

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

Zainab Al Khawaja: Imprisoned in Bahrain for Nonviolent Protests

Zainab Al Khawaja is a Bahraini human rights defender serving a three-year sentence on the basis of politicized charges related to nonviolent acts, including tearing up a picture of the king. One of the leading voices calling for reform in Bahrain, Al Khawaja helped lead peaceful protests during the 2011 pro-democracy uprising. She has been arrested and released numerous times since 2011. Al Khawaja is serving her current sentence with her one-year-old son, Abdulhadi. International human rights groups, including Human Right First, have repeatedly called for her release.

Al Khawaja is the daughter of Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, subjected to life imprisonment for his pro-democracy advocacy and nonviolent role in the 2011 protests. Before her imprisonment, Zainab drew attention to the condition of her father's hunger strike and attempted to visit him in Jaw Prison in August 2014. Her sister, Maryam Al Khawaja, has been sentenced in absentia on politicized charges and advocates for democracy and human rights in Bahrain from abroad.

DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN BAHRAIN

Al Khawaja is one of many Bahrainis harassed, prosecuted, and imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Although the Bahraini government claims to be promoting stability and pursuing reforms, officials continue to arbitrarily jail



journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition leaders on freedom of expression–related charges.

Bahraini authorities use broad and vague laws to lend a veneer of legality to their repressive efforts to stifle the media and to punish those critical of the regime. Articles 214 and 216 of Bahrain's Penal Code mandate prison sentences or fines for any person who offends the king, national flag emblem, or official institutions. Similarly, under the country's Press Law, individuals can face up to five years of imprisonment for publishing criticisms of Islam or the king, inciting actions that undermine state security, or advocating a change in government. These laws are among those used to control traditional media and suppress dissent expressed over social media.

Once arrested, Bahrainis who peacefully criticize the government are often tortured while in detention or denied due process in judicial proceedings. This persistent persecution of human rights defenders

and pro-democracy critics is a glaring example of Bahrain's failure to deliver on promised reforms.

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

The United States has repeatedly asserted that countering violent extremism requires tolerant and open societies. As expressed by the State Department's Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Sarah Sewall, in March 2016, "When people are free to speak without reprisal, they are more likely to raise concerns about the drivers of radicalization in their communities."

Bahrain's repression of speech and jailing of nonviolent human rights defenders reduces space for political discussion and debate of legitimate grievances. It weakens the moderate, nonviolent critics essential for open, responsive governance. This vacuum provides fertile ground for violent extremism to take root and flourish.

The U.S. government has not lived up to its own principles in its engagement with Bahrain. When Al Khawaja was taken into custody in March 2016, instead of condemning her conviction and calling for her immediate release, a State Department spokesperson urged Bahrain to "follow due process in all cases and to abide by its commitment to transparent judicial proceedings." This response fell short of earlier U.S. statements on her case, and did not reflect her current circumstances; Al Khawaja had already been convicted and sentenced with no further right to appeal. When asked repeatedly if they would reassert their earlier, stronger position on Al Khawaja's case, U.S. officials merely reiterated their call for "due process."

To effectively counter violent extremism, the U.S. government must speak out against its allies' repressive and counterproductive practices. U.S. officials should use their considerable leverage to urge Bahrain to undertake serious reforms, cease the prosecution of human rights defenders for peacefully expressing their views, and immediately release those imprisoned for nonviolent dissent.