

URGENT ACTION

BAHRAINI PRISONER STILL ON FASTING PROTEST

Bahraini-Danish human rights defender and prisoner of conscience Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja reinstated his fasting protest on 21 September 2023 after prison authorities reneged on their promises including to transport him and other prisoners to those appointments without handcuffs and in a regular vehicle. His health remains critical due to his cardiac condition which has led to three emergency visits to hospital. He began his fast on 9 August to protest his continued denial of access to medical care and in solidarity with hundreds of prisoners in Jaw Prison.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Crown Prince and Prime Minister

Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Court of the Crown Prince

P.O Box 29091

Riffa – Bahrain

Email (via contact form): <http://www.crownprince.bh/en/contact>

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Your Highness,

Bahraini-Danish human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, 62, has been arbitrarily imprisoned since 2011 solely for peacefully exercising his rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression during the 2011 popular uprising in Bahrain. He began a fasting protest on 9 August 2023, accepting only very small quantities of liquid such as juice or milk no more than once per day, joining hundreds of prisoners in their mass hunger strike. His fasting has exacerbated his cardiac condition, leading to three emergency hospitalizations.

On 11 September, the prisoners halted their month-long mass hunger strike in response to promises by the prison administration to improve conditions over coming weeks, but on 13 September Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja resumed his own fast when the prison cancelled his scheduled hospital appointment with an ophthalmologist. He was rushed to hospital again on 14 September after he felt tightness to the chest and pain in his arm. There, he was seen by a cardiologist, but no tests were done, and he was also seen by an ophthalmologist who prescribed him eye drops. Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja immediately suspended his fasting for five days, to give the prison authorities the time to arrange an appointment with a cardiologist and for actual tests to be run.

On 19 September he resumed his fasting after prison authorities failed to make a hospital appointment with a cardiologist. On 20 September, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja signed a document suspending his fasting protest after two prison officers promised Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja that all the prisoners held the building housing him and the other opposition leaders, would no longer be transported to their appointments handcuffed and on board an armoured bus and that he will soon have an appointment with a cardiologist and other specialists. The next day, one of his co-prisoners was due for a hospital appointment. When he arrived at the prison transport gate, the guards said that they knew nothing about the promises made to the prisoners. As a result, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja resumed his protest yet again.

We call upon your Highness to ensure that Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja is immediately and unconditionally released as he is a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his human rights. In the meantime, and due to his serious health condition, we urge you to ensure that the promises made to him and other prisoners of timely access to adequate health care and in regular transportation are met, and that he is protected from further torture and other ill-treatment.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Prominent human rights defender and prisoner of conscience Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, aged 62, co-founded both the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR). Until early 2011, he worked as MENA Protection Coordinator for the human rights group Frontline Defenders. He also previously took part in an Amnesty International fact-finding visit to Iraq in 2003 and is a member of the International Advisory Network of the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre. He is a peaceful advocate of human rights and the recipient of several human rights awards, including the Dignity - World without Torture Award which he received in October 2013. Most recently, in 2022, he obtained the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja is serving a life sentence in Jaw prison for his role in leading peaceful protests during the 2011 popular uprising in Bahrain. He was convicted and sentenced following a grossly unfair military trial in 2011 and later at a retrial in 2012 by a civilian court on charges including "setting up terror groups to topple the royal regime and change the constitution".

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja began a fasting protest on 9 August 2023 after the latest denial of adequate medical care by the prison authorities and joining hundreds of Jaw Prison detainees in their hunger strike. Although he experienced cardiac arrhythmia on 28 February 2023, it was not until 1 June that he had an appointment at the prison clinic with a cardiologist from the Salmaniya hospital. The cardiologist did not have access to his medical file nor the necessary equipment to conduct a proper examination and stated that Al-Khawaja needed an X-ray and specialized medical monitoring in hospital for several days, which the prison authorities refused to grant. Two days later, on 11 August, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja experienced strong cardiac arrhythmia and was taken to the prison clinic from where he was transferred to the Bahrain Defence Force hospital emergency service before being admitted to the intensive care unit. He was too weak to oppose being treated intravenously. A couple of hours later, he was transferred back to his prison cell where he immediately resumed his protest.

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja's hospital medical appointments have not been taking place as scheduled, even when he agreed to being handcuffed and transported on board an armoured bus and against medical advice from prison doctors that the prison authorities should relax the constraints because of his medical conditions, including spinal issues. According to prisoners' testimonies, during travel in the armoured bus, prisoners are at times kept waiting in the vehicle for hours. More recently, some other prisoners were transported in regular cars or busses and without being handcuffed. International human rights mechanisms have said that the use of restraints on prisoners who do not pose a risk can constitute torture and other ill-treatment. Rule 47 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners states that restraints should only be used to prevent escape or to prevent prisoners from injuring themselves or others.

On 7 September 2023, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja's daughter, Maryam Al-Khawaja, announced that she would return to Bahrain to push for the release of her father, putting her own freedom on the line to save him. In solidarity with her trip on 15 September, she was joined by Amnesty International's Secretary General Agnès Callamard, Olive Moore and Andrew Anderson, respectively the current and former directors of Front Line Defenders and Timothy Whyte, Secretary General of ActionAid Denmark. All were denied boarding their scheduled flight to Bahrain from London.

On 14 September, the Bahraini authorities cancelled a planned visit by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to assess conditions in the country a day before they were due to arrive.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English / Arabic
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 9 November 2023
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja (he/him)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde11/7119/2023/en/>