

## IHRC's briefing:

# Emergency Briefing on the Human Rights Situation in Bahrain



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## **Introduction**

The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) is deeply distressed about the ongoing crisis in Bahrain, and concerned that coverage of the situation by the mainstream media is insufficient. Since 14<sup>th</sup> February 2011, Bahrain has seen a political movement renew its demands for freedom, democracy, and the revival of communal partnership in the framework of the civil movements seeking justice that are currently sweeping Arab countries. This was followed by brutal suppression by the Bahraini regime and its security apparatus, as well as the invasion by Saudi-led military forces.

In this briefing, IHRC aims to highlight some of the many instances of government oppression and suppression of human rights that have occurred during this period, all of which have roots in an historic and institutionalised system of inequality and injustice.

## **Extra-Judicial Killings**

At the time of writing, since 14<sup>th</sup> February there have been at least 31 confirmed instances where Bahraini citizens have been killed illegally by government and Saudi-led forces. Many of those killed had been engaging in peaceful protest; others were merely going about their daily routine with no intention of protesting.

According to the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, the youngest of these so far is Sayyed Ahmad Saeed Shams – a 15 year old boy who was shot in the eye with a rubber bullet by Bahraini security forces whilst playing football outside of his home in the village of Sa'ar. Speaking to IHRC, his father described how his son was pistol-whipped onto his neck, causing it to snap. He died wearing a Manchester United jersey – his favourite team. "I picked him up and I could hear him breathing in pain. He took his last breath and then he did not breathe again. He died in my arms".

A 71 year old, Isa Mohammed, died of asphyxiation in his home after police fired extensive tear gas in the village of Ma'ameer on 25<sup>th</sup> March. His family's pleas for emergency medical assistance was to no avail, as the Salmaniya hospital, which was at this point encircled by security forces, was not allowed to give assistance to the wounded and sick.

Bahia Abdelrasoul Al-Aradi, a 51 year old nurse, was shot in the head by a government sniper whilst speaking on the phone to her sister on 25<sup>th</sup> March. Those that attempted to aid her from nearby houses were also shot at by the military vehicles parked on a highway near Al-Gadam roundabout.

Zakariya Rashid Hassan Al-Ashiri's death was announced by the Ministry of Interior on 9<sup>th</sup> April. His death occurred six days after being arrested on charges of "inciting hatred, disseminating false news, promoting sectarianism and calling for the regime's overthrow" on online forums. He moderated a now closed online forum where updates about the protest were posted. Clear evidence of torture marked his shoulder and wrists.

These are just a few examples of the blatant disregard for human life exhibited by the Bahraini regime's security forces, and the lengths that it has proved it is willing to go to in order to both suppress dissent, and exercise an extreme use of force indiscriminately over its citizens; politically active or not.

## **Mass Arrests and Disappearances**

The Bahraini regime has engaged in a campaign of mass arrests in the midst of its crisis of legitimacy. Over 900 men, women and children have since the uprising began been forced to languish in prisons and jail cells, most held without charge or being told of a reason.

Many of the families of those arrested are denied contact with their relatives, and detainees are routinely refused legal representation. It is not uncommon for the family and friends of those concerned to have no knowledge of the circumstances of their arrest, or where they are being held. Perhaps even more worrying is the fate of over 54 men and women that have simply disappeared since the uprising began.

Many of the detainees or missing persons were arrested from the Salmaniya hospital after being wounded during protests, and before even being treated.

The youngest of those arrested is Ahmed Ali Thamer Abbas Yahya; a 12 year old boy abducted by Bahrain Defence Forces (BDF) whose fate and whereabouts are unknown.

## **Torture**

Torture remains institutionalised within the Bahraini judicial and penal systems (see IHRC report 'Broken Promises: Human Rights, Constitutionalism and Socio-economic Exclusion in Bahrain' by Omar F. Ahmed), and this has been especially evident in the past few months.

The Ministry of Interior has claimed that Ali Issa Saqer, 31, died after being restrained by guards for "causing chaos". Photos taken before his burial clearly show purple lashing marks, and bruises covering his entire back. According to Human Rights Watch, he also showed signs that his ankles and wrists had been burnt.

Mohammad al-Maskati, head of the Bahraini Youth Society on Human Rights, has also claimed that sexual violence and the threat of sexual violence have been employed by policemen and security forces in order to intimidate and punish political opposition.

## **Interference by Saudi-led Forces**

In blatant disregard for international law and conventions, a coalition of military forces led by Saudi Arabia on 14<sup>th</sup> March entered the country at the behest of the Bahraini royal family. They have aided the regime's security forces in suppressing demonstrations and brutalising protesters with tear-gas, batons and even live rounds. They have also purposefully attacked and demolished mosques and religious centres associated with the Shia population in order to initiate a sectarian conflict between Bahraini nationals, which has failed spectacularly.

## **Purging of the Political Opposition**

Ebrahim Sharif, Secretary General of the National Democratic Action Society (Waad), a political opposition association in Bahrain, was arrested at his house in Manama on 17<sup>th</sup> March. Since that day his family has not been allowed to visit him and he is believed to be held in military custody.

IHRC and Amnesty International have received reports that he may have been subjected to torture or other ill-treatment after his arrest.

Secretary General of the Haq Movement, Hassan Mushaima, returned from exile in London to Manama, Bahrain on 26<sup>th</sup> February. Since then he has been arrested without charge frequently in order to limit his capacity to be involved in the protest movement.

Dr. Abduljalil Al Singace, a prominent member of the Haq Movement and director of its Human Rights Bureau, was arrested and severely tortured for merely relaying the current situation in Bahrain to IHRC in early March. He has been stripped of his professorship at the University of Bahrain, and has been denied his freedom of movement by being declared not allowed to leave the country.

### **Suppression of Intellectuals and Students**

Academics, scholars and students have also found themselves subjected to the regime's wrath.

Ayat Al-Qormezi, a 20 years old poet and student at the Faculty of Teachers, was arrested on 30<sup>th</sup> March. She was imprisoned for reciting a poem in Pearl Square which was critical of government policy, on 23<sup>rd</sup> February. Al-Qormezi had been subjected to harassments, defamation, intimidation and threats of rape and murder by police and gangs loyal to the regime.

Dr. Masaud Jahromi, Chair of the engineering department at the Ahlia University in Bahrain, was dragged from his bed by Bahraini Security Forces on 14th April at 2:30am. He is an alumnus of the University of Manchester and the University of Kent, having gained his MSc and PhD from these institutions respectively. He has not been heard from since he was taken away in the early hours of that morning by his students, colleagues or family; all of whom have been campaigning for his release.

In April, 7 Bahraini trainee airline pilots taking lessons at the Oxford Aviation Academy in London, UK, were suspended from their training after having their lessons cancelled by the Bahraini regime for having attended a peaceful protest against the Bahraini government in London.

### **Attempts to Marginalise the Movement as Sectarian**

Pundits, journalists and politicians in the West and Gulf region have made a conscious effort to differentiate the Bahraini struggle for freedom from oppression from its Arab counterparts in Libya, Yemen, Egypt and elsewhere. These efforts have been welcomed wholeheartedly by the Bahraini authorities, who have justified suppression of all opposition towards their authoritarian regime as a product of sectarianism.

The Western media have reproduced the logic driving the Bahraini regime's suppression – that those demonstrating do so out of a hatred for Sunnis; disrupting what is an equal, fair and just society.

The ease with which the dictators of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have influenced Western politicians and 'respectable' media outlets to imagine that they possess a right to openly commit atrocities under the pretence of sectarianism is shocking.

The case of Mohamed Al-Buflasa confirms that the Bahraini government is falsely attributing a sectarian nature to the revolution taking place in Bahrain. A 36 year old poet, writer and former independent candidate for the Parliamentary elections, Mohamed was the first Bahraini to go missing after the events of 15th February, having given a speech calling for political activism at Pearl Square. He is also a Sunni. He was arrested by the military, and sentenced to two months by a military court.

The slogan “neither Shia, nor Sunni, we are all Bahraini” that is emanating from the streets of Bahrain is a testimony to the non-sectarian nature of the Bahraini revolution. This is the narrative that the Bahraini government wishes to crush.

### **Targeting of Human Rights Activists**

The Bahraini regime has threatened influential political and legal activists in the country that have been brave enough to speak out against government suppression, and who have urged the Bahraini government to end its campaign of violence and meet the legitimate demands of its society.

The measures used by the regime to persecute the country’s human rights activists includes raiding their houses; seizing private documents and possessions; forcing them into hiding; limiting their capacity to speak with news outlets and the public; publicising their personal details in order to encourage reprisals; and their arrest and torture.

Nabeel Rajab, President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and vice Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), has endured enormous pressure by the regime since the protests began. He has been banned from travelling to Geneva to attend a human rights conference, and has been prevented from communicating with the media. He now has his messages smuggled out of the country.

Suhail Mahdi Saleh Alshehabi, member of the Committee for the Unemployed, was detained from August 2010 until February 2011, and was subjected to torture. On 3<sup>rd</sup> April, at 1:30 am, the front door to his house was broken down, and his home was stormed. His two brothers were severely beaten, and security forces threatened to rape their wives if they did not reveal the hiding place of their brother Suhail. This traumatic event took place in the presence of his elderly father and sick mother.

### **Seizure of Salmaniya Hospital, and Persecution of Medical Professionals**

On Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> March, security forces seized the Salmaniya Hospital in Manama; beating doctors and other members of staff, and preventing the treatment of demonstrators. They proceeded to deny relatives of the victims, members of staff, medics and ambulances from entering or leaving the hospital, having encircled the hospital with tanks and troops.

Since then, doctors, nurses and other medical personnel have found themselves subject to intimidation and reprisals by security forces and the Bahraini regime for treating the sick and wounded. According to the Bahraini Centre for Human Rights, 47 doctors, nurses and paramedics have been detained by the government, and are understood to be held at a military base in connection with treating anti-government protesters.

The head of the Bahrain Dental Society is also being detained.

### **Attacks on Civil-Society**

Freedom of press in general, and journalists in particular, have suffered as a consequence of the regime's actions. Karim Fakhrawi, founder of Bahrain's premier independent daily newspaper Al-Wasat, died under police custody on 12<sup>th</sup> April. The paper had been accused by the regime of "deliberate news fabrication and falsification". He had gone to a police station on 5<sup>th</sup> April to complain that authorities were about to bulldoze his house. The government sponsored Bahrain News Agency has claimed that Karim died of kidney failure, but photographs have emerged which show clear evidence of extensive cuts and bruises all over his body. His case has been highlighted by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Haidar Mohammed al-Nuaimi, a columnist for the same newspaper, was dragged on to the streets from his home and beaten by around 30 plain-clothed policemen on 24<sup>th</sup> April before they dragged him away. His whereabouts are currently unknown.

### **Sacking of Professional Sportspeople**

The regime has also taken measures to prevent the political expression of its sports people, including many high profile footballers and football coaches. These footballers have had their wages frozen, and the contracts to their clubs and teams terminated without justification. The reason is nevertheless clear, as all of the people affected by the regime's actions have engaged in political demonstrations during the popular uprising, and expressed opposition to the al-Khalifa monarchy.