” and “inciting hatred against the ruling regime”.

Bahraini government apologists often point to the continued liberty of Nabeel Rajab, the President of the BCHR, as proof that the government does not target human rights defenders. However, Rajab has been beaten on multiple occasions by members of the security forces, most recently in January 2012, which required his hospitalization. His house in Bani Jamra has also frequently been

attacked with tear gas by security forces. Additional forms of intimidation against human rights defenders in Bahrain include an ongoing smear campaign and death threats by a former state security official, known for his connection with the government, against Nabeel Rajab; Mohamed Al Maskati, president of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights; and Youssef Al Mahafdha, board member of the BCHR. Zainab Alkhawaja of the BCHR also continues to be the victim of violent assault by the police since the publication of the BICI report. As this Written Intervention is submitted, Zainab remains in detention following her arrest on February 13 as she was attempting to protest near the now demolished Pearl Square. She faces charges of illegal gathering and disturbing public peace. The four defenders are among the few advocates of human rights and freedoms inside Bahrain who are not imprisoned.

Other forms of restrictions placed on human rights defenders have included the prevention of several international human rights defenders from entering Bahrain. Many foreign HRDs who have travelled to Bahrain on behalf of external human rights NGOs have been denied visas in order to prevent them from observing trials and monitoring the situation in the run up to the first anniversary of the Bahrain uprising. This indicates why many journalists, including from Al-Jazeera and the New York Times, have also been denied entry.

Activists like these perform a valuable service to human rights reporting through their continued presence in Bahrain. The human rights community in Bahrain has been drained in the past year as many people with relevant skills and experience have been either imprisoned or forced to leave Bahrain from fear of arrest for their activities, especially following the decision of journalists such as Ali Abdulemam and Karim Farqrawi to go into exile to avoid imminent imprisonment. This puts additional pressure on those who remain to document attacks against civilians.

Human rights defenders in Bahrain operate under extremely constrained circumstances. They are at risk of being stopped and beaten at checkpoints, attacked during protests, and are most likely under constant surveillance by the government. They are also at risk of being prosecuted under lese-majesty laws protecting the 'inviolability' of the king and criminalizing any speech that could damage Bahrain's economy. While such vague laws remain unreformed, human rights defenders remain vulnerable.

Even in the foreign media, human rights defenders suffer attacks on their freedom of speech. Mr Rajab co-authored an article on the online website of the The Guardian on January 2012, as a result of which a PR company working with the Bahrain government threatened the newspaper with libel action if it did not take the article down. Meanwhile, the internet in Bahrain is censored, including access to the website of the BCHR and other human rights websites such as the Arab Network for Human Rights Information.

It is of grave concern that the government of Bahrain has shown no signs for intending to release detained human rights defenders and political activists. In fact, despite the cases presented above, the foreign minister of Bahrain stated in February 2012 that there are no political prisoners in Bahrain's detention centers, falsely claiming that those detained because of their involvement or support to the mass protests which started February 14 are detained on criminal charges. Some of these political prisoners, such as Abdulhadi Alkhawaja, face baseless charges of attempting to foment a coup to bring down the Bahrain regime. Despite the government claims since February, the BICI managed to lobby on behalf of several political activists who were released after the commission addressed their cases, while others remain in prison. While the BICI have indicated that the government has promised to release them, there has been no sign of their acquittal so far.

We continue to reiterate that the sustained detention of political prisoners is one of the most serious problems in Bahrain, especially as the anniversary of mass pro-democracy protests in Bahrain approaches. The well respected human rights figures remaining in prison angers the people who these important leaders represent, and as a result, makes attempts for dialogue impossible. We are

of the view that it is a fundamental first step towards any kind of serious reconciliation that these prisoners be released.

Recommendations

We call on members of the UN Human Rights Council to remind the government of Bahrain of its obligations under international law and implement the following:

- Present the finding of the BICI report in front of the HRC.
- Abide by the recommendations of the BICI report and immediately release and drop all charges against human rights defenders and political activists who are in prison solely for exercising their right to freedom of opinion and assembly.
- Until their unconditional release, ensure immediate access to medical care to detainees who are suffering a risk to their health and immediately put an end to the increasing restrictions and degrading treatment, which at times amounted to torture, practiced against them by security forces.
- Refrain from practicing ongoing restrictions against human rights defenders working on documenting human rights violations and grant them the freedom to resume their work without any impediments.
- Include independent and credible human rights defenders in dialogues and discussions on reform, if there is a genuine will to stabilize the human rights and political situation in the country through a legitimate process.
- Grant international human rights defenders and journalists visas to monitor the situation in Bahrain, especially in the coming months.
- Allow the legal registration of human rights monitoring groups and amend association laws.