

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing  
on  
Bahrain: 2022 Elections

Tuesday, November 1, 2022 – 10:00 a.m.  
Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Statement of Maryam Al-Khawaja  
Human rights defender, consultant and trainer, and daughter of  
imprisoned human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja

Regarding the situation in the prison system:

We are seeing systematic denial of access to adequate medical treatment. There has been outbreaks of many serious diseases, and people have died because of medical denial. Prison cells are overflowing with prisoners. Instead of taking steps in the right direction, e.g. releasing prisoners of conscience and allowing opposition society to exist, Bahrain is doubling down on crackdown with laws implementing to make the human rights situation worse. One of the things, which Bahrain has been good at is bogging people down on the details: E.g. on Al-Khawajas case, Bahrain officials spend time sending document after document with irrelevant information, which bogs people down on the details. People are then forced to only focus on the minor things and forget the idea that these people should not be in prison in the first place

Window dressing reforms: Bahrain started the National Institute of Human Rights or the Prisoners Commission or the Ombudsman's Office: But time and time again these offices has been used for reprisals targeting and attacking people instead of making the human rights situation better. Western countries are blinded and focus on the “positive reactions” to these reforms even though they have not been the human rights situation better - actually the situation has been worse. Harassment and crackdown continues. Bahrain does *not have a dysfunctional justice system but a highly functional injustice system.*

Recently, The Bahrain Office of Public Prosecution made a public threat that anybody who calls for boycotting the elections will be imprisoned for 2 years and pay a fine of 2000 dinars (USD 5300). If there was real access to accountability and justice in Bahrain, the King and Premierminister (also Crown Prince) would be on massive trial for human rights violations of crimes made since 2011 and before that. But that is not the world we live in.

We live in a world where the GCC lives with impunity because of its relations with Western countries and because of the economic and security alliances they have.

“We have insisted both publicly and privately that mass arrest and group force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahraini citizens. And such steps will not make legitimate calls for reforms go away. The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in the dialogue and you can not have a dialogue with a part of the peaceful opposition is in jail. The government must create the conditions for dialogue”

- Quote from former US president Barack Obama

In other words: You cannot move forward in Bahrain without the opposition who is sitting in prison cells. 11 years after this statement we are in the exact same situation. Why? While we saw positive statement we didn't see effect or accountability towards Bahrain government which continued to keep opposition and political prisoners in prison.

We are looking at a worsening of the human rights situation in Bahrain and in the region. Whether that is in Saudi Arabia after President Biden's fistbump with MBS or in Egypt where Alaa Abdel Fattah might be dying in the next two weeks because of his hunger strike. And we are looking at a worsening of the human rights situation in Bahrain. As an international community we need to make a decision. Do we want to continue this path down the worsening situation of human rights where things will get worse. Or we can decide that now is the time for push for human rights and respect for democracy and basic freedoms. I want to reiterate the ask from colleagues, but also say that this is the time for the US government to make that decision - should they continue with double standards regarding accountability with allies or decide to stop double standards and practice accountability for all equally.

Thank you.