

Testimony of Matar Ebrahim Matar before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

August 1, 2012

Good afternoon,

It is my pleasure to participate today in this hearing about the situation in my country Bahrain. First, let me thank Congress for their recognition of the struggle in Bahrain and for holding this event. I hope can reach a tangible outcome from this hearing. Also I would like to thank Senator Wyden, Congressman McGovern and all the Representatives and Senators who have shown commitment to the case of Bahrain. Having Assistant Secretary Mr. Michael Posner with us here is highly appreciated by me and by many Bahrainis. Being on Capitol Hill to participate in this hearing reminds me of Abduljalil AlSingase and Nabeel Rajab. They gave congressional briefings and both of them are in prison now.

Before going into detail about the status of the BICI recommendations, let me describe for you the big picture. Based on The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy index, Bahrain is considered an authoritarian regime. This fact had been represented in BICI in a different manner. Article 50 stated that "The King enjoys broad executive powers". The Democracy Index also considered Bahrain an Absolute Monarchy and I believe that absolute power is an absolute devil. The King always denies this fact and calls Bahrain a Constitutional Monarchy. Here is the root cause of our major problems. It is denial. After denial, few options remain: either to ignore all the ongoing violations and problems or to find excuses for them. No genuine step can be taken without facing the problems.

In this Index (Democracy Index) Bahrain is worse than Cuba, China and Vietnam. Many countries were progressing and the most improved country was Tunisia which jumped 53 steps. On the other hand, the most undisputed declining country in the world was Bahrain. It fell 22 steps to be one of worst 25 countries in the world. It is difficult for this regime to respect human rights and freedoms. If the regime is not ready to share the wealth and power, they

don't have an option except to continue oppressing the people to control the situation. Knowing this fact explains having elected members of the municipality council as part of the dismissed workers list.

Even before the uprising, it wasn't difficult for observers to expect deterioration in Bahrain. All those who were monitoring the trial of 25 activists heard the testimonies about torture and they could imagine where things were going. In 2010, I raised those signs of deterioration in front of Madam Secretary Hillary Clinton when she was visiting Bahrain and I asked her if there was a certain limit for the violations of human rights by a US strategic ally. Part of Madam Secretary's reply was to encourage to looking at the "Full side of the glass instead of just looking at the empty one." She was talking about how Bahrain is leading the Gulf region in a different manner. Listening to the recent speech for Madam Hilary Clinton at the Holocaust Museum when she was talking about "prevention and response strategies" for "campaigns of harassment and violence against groups of people because of their ethnic, racial, religious, or political backgrounds" in addition to her talk about "moral obligation," I wonder, does such deterioration in the situation in Bahrain trigger revision of the current policies? Are there prevention and response strategies for the ongoing violations in Bahrain?

I'm not here to ask for help. I'm not asking the US government to fight for democracy and freedom instead of Bahrainis. The issue is not just about the moral obligation of Americans' principles and values. It is about considering one of the most deteriorating countries a major US non-NATO ally. It is also about the obligations of running one of the most important US bases through support of such brutal regime. Does it need a lot of research for the conclusion to be reached by experts in national security and military that such regimes are not sustainable?

Comparing Bahrain with the Gulf Countries, it is hard for me to admit the fact that Bahrain is weak. It is weak in terms of economy, complicated demography, and being between two giant countries such as Saudi and Iran. It is a very bad feeling to see Bahrain used and pay the price for the ongoing conflict in the region.

Any other attempt will not solve the problem, and will just give more time to the regime to commit more violations. After more than 16 months since the imposition of martial law, and with the BICI report being there for 9 months, more violations were committed and not fewer. This is an indicator that whatever was done to implement the BICI recommendations was actually empty from its purpose and did not help to change the situation on the ground. I don't want to talk a lot about how the regime failed to implement most of the recommendations and vacuumed them from their purpose. For that I would like to refer you to my respected colleagues in Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights to give you their assessment. Also I would like to refer you to the recent Amnesty International report and to the documents that I have provided which thoroughly explain why we think the regime is not serious about implementing BICI's recommendations.

To play a constructive role in this struggle, I urge Congress to support the following steps:

In any country that has such political trouble, the easiest solution is to bring a national unity government that includes all sides. We suggest 50:50 opposition/loyalists, led by an agreed Prime Minister. This government will be responsible for implementing BICI in full, addressing reconciliation, and promoting dialogue.

A Special National court, with international expertise and monitoring, shall be established to address accountability for all crimes committed since 14 February 2011 from all sides.

A serious action plan shall agree on police reform, like what happened in South Africa, Northern Ireland, and others, that ensures inclusive security and with immediate effect.

Finally, I recommend stopping all security and military engagement with Bahrain if this plan is not established.

Thanks again, it was my pleasure and honor to be here today.