

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

1 April 2016

Index: MDE 11/3756/2016

As Bahrain hosts Formula One Grand Prix event, Amnesty International calls on authorities to slam the brakes on the wheels of repression

Amnesty International has today called on the Bahraini authorities to mark the glamorous Formula One Grand Prix event taking place this weekend by immediately and unconditionally releasing all prisoners of conscience held solely for peacefully expressing their views and ending the harassment of political and human rights activists.

Despite promises of reform made back in 2011 in the face of popular anger and international criticism following the authorities' crushing of mass protests, the wheels of repression continue to spin in Bahrain.

The authorities have severely curtailed the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, have not effectively addressed the practice of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and other police abuses, and handed down heavy prison terms and death sentences after grossly unfair trials. They have also arbitrarily stripped Bahraini nationals of their citizenship on vague security grounds, rendering them stateless and expelling them from the country.

During this weekend, the Bahraini authorities will, as in previous years, use the Formula One Grand Prix sporting event to project the image of a country that is open and embracing reform. But this is far from the reality.

Leading political figures have been languishing in prison since 2011. Others who have continued to call for peaceful reform or criticise the actions of the authorities were put in jail following unfair trials. **Sheikh Ali Salman**, sentenced to four years in prison, **Fadhel Abbas Mahdi** sentenced to five years, **Ebrahim Sharif** sentenced to one year, and **Zainab al-Khawaja**, sentenced to three years and one month, are but a few examples on a long list of how the authorities deal with peaceful critics.

Others who are not in jail have charges pending against them or face other arbitrary restrictions. Despite repeated calls from governmental and non-governmental bodies, prominent human rights defender **Nabeel Rajab** cannot travel outside of Bahrain. **Sheikh Maytham al-Salman**, a dedicated defender of freedom of expression and religion, has been awaiting a new passport since January 2016. He is yet to be provided with a reason for the delay despite having requested, at least nine times, further information from the relevant authorities of the Ministry of Interior. Such practices constitute arbitrary restrictions on their freedom of movement and interfere with their work in defence of human rights. Both Sheikh Maytham al-Salman and Nabeel Rajab also face charges as a

result of peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Anyone seeking to publicly criticise the authorities while international journalists and visitors are in Bahrain for the Grand Prix is likely to face serious consequences. The authorities have banned indefinitely demonstrations in Manama, and riot police have often fired tear gas and shotguns to disperse protests in other towns and villages, leading to arrests and serious injuries.

Very few security officers are ever investigated and prosecuted for torture or other abuses against protesters and detainees. Those who have been have generally been low ranking, and have either been acquitted or received token sentences. Meanwhile Amnesty International continues to receive reports of torture and other ill-treatment during detention and interrogation. When victims and their lawyers raise such allegations in court, they have often been ignored or the allegations not adequately examined, entrenching a culture of impunity the authorities have repeatedly claimed they are working to eliminate.

Another example of the alarming erosion of human rights in Bahrain is the increasing tendency to resort to expulsion of individuals who have had their nationality arbitrarily revoked. Such developments are chilling and reflect another weapon of choice the Bahraini authorities resort to when it comes to silencing dissent and getting rid of “unwanted” individuals.

If the authorities wish to project a more positive image to the world, they should improve the human rights reality in Bahrain. A good start would be the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience, halting expulsions, and introducing human rights-compliant reforms to the justice system and the laws of the country.