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Bahrain: UN human rights review must spur action not hollow pledges

A new United Nations review of the human rights situation in Bahrain will have been a hollow exercise unless the Gulf kingdom follows it up with real action to implement its recommendations, Amnesty International said.

On Wednesday the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva adopted the outcome of its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Bahrain – a four-yearly report card on the country’s human rights record.

Bahrain’s government has fully [accepted more than 140 out of the 176](#) recommendations stemming from the review, including measures aimed at releasing prisoners of conscience, bolstering fair trial guarantees and investigating human rights violations committed during and after last year’s massive pro-reform protests.

“We’ve already seen Bahrain pledge human rights reform on the world stage – after the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, made up of international experts, published its findings last year – but the sad reality is that such pledges remain hollow without real action to back them up,” said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“Unless Bahrain’s government now puts into practice the UPR’s recommendations at the national level, this will have been just a hollow box-ticking exercise.”

Freedom of expression and fair trials

Among the UPR’s recommendations accepted by the Bahraini government were 16 measures related to fair trial guarantees – including the release of those behind bars for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Despite repeated assurances by the Bahraini government to respect the rights to freedom of expression and association, numerous prisoners of conscience remain behind bars and recent weeks have seen a renewed clampdown on these freedoms.

Earlier this month, Bahrain’s High Criminal Court of Appeal [upheld harsh sentences against 13 prisoners of conscience](#).

And in August, human rights activist Zainab al-Khawaja was arrested and faces a litany of charges – including tearing up a picture of the King – while human rights defender [Nabeel Rajab was handed a three-year prison sentence](#) for merely exercising his right to freedom of expression and association.

Torture allegations

The Bahraini government accepted 11 recommendations to investigate allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of those detained after protests in 2011 – and to bring those responsible to justice.

While the Bahraini authorities have sentenced three police officers for abuses and recently brought charges against several others, the vast majority of alleged abusers have evaded justice so far.

Amnesty International calls on the Bahraini authorities to ensure accountability where human rights violations took place, and to make public the outcome of any investigations into allegations of torture and killings by the security forces.

Legislative reform

Bahrain's government accepted 22 of the UPR's recommended changes to national legislation, but rejected nine proposed legal amendments which would bring national law in line with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Amnesty International said the rejection was a regrettable move that will deny justice to victims of grave human rights violations. The government also rejected recommendations relating to the abolition of the death penalty.

The organization also urged the Bahraini authorities to remove vaguely worded provisions in national law that could still be used to criminalize the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

“By continuing to place wide restrictions on political associations and to arrest scores of people who take place in peaceful demonstrations, Bahrain's authorities are flagrantly violating their international human rights obligations,” said Luther.

“Taking the UN's recommendations at face value and implementing real change is an urgent first step to remedying the dire human rights situation in the Gulf kingdom.”