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## **Bahrain must free prisoners of conscience**

13 opposition activists and prisoners of conscience must be released immediately by the Bahrain authorities, Amnesty International said today ahead of a court decision on their case next week.

The men, who were convicted last year before a military court on charges including 'setting up terror groups to topple the regime and change the constitution' after their involvement in peaceful anti-government protests, had their convictions and sentences upheld on appeal in September.

On Monday 3 December, the Court of Cassation in the capital Manama will decide whether or not to grant the men's defence request to be released on bail.

The Court will decide whether to quash or uphold their sentences and convictions at a later separate hearing although there is a small possibility this will happen on Monday.

"Monday's decision will be a real test for the Bahraini authorities and their allies, if they want to prove once and for all that they are genuinely committed to respecting and protecting human rights," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"These men must be immediately and unconditionally released. Their sentences and convictions must be quashed. Bahrain's allies must also put pressure on the authorities to drop the pretence of reform and immediately back up their words with real actions."

The 13, who include prominent opposition activists Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Ebrahim Sharif, were originally sentenced by a military court in June 2011 to between five years and life in prison .

All maintain their innocence. Amnesty International found no evidence that they used or advocated violence in last year's anti-government protests and they are therefore held solely for exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Last week, to coincide with the first anniversary of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report, Amnesty International released a briefing paper criticizing the inadequate implementation of the BICI recommendations and the worsening human rights situation in the country.

The BICI report found the Bahraini government responsible for gross human rights violations and documented widespread abuses. It made a series of recommendations including calling on the authorities to bring to account those responsible for human rights abuses and to carry out independent investigations into allegations of torture and other violations.

Amnesty International's briefing, [Bahrain: Reform shelved, repression unleashed](#), highlighted the increased repression and lack of accountability for past abuses in Bahrain, including the continuous imprisonment of prisoners of conscience like the 13 opposition activists and Nabeel Rajab, president of

the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights.

The Bahraini government responded to the criticism by saying the allegations were baseless and that it was committed to the implementation of the BICI recommendations.

However Amnesty International has documented continuous human rights abuses in the past few months as well as lack of accountability and impunity for past abuses, including the lack of impartial and independent investigations into all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, including allegations made by the 13 opposition activists that they were tortured or otherwise ill-treated while in custody.

Far from engaging in reform, the authorities moved in the past months to unleashing further repression, culminating in October 2012 in the banning of all rallies and gatherings in the country in violation of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and in November with the stripping of Bahraini nationality from 31 opposition figures.