

Human Rights Defenders and Political Prisoners in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain

Abdulhadi Al Khawaja: Serving Life in Prison on Politicized Charges in Bahrain

Abdulhadi Al Khawaja is the co-founder and former president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR). He began his pro-democracy activism as a student in London and later received asylum in Denmark. After twelve years abroad in exile, Bahrain granted Al Khawaja amnesty and he returned to the country in 2001. He founded the BCHR and persistently advocated for human rights and democracy despite harassment from the authorities, arbitrary arrests, and prosecutions.

During the 2011 pro-democracy Bahraini uprising, Al Khawaja organized peaceful demonstrations across the country. He was arrested in April 2011 for his role in the protests and tortured in detention. In May of that year, he and twenty other pro-democracy activists were charged before a military court, in closed proceedings, for vague terrorism-related crimes. Al Khawaja was convicted of participating in terrorism to overthrow the government, although there is no evidence he ever participated in or incited violent acts. In June 2011, Al Khawaja was sentenced to life in prison.

THE MISUSE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM LAWS AND RESTRICTION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN BAHRAIN

The Bahraini government routinely uses terrorism-related laws to secure long and arbitrary prison sentences to intimidate and silence human rights defenders and pro-democracy leaders for acts of



peaceful expression. Bahrain's vague and overbroad counterterrorism laws criminalize legitimate political organizing and assemblies as "illegal gatherings" and allow the government to strip Bahraini citizenship from certain convicted citizens. The government also prosecutes activists under laws that criminalize insulting or defaming religion or symbols associated with the regime.

The authorities manipulate these laws to conflate peaceful expression with violent activity. For example, in February 2016 a Bahraini court sentenced opposition leader Ibrahim Sharif, of the secular Waad party, to one year in prison on charges of "inciting hatred against the regime," based on a speech he gave calling for reform. Similarly, in 2015, Sheikh Ali Salman, an opposition leader from the Al Wafaq party, was sentenced to four years in prison for politically-motivated charges

as result of his peaceful dissent. Al Khawaja's own daughter, Zainab Al Khawaja, is currently serving a three-year sentence for nonviolent acts of protests, including tearing up a picture of the king.

Bahrainis who peacefully criticize the government face grave risks including arbitrary detention, torture, and trial without due process. The authorities often rely on confessions obtained under torture. Al Khawaja himself required surgery after injuries to his head sustained during his time in detention. He attempted to bring complaints of physical and sexual torture to the military court with jurisdiction over his case, but the court refused to hold a hearing on the torture allegations.

THE U.S. APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

At the 2015 Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, President Obama asserted, “[T]he essential ingredient to real and lasting stability and progress is not less democracy; it’s more democracy. It’s institutions that uphold the rule of law and apply justice equally. It’s security forces and police that respect human rights and treat people with dignity. It’s free speech and strong civil societies where people can organize and assemble and advocate for peaceful change. ... All of this is part of countering violent extremism.”

The persecution of Al Khawaja and other human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists illustrates Bahrain’s failure to adhere to the principles necessary to counter extremism. Instead, the government continues to arbitrarily detain, torture, and prosecute those who seek political reforms and fundamental freedoms.

As the State Department notes in its 2014 Country Report on Terrorism, “The inability of the [Bahraini] government and political opposition to reach an agreement on political reforms threaten[s] to fuel further domestic unrest, upon which violent opposition groups could seek to capitalize.” By failing to meaningfully engage with civil society and peaceful opposition leaders, Bahrain is exacerbating

political tensions and creating space for violent extremist groups to flourish within its borders.