



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Bahrain: 2022 Elections

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Virtual via Cisco WebEx

As prepared for delivery

Good morning and thank you for joining us for today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission virtual briefing on the upcoming elections in Bahrain.

I extend a special welcome to our panelists, three of whom are joining us from overseas. We appreciate their expertise and long-standing commitment to human rights, both personal and professional.

I also welcome Elizabeth Hagedorn of Al-Monitor who has graciously agreed to moderate the discussion this morning.

Bahrain is a majority Shi'a Muslim country governed by a Sunni-led hereditary monarchy. The Commission has been tracking its human rights situation since 2010. Over the course of the last 12 years, in spite of a few hopeful moments, civil and political rights have consistently deteriorated.

This coming November 12, Bahrain will hold elections for its 40-seat Council of Representatives, the only elected chamber of the National Assembly.

This will be the third time Bahrainis have gone to the polls since the 2011 pro-democracy uprising made very clear that political reform was desperately needed, and inspired hopes that it would be possible.

Unfortunately, those hopes have been dashed. The latest evidence is the conditions in which the elections are taking place, which do not meet international standards for free and fair elections.

The right of people to participate in government without discrimination is guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bahrain has acceded.

But political parties are banned in Bahrain. “Political societies” operated as the functional equivalent in the past, but the two most important were banned five years ago. No organized political opposition is possible in Bahrain.

The government body that administers the elections is not independent. Nor is the press.

“One person, one vote” is a bedrock democratic principle. But in Bahrain electoral districts deliberately underrepresent the majority Shi’a population. This is one important reason that Freedom House has characterized the country’s elections as “not fair.”

The government prohibited international monitoring of the 2018 elections, and the same is expected this year.

In fact, all of these same conditions were in place for the 2018 elections. As this Commission [highlighted at the time](#), the 2018 elections were not free and fair, and nothing has changed since.

Meanwhile, key human rights defenders, opposition leaders and journalists remain imprisoned for exercising their fundamental rights.

Among them are four brave men who have been recognized as prisoners of conscience in the Commission’s [Defending Freedoms Project](#).

[Abduljalil Al-Singace](#), a blogger and human rights activist, is serving a life sentence.

[Naji Fateel](#), a blogger and tweeter, is serving a 25-year sentence.

[Sheikh Ali Salman](#), the former Secretary-General of the banned Al-Wefaq political society, is serving a life sentence.

And [Abdulahdi al-Khawaja](#), an internationally recognized human rights defender and the father of Maryam al-Khawaja, one of our panelists today, is serving a life sentence.

The convictions of these men were characterized by violations of their due process rights. Several of them have been subjected to torture and degrading treatment, including denial of health care. The cases the government has made for their continuing detention are not convincing. Simply put, they have been treated unjustly.

I believe in engagement. I think it is important to have lines of communication with states we disagree with, or that do not share our values or our form of government.

Bahrain was designated a major non-NATO ally nearly 20 years ago. The U.S. 5th fleet continues to be based there. Successive U.S. administrations, both Democratic and Republican, have considered Bahrain to be a strategic partner.

What I do not support is pretending that fundamental human rights are respected in Bahrain. Or that the fact that people go to the polls means there has been a real election.

We do ourselves no favors by lending legitimacy to an electoral process that is all form, but no substance.

I would like to see the reforms that were promised a decade ago get back on track. The opportunity remains for Bahraini authorities, perhaps especially Crown Prince Salman, to take steps in that regard. For example,

- Prisoners of conscience should be freed without conditions, including all four of those I just named.
- Political societies should be reinstated.
- The international press should be invited to cover the November 12th elections with no restrictions on their access.
- Peaceful protests or expressions of dissent leading up to the elections should be respected.

I have no doubt that steps like these would be welcomed here in the United States and around the world.

What the Administration should not do after November 12th is congratulate the Bahraini government for holding elections, when those elections will not have been free and fair.

Thanks again to everyone who is joining us today, and I turn the mic back to Elizabeth Hagedorn.