



General Assembly

Distr.: General
22 June 2021

English only

Human Rights Council

Forty-seventh session

21 June–9 July 2021

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Iraqi Development Organization, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 May 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Continued Detention of Human Rights Defenders in Bahrain, Including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Dr. Abdel-Jalil al-Singace

Introduction

In response to the 2011 peaceful pro-democracy movement, the Bahraini government used excessive force and violence to crackdown on protesters.¹ This repression included the unlawful arrest and arbitrary detention of thousands of individuals for their pro-human rights and oppositional political stances. Thousands of political prisoners remain incarcerated, including numerous human rights defenders (HRDs).² HRDs continue to be targeted by the authorities, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Dr. Abdel-Jalil al-Singace.

Prisons: Conditions and COVID-19

Bahrain has been repeatedly noted for its subpar prison conditions including the authorities' inhuman treatment of political prisoners and human rights defenders. Overcrowded and unhygienic, they do not meet the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also called the Mandela Rules.³ Human rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have repeatedly brought attention to the abhorrent conditions, including the authorities' persistent failure to provide adequate medical care.^{4,5} we repeatedly receives credible reports of torture and other inhuman treatment, solitary confinement, deprivation of food and sleep, collective punishment, arbitrary suspension of phone calls and visits with families, and other concerning tactics.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the aforementioned issues, and has brought to light the authorities' blatant mismanagement of the situation. Prisoners have also reported a lack of access to sanitation equipment and testing. Due to the authorities' mismanagement of the situation, COVID-19 entered into the prison system in the early months of 2021, and the administration response has been wholly inadequate.⁶

On March 17, 2020, the Bahraini authorities determined that the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the consideration of alternative sentencing schemes and royal pardons. 1,486 prisoners were subsequently released, 901 of whom were granted a royal pardon on "humanitarian grounds," while the remaining 585 received non-custodial sentences. However, human rights defenders such as Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace were overlooked.⁷

¹ Human Rights Watch, "Bahrain: Widespread Crackdown; Systematic Abuse," January 12, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/01/22/bahrain-widespread-crackdown-systematic-abuse>.

² ADHRB, "Written statement submitted by ADHRB to the Human Rights Council, Agenda item 4," February 1, 2021, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/46/NGO/114>.

³ ADHRB, "Bahraini Prisons Continue to Violate the Mandela Rules," March 1, 2021, <https://www.adhrb.org/2021/03/bahraini-prisons-continue-to-violate-the-mandela-rules/>.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2021: Bahrain Events of 2020," 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/bahrain>, [accessed in April 2021].

⁵ Amnesty International, "Bahraini authorities flouting prisoners' rights to health amid rise in COVID-19 cases at Jau Prison," April 9, 2021 (updated April 12, 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/04/bahraini-authorities-flouting-prisoners-rights-to-health-amid-rise-in-covid-19-cases-at-jaw-prison/>.

⁶ Amnesty International, "Bahraini authorities flouting prisoners' rights to health amid rise in COVID-19 cases at Jau Prison," April 9, 2021 (updated April 12, 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/04/bahraini-authorities-flouting-prisoners-rights-to-health-amid-rise-in-covid-19-cases-at-jaw-prison/>.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Bahrain: Free imprisoned Rights Defenders and Opposition Activists," April 6, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/06/bahrain-free-imprisoned-rights-defenders-and-opposition-activists>.

As of mid-April 2021, nearly 100 cases of COVID-19 had been detected within Jau Prison, alone.⁸ In response to prisoner protests against the inadequate response by the administration, prisoners held protests in early April, while their family members protested across the country.⁹ In response, the authorities severely beat prisoners, and arrested, interrogated, and charged multiple family members for their activism.¹⁰

We have repeatedly raised concerns about the treatment of these prisoners and of human rights defenders at the HRC, including on June 3, 2020, ahead of the 44th session of the Council¹¹, and February 1, 2021, ahead of the 46th session.¹²

Wrongfully Imprisoned Human Rights Defenders

Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace are two exemplary human rights defenders who have been wrongfully imprisoned. They are both part of the “Bahrain 13,” a group of 13 political leaders who were arrested for their roles in the 2011 pro-democracy movement.¹³ Their cases are examples of the treatment of all detained human rights defenders in Bahrain.

Abdulhadi al-Khawaja is a prominent Danish-Bahraini human rights defender, former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), a civil society organization which was ordered to close due to its political engagement, and founder of the Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR).¹⁴ On April 9, 2011, he was violently arrested—the arrest left him with a fractured jaw—and he was later tortured while in detention.¹⁵ He received a life sentence in reprisal for his activism, including exercising his rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly during the pro-democracy protests of 2011.¹⁶ In prison, he has faced reprisals, including the denial of medical care, the confiscation of his belongings in October 2017, and, one month later, a restriction of his ability to access television, radio, books, pens, and paper.¹⁷ To this day, Mr. Al-Khawaja still suffers from chronic pain and requires additional surgery for his jaw.¹⁸

Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace is a 58-year-old mechanical engineer, blogger, human rights activist, and former spokesman of the opposition group, al-Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy.¹⁹ He was arrested on March 16, 2011, and during his detention, Bahraini officers beat and sexually abused him, forced him to stand on one foot for extended periods of time, and coerced him into signing a false confession. For his role in the protest movement, he was charged with “plotting to overthrow the government,” and sentenced to life in prison. Since

⁸ As according to ADHRB’s statistics, including close contact with sources on the ground.

⁹ Alex MacDonald, “Bahrain: Detainees isolated after crackdown on protests in jail,” Middle East Eye, April 20, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/bahrain-prisoners-isolated-after-crackdown-protests-jail>.

¹⁰ Reuters, “Tensions rise in Bahrain prison as inmates, families protest conditions,” April 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/bahrain-security-prison-int-idUSKBN2C62B3>.

¹¹ ADHRB, “Written statement submitted by ADHRB to the Human Rights Council, Agenda item 4,” June 3, 2020, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/46/NGO/114>.

¹² ADHRB, “Written statement submitted by ADHRB to the Human Rights Council, Agenda item 4,” February 1, 2021, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/46/NGO/114>.

¹³ ADHRB, “Profiles in Persecution: Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace,” May 9, 2019, <https://www.adhrb.org/2019/05/profiles-in-persecution-dr-abduljalil-alsingace/>.

¹⁴ Front Line Defenders, “Case History: Abdulhadi al-Khawaja,” <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-abdulhadi-al-khawaja> [accessed in April 2021].

¹⁵ ADHRB, “Rhetoric Over Action: Bahraini-Danish Human Rights Defender Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Danish Double Standards,” August 10, 2020, <https://www.adhrb.org/2020/08/rhetoric-over-action-bharani-danish-human-rights-defender-abdulhadi-al-khawaja/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ International Federation for Human Rights, “Bahrain: Human rights defender Abdulhadi al-Khawaja faces reprisals in detention after protesting poor prison conditions,” December 19, 2017, <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/bahrain-human-rights-defender-abdulhadi-al-khawaja-faces-reprisals-in>.

¹⁸ ADHRB, “Rhetoric Over Action,” August 10, 2020.

¹⁹ ADHRB, “Profiles in Persecution: Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace,” May 9, 2019.

March 2013, Bahraini officials have habitually ignored his requests for medical attention despite his long-term poliomyelitis, which left him paralyzed in childhood.²⁰ On January 28, 2016, Dr. Al-Singace ended a 313-day liquid-only hunger strike, which he had carried out to protest ill-treatment and abuse in Jau Prison. Furthermore, he has not received a family visit since March 2017, in protest of the prison's imposition of the inhumane and unnecessary practice of shackling prisoners for these visits.²¹ According to several sources, his treatment has not improved despite these protests.

Grounds for Release

Al-Khawaja and Al-Singace are human rights defenders who were wrongfully charged on spurious charges, and are now suffering the consequences of a brutal dictatorship that prevents all forms of dissent. Rather than receiving commendation for their work for their fellow citizens, they are unjustly imprisoned.

Each of these individuals should be released and pardoned on the basis of the unsubstantiated charges brought against them. When factoring in the risks posed by COVID-19, it is clear that a release should occur immediately. Furthermore, they should be released unconditionally, so that they may continue their work of advocating for human rights and advancing justice in Bahrain.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Human rights defenders are the protectors of democracy in any society, and Bahrain is no different. The peaceful, democratic actions of these defenders of basic liberties never warranted prison sentences. They should be immediately released, especially when considering the dangers posed by COVID-19.

We call on the Government of Bahrain to:

- Unconditionally release and pardon Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Dr. Abdul-Jalil al-Singace;
- Unconditionally release and pardon all other human rights defenders;
- Provide compensation for all human rights defenders who have been wrongfully imprisoned;
- End the campaign of reprisals against human rights defenders;
- Until the administration releases these prisoners, ensure that the prison administrations follow all UN guidelines related to the treatment of prisoners, especially considering the dangers posed by COVID-19. Namely, authorities must ensure that prisoners have safe, socially-distanced, and sanitary spaces and prevention measures in all housing, eating, and social areas. They must receive adequate and timely medical care, as needed. Prisoners' family members must be able to access information about them, and families and prisoners must be allowed to resume regular, direct, private contact.

²⁰ Scholars at Risk, "Abduljalil al-Singace, Bahrain," <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/abdul-jalil-al-singace-bahrain/>, [accessed in April 2021].

²¹ ADHRB, "Profiles in Persecution: Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace," May 9, 2019.