



Bahrain: Repression and the Consequences for Reconciliation

House of Representatives Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC)

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Opening Remarks by Kate Kizer

When more than half of Bahrain's population peacefully demonstrated to demand their basic human rights and the constitutional monarchy they had been promised ten years prior, the Bahraini government responded with brute force, resulting in the deaths of protestors, the injuries of hundreds, and the arrest of thousands. After the government responded to international pressure and created the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (the BICI) to determine accountability for what happened and specific reform steps to move forward, it accepted the commission's 26 recommendations and vowed to swiftly implement them.

The last five years have shown that the Bahraini government has failed to uphold these promises. My organization's independent research found that the government has only implemented two recommendations in the last five years. At the same time, the government's repression has increased and become a systematic way to control its population through force and fear. Our organization works with Bahraini victims to document the abuses they have suffered at the hands of government security forces. The pattern of abuse that we have documented since 2011 details an evolution of repression in Bahrain that demands international attention and a response from Bahrain's key allies like the United States.

In October 2013, ADHRB started collecting detailed information from Bahraini victims or their immediate family regarding the abuses they have suffered. Our legal affairs team then works with the victims and their families to write and submit complaints to the Special Procedures of the United Nations. The majority of the complaints we submit focus on credible accusations of torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and due process violations.

The UN Special Procedures are made up of experts in different human rights related topics. Based on the information submitted, the procedures contact and pressure governments about the complaints they receive. As a result of our documentation work, both the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Special Rapporteur on Torture, among others, have repeatedly spoken up for Bahraini individuals.

Since 2013, our five-person team has documented more than 500 such complaints with the UN. At the end of last year, we conducted an analysis of the type, severity, and frequency of violations. Our findings indicate a systematic pattern of abuse conducted by Bahraini authorities.

Abuse begins immediately at the time of arrest. ADHRB has documented only three cases in which the arresting security forces produced a warrant. In more than 20% of the cases, the arresting officers used violence. 89 victims reported that they were disappeared incommunicado following their arrest, some for periods that lasted several weeks or months. Many credibly alleged they were tortured during this time.

Of the 495 complaints ADHRB analyzed, 370 victims reported torture. Only two victims were able to specifically report no instance of violence or torture during their detention. Almost 75% of the tortured detainees report security forces beat them with fists. More than 40% have been beaten with weapons. 66 victims reported that they were electrocuted during their detention, with security officers oftentimes specifically targeting sensitive areas. More than 20% of the complainants allege that security forces prevented them from praying or subjected them to sectarian insults.

At least 15% of the victims ADHRB has documented have been minors at the time of their initial detention. In a number of cases, when detainees were tortured, security forces also threatened to torture their families if they did not confess.

The Bahraini judiciary then relies on these coerced confessions to convict detainees at trial. In 122 cases, torture victims were forced to sign coerced confessions, often blindfolded or not knowing what they were signing. In at least 23 cases, the victims indicated that these confessions were used as primary evidence for convictions, with sentences up to and including the death penalty. Despite Bahrain claiming that it has set up institutions to address reports of abuse and torture and compensate victims, none of the 370 victims that we have worked with received any form of compensation. Only one complaint to these institutions led to an investigation, but the responsible officers were never charged.

The criminal justice system has become one of the main tools of repression for the Bahraini government. As a result of the systematic use of arbitrary detention and torture, between

3000-4000 Bahrainis remain imprisoned, more often than not based on coerced confessions. This includes human rights activists, the political opposition's leadership, and an American citizen, Tagi al-Maidan.

Ending human rights abuses and impunity in Bahrain is vital for US national security interests if the US is interested in maintaining a stable security partner. The torture and abuses Bahrainis face as a result of peaceful dissent in the form of free expression and assembly creates a vacuum in Bahraini society. This pattern of abuse for peaceful dissent reinforces the mistaken belief that nonviolence cannot create the structural changes the majority of Bahrain's population called for in 2011; the perpetuation of this cycle of abuse is not only a ripe breeding ground for radicalization inside and outside Bahrain's prisons, but also actively undermines the United States' strategy to counter violent extremism. The US can no longer sit back and rely on the government's promises that it can control the situation. The systematic violation of human rights in Bahrain will inevitably lead to creating yet another violent flashpoint in an already volatile region.

Thank you.