



HM Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa
Office of HM the King
P.O. Box 555
Rifa'a Palace
Kingdom of Bahrain

11 May 2023

Dear HM Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa,

As Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), we write to you to promote closer relations with all institutions of the European Union by your government's proven adherence to international human rights standards through the release of all those imprisoned following arbitrary arrest and/or unfair trial, improved conditions of detention and the opening of civic and political space.

While we acknowledge and condone the Government of Bahrain (GoB)'s reported release in April of over 50 political prisoners, we express our dismay by the government's continued arbitrary detention of numerous of political prisoners and human rights defenders, whom the authorities detained in previous years for the peaceful expression of their conscientiously held beliefs.¹

We echo calls set in the United Nations' Human Rights Committee's 2018, and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' 2022 appeals that urge the GoB to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners and to protect human rights defenders.²

¹ In its report on events in 2022, Human Rights Watch reported that:

Thirteen prominent opposition [leaders](#) have remained behind bars for more than a decade for their roles in the 2011 pro-democracy protests. They include Hassan Mushaima, the head of the unlicensed opposition group Al-Haq; Abdulwahab Hussain, an opposition leader; Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a prominent human rights defender; and Abdel-Jalil al-Singace, the spokesman for Al-Haq. All four are serving life terms following manifestly unfair trials.

See: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/bahrain> In its November 2020 Briefing [to the European External Action Service (EEAS)] Human Rights Situation in Bahrain, Salam for Democracy and Human Rights details the cases of eight people arbitrarily imprisoned following unfair trials, on the basis of provisions that do not meet minimum international standards in respect to recognisably criminal conduct. See: <https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020.10.10-EEAS-Human-Rights-Situation-in-Bahrain-overview-FINAL.pdf>

² United Nations' Human Rights Committee - Concluding observations on the initial report of Bahrain, 15 November 2018, UN reference: CCPR/C/BHR/CO/1, at:

<https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhsiMkkhmRBkQVNCbDF>

We recall the European Parliament resolutions of 15 December 2022, on the case of human rights defender [Abdulahadi Al-Khawaja](#) and of 11 March 2021, [on the human rights situation in the Kingdom of Bahrain, in particular the cases of death row inmates and human rights defenders](#), and renew the calls set out in these resolutions.

We share the alarm expressed by UN bodies and credible international human rights organisations over the persistent use of torture, systematic medical neglect and poor detention conditions in Bahrain.³ We renew the call for the GoB to take vigorous steps to prevent torture and ill-treatment, ensure that all such cases are promptly, independently and thoroughly investigated, bring perpetrators to justice and ensure that victims receive full reparation.⁴

We deplore instances of voter suppression and rejection by the GoB to adhere to international standards in relation to freedom of association that resulted in the holding of parliamentary elections that were neither free nor fair in November 2022.⁵

[YxdTy6GQja8djUQQUivDlkVKQImvIZ%2BgwjT2jYggAyZn1IEZ2xZ7Toz4WtpBozJ3jO9IHIFL35H4amdve496VJjbPAP](#) - Paragraph 54 states that “The State party should protect freedom of expression, in accordance with article 19 of the Covenant. In particular, it should: [...] (c) Release immediately and unconditionally anyone held solely for the peaceful exercise of his or her rights, including human rights defenders, activists, lawyers and trade unionists [...]” and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - Concluding observations on the initial report of Bahrain, 3 August 2022, UN reference: E/C.12/BHR/CO/1, at:

<https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=4slQ6QSmIBEDzFEovLCuW355pOJr0rR24IZdyERa342g5MY2D5AsPyX8wctmE0i6kyTc0o1OYjVPN%2FZdNdcRZwgVj1INRezON%2ByY3zylbdqKk5g5j4Z9ka39UGqnvKo8> - In paragraph 9, “The Committee recommends that the State party protect human rights defenders from harassment, intimidation and reprisals, and that it guarantee an enabling environment for civil society organizations engaged in the promotion and protection of human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights, inter alia, by carrying out information and awareness-raising campaigns focusing on the importance of their work. [...]” and “The Committee urges the State party to take measures as soon as possible to ensure the effective protection of all rights human rights defenders, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, Abduljalil al-Singace and Naji Ali Fateel, and to fully cooperate with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on the matter.”

³ In its 2022/23 annual report on Bahrain, Amnesty International reported that “At least six prisoners were tortured and otherwise ill-treated during the year.” See: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/5670/2023/en/> *The NGO, Salam for Democracy and Human Rights's 2022 report (in Arabic) Bahrain: The Treatment of Prisoners During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, at: <https://salam-dhr.org/a-report-by-salam-for-democracy-and-human-rights-organisation-on-nelson-mandela-international-day-bahrain-the-treatment-of-prisoners-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/> set out a catalogue of administrative flaws in the management of prisons, while in paragraph 37 of its 2018 Concluding Observations, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concern:

“about reports that acts of torture and ill-treatment are often committed by law enforcement officials, including as a means of eliciting confessions, that, despite the prohibition in domestic law, confessions obtained under duress have been used as evidence in court and that allegations made by defendants in this respect have not been adequately investigated”;

and “about reports of torture in prisons, particularly in the Jau prison [and] the lack of information on investigations carried out and convictions handed down vis-à-vis the number of complaints of torture and ill-treatment.” Paragraph 41 expresses concern “about reports of inhuman prison conditions, including serious overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, inadequate access to drinking water and unhygienic toilet facilities, particularly in the Jau prison [...]”

⁴ This is the near-verbatim recommendation from paragraph 38 (a) in the UN Human Rights Committee’s 2018 Concluding observations on the initial report of Bahrain, 15 November 2018, UN reference: CCPR/C/BHR/CO/1, at: <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhsiMkxhmRBkQVncBdFYxdTy6GQja8djUQQUivDlkVKQImvIZ%2BgwjT2jYggAyZn1IEZ2xZ7Toz4WtpBozJ3jO9IHJFL35H4amdve496VJjbPAP> - Paragraph 38 also calls on the GoB to “(b) Set up an accessible, independent and effective complaint mechanism to combat torture” and “(e) Provide security forces and other law enforcement personnel with effective training on torture prevention and humane treatment” Paragraph 42 sets out recommendations relating to monitoring and living conditions.

⁵ In the chapter on Bahrain, Human Rights Watch’s World Report on events in 2022, at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/bahrain> states that: “Bahrain’s November 2022 parliamentary and municipal elections took place amid serious restrictions on political and civil rights, free speech, and assembly.” and that:

“Political isolation laws, passed in June 2018, explicitly ban members of previously dissolved political parties from running for parliament and from sitting as members on the boards of directors of civil society organizations. The laws also ban formerly convicted felons, even if pardoned or convicted on abusive speech or assembly-related charges, and those previously deemed to have “disrupted” constitutional life in Bahrain. In 2016 and 2017, Bahrain’s judiciary dissolved the country’s two major opposition parties, Al Wifaq and Waad.”

In a 10 November statement entitled *Bahrain: Upcoming elections held amidst political repression, rights violations*, Amnesty International reminded readers that:

The 2018 “political isolation” laws unfairly and arbitrarily restrict voter registration and participation, unfairly prohibit activists and former opposition party members from standing for public office, and from joining civil society bodies such as associations and clubs. They contravene Articles 22 and 25 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), to which Bahrain is a state party.

Human rights and civil society organisations worldwide have recognised how these measures, along with undue limitations on freedom of expression, and assembly restrict civil society and political expression in Bahrain.⁶

We urge the GoB to rescind discriminatory laws and practices but rather promote democracy and political participation.

We acknowledge the establishment of the [National Human Rights Plan \(NHRP\)](#) by the GoB. However, we echo concerns of civil society that it may be a means to whitewash deeply rooted inequities and human rights violations. A lack of genuine engagement and consultation with independent civil society by the government and those responsible for the implementation of the plan will ensure its failure. We urge the Bahraini authorities to implement it with proper oversight from independent bodies and human rights organisations to ensure its effectiveness and credibility.

In line with previous European Parliament resolutions on Bahrain, we urge the GoB to:

- Release, immediately and unconditionally, all human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience, who have been detained and sentenced for merely exercising their right to freedom of expression, and to drop all charges against them;
- Engage in a meaningful and concrete manner with UN human rights bodies by extending a standing invitation to visit Bahrain to all Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council;
- Implement in an objectively verifiable way the recommendations of all UN human rights mechanisms such as treaty bodies and Special Procedures; and
- Immediately end excessive and arbitrary restrictions on civic space that are not in line with international human rights standards.

“In July 2016, the government outlawed al-Wefaq, a Shia-led political opposition party that has had the most electoral success of any party under Bahrain’s current constitution. Between 2012 and 2017, the authorities also outlawed Amal, an opposition party that had competed with al-Wefaq for Shia voters, and the non-sectarian opposition party Wa’d. Members of these political parties have also been banned from holding leadership positions in civil society organizations.”

See: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/11/bahrain-upcoming-elections-held-amidst-political-repression-rights-violations/>

⁶ At the time of writing, CIVICUS, a global alliance with a mission to strengthen citizen action and civil society around the world terms Bahrain as ‘closed’ and scores it 15/100 for civil society freedom on its global monitor. See: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/bahrain/> - Reporters Without Borders ranks Bahrain 167 out of the 180 countries ranked and states that “Freedom of expression does not exist in Bahrain”. See: <https://rsf.org/en/country/bahrain> . Index on Censorship’s Index assesses academic, digital and media / press freedom, split into 10 deciles. Bahrain’s overall rank is in the lowest - 10. See: <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/indexindex/> The Economist’s Democracy Index 2022 terms Bahrain as ‘authoritarian’ and it scores the country at 2.52, or 23 places above the lowest ranked country. See: https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/?utm_source=economist&utm_medium=daily_chart&utm_campaign=democracy-index-2022#mktoForm_anchor

We urge the Bahraini authorities to take immediate and concrete steps to reverse the now-long standing downward trajectory of human rights and democracy by ensuring that all people of the Kingdom of Bahrain can have a voice and play a role in its development, notably with respect to the human rights situation in the country. We call on your government to guarantee the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

As Members of the European Parliament, we remain committed to the protection, promotion, and fulfilment of all human rights in Bahrain.

Sincerely,

Dietmar Köster, S&D
Mounir Satouri, The Greens/EFA
Karen Melchior, Renew
Janina Ochojska, EPP
Özlem Demirel, The Left
Ana Miranda, The Greens/EFA
Margrete Auken, The Greens/EFA
Kira Marie Peter-Hansen, The Greens/EFA

CC:

H.E. Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the EU Abdullah bin Faisal Jabr Al-Dosari