



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Bahrain: 2018 Elections

**Tuesday, July 10, 2018
10:00 – 11:00 a.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning, and thank you for joining us for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's briefing on Bahrain – the second briefing we've done this year, because conditions in Bahrain continue to worsen.

I especially want to thank our panelists for their presence today, and for their longstanding efforts to protect human rights and support democracy in Bahrain.

At some point this fall Bahrain will hold elections for the 40-seat Council of Representatives, one of two chambers of the National Assembly.

The election is important because the Council is the only elected governing body in the country. So the election will be the only opportunity the people of Bahrain will have to choose some of their leaders.

And choosing some leaders is important because Bahrain, a Shi'a majority country, is ruled by a hereditary Sunni monarchy.

So what is the likelihood that these elections will be free and fair?

Spoiler alert: right now, the answer is "not very."

Political parties are banned in Bahrain. “Political societies” operate as the functional equivalent, but the two most important of those, Al Wefaq and Waad, have been dissolved by the government.

Then two months ago, in May, the National Assembly advanced legislation that essentially bans **individual** members of the political opposition from seeking election.

So there are no parties, and key leaders won’t be able to run as individuals either.

That’s on top of the fact that many key opposition leaders are in jail. Prominent figures – like Nabeel Rajab, Sheikh Ali Salman, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, Abduljalil Al-Singace, Ahmed Humaidan, Naji Fateel and many, many others – continue to be detained for exercising fundamental human rights like freedom of expression.

These developments and others – like the closing of the only independent newspaper, al-Wasat, in 2017 – are worrisome and frustrating.

Worrisome because Bahrain continues to host the United States 5th Fleet, and to my knowledge, there is no Plan B in the works.

Frustrating because a few short years back, Bahrain had a real chance to move in a more democratic direction by implementing the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI).

Instead, the government has doubled down on its repression of opposition voices and essentially closed off all peaceful channels for the expression of dissent.

Like other authoritarian governments around the world, the Bahraini government has carried out its crackdown in the name of fighting terrorism.

News flash: with such tactics, Bahrain is more likely to feed extremism than to defeat it.

Today we will hear recommendations for things Congress should do to encourage Bahrain to change course and ensure its upcoming elections will be free and fair. There is still time, and I hope the government will listen.

Otherwise, we can all foresee that opposition to the regime inside the country and out will only increase.

I turn now to Dr. Ken Katzman of the Congressional Research Service, who will introduce our panelists and moderate the discussion.