

## **Bahrain's allies must take action to free human rights defenders**

28 October 2014 - The undersigned 40 organisations call on the international community to publicly condemn the ongoing crackdown on human rights defenders, who face harassment, imprisonment, and forced exile for peacefully exercising their internationally recognised rights to freedom of expression and assembly. With parliamentary elections in Bahrain scheduled for 22 November, the international community must impress upon the government of Bahrain the importance of releasing peaceful human rights defenders as a precursor for free and fair elections.

Attacks against human rights defenders and free expression by the Bahraini government have not only increased in frequency and severity, but have enjoyed public support from the ruling elite. On 3 September 2014, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa said he will fight "wrongful use" of social media by legal means. He indicated that "there are those who attempt to exploit social media networks to publish negative thoughts, and to cause breakdown in society, under the pretext of freedom of expression or human rights." Prior to that, the Prime Minister warned that social media users would be targeted.

The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) documented 16 cases where individuals were imprisoned in 2014 for statements posted on social media platforms, particularly on Twitter and Instagram. In October alone, some of Bahrain's most prominent human rights defenders, including Nabeel Rajab, Zainab Al-Khawaja and Ghada Jamsheer, face sentencing on criminal charges related to free expression that carry years-long imprisonment.

Nabeel Rajab, President of the BCHR, Director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), and Deputy Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), was arrested on 1 October 2014 and charged with insulting the Ministry of Interior and the Bahrain Defence Forces on Twitter. Rajab was arrested the day after he returned from an advocacy tour in Europe, where he spoke about human rights abuses in Bahrain at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, addressed the European Parliament in Brussels, and visited foreign ministries throughout Europe.

On 19 October, the Lower Criminal Court postponed ruling on Rajab's case until 29 October and denied bail. Rajab's family was banned from attending the proceedings. Under Article 216 of the Bahraini Penal Code, Rajab could face up to three years in prison. We believe that Rajab's detention and criminal case are in reprisal for his international advocacy and that the Bahraini authorities are abusing the judicial system to silence Rajab. More than 100 civil society organisations have [called](#) for Rajab's immediate and unconditional release, while the [United Nations](#) called his detention "chilling" and argued that it sends a "disturbing message." The [United States](#) and [Norway](#) called for the government to drop the charges against Rajab, and [France](#) called on Bahrain to respect freedom of expression and facilitate free public debate.

Zainab Al-Khawaja, who is over eight months pregnant, remains in detention since 14 October on [charges of insulting the King](#). These charges relate to two incidents, one in 2012 and another during a court appearance earlier this month, where she tore a photo of the King. On 21 October, the Court adjourned her case until 30 October and continued her detention.

Zainab Al-Khawaja is the daughter of prominent human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, who is currently serving a life sentence in prison, following a grossly unfair trial, for calling for political reforms in Bahrain. Zainab Al-Khawaja has been subjected to continuous judicial harassment, imprisoned for most of last year and prosecuted on many occasions. Three additional trumped up charges were brought against her when she attempted to visit her father at Jaw Prison in August 2014 when he was on hunger strike. The charges are related to “entering a restricted area”, “not cooperating with police orders” and “verbal assault”.

Zainab’s sister, Maryam Al-Khawaja, [was also targeted](#) by the Bahraini government recently. The Co-Director of the GCHR is due in court on 5 November 2014 to face sentencing for allegedly “assaulting a police officer.” While the only sign that the police officer was assaulted is a scratched finger, Maryam Al-Khawaja suffered a torn shoulder muscle as a result of rough treatment at the hands of police. She spent more than two weeks in prison in September following her return to Bahrain to visit her ailing father. More than [150 civil society organisations](#) and individuals called for Maryam Al-Khawaja’s release in September, as did [UN Special Rapporteurs](#) and [Denmark](#).

Other human rights defenders recently jailed include feminist activist and women's rights defender [Ghada Jamsheer](#), detained since 15 September 2014 for comments she allegedly made on Twitter regarding corruption at Hamad University Hospital. Jamsheer faced the Lower Criminal Court on 22 October 2014 on charges of “insult and defamation over social media” in three cases and a verdict is scheduled on 29 October 2014.

While the government of Bahrain continues to publicly tout efforts towards reform, the facts on the ground speak to the contrary. Human rights defenders remain targets of government oppression, while freedom of expression and assembly are increasingly under attack. Without the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners and human rights defenders, reform cannot become a reality in Bahrain.

We urge the international community, particularly Bahrain’s allies, to apply pressure on the government of Bahrain to end the judicial harassment of all human rights defenders. The government of Bahrain must immediately drop all charges against and ensure the release of human rights defenders and political prisoners, including Nabeel Rajab, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, Zainab Al-Khawaja, Ghada Jamsheer, Naji Fateel, Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace, Nader Abdul Emam and all those detained for expressing their right to freedom of expression and assembly peacefully.

Signed,

Activist Organization for Development and Human Rights, Yemen

African Life Center

Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)

Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)

Avocats Sans Frontières Network

Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)

Bahrain Human Rights Observatory (BHRO)

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)  
Bahrain Salam for Human Rights  
Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR)  
Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)  
CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation  
English PEN  
European-Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR)  
Freedom House  
Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)  
Index on Censorship  
International Centre for Supporting Rights and Freedom, Egypt  
International Independent Commission for Human Rights, Palestine  
International Awareness Youth Club, Egypt  
Kuwait Institute for Human Rights  
Kuwait Human Rights Society  
Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada (LWRC)  
Maharat Foundation  
Nidal Altaghyeer, Yemen  
No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ - Italy)  
Nonviolent Radical Party, Transnational and Transparty (NRPTT - Italy)  
PEN International  
Redress  
Reporters Without Borders  
Reprieve  
Réseau des avocats algérien pour défendre les droits de l'homme, Algeria  
Solidaritas Perempuan (SP-Women's Solidarity for Human Rights), Indonesia  
Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA)  
Syrian Non-Violent Movement  
The Voice of Women  
Think Young Women  
Women Living Under Muslim laws, UK  
Youth for Humanity, Egypt