

URGENT ACTION

ACTIVIST IMPRISONED FOR “INSULTING” THE KING

Bahraini political activist Mahdi Sahwan was sentenced by a Lower Criminal Court in Manama to one year's imprisonment for “insulting” the King and three months' imprisonment for “calling for an illegal gathering”. He may be a prisoner of conscience.

Mahdi Sahwan, a 43-year-old Islamist activist was arrested on 7 July 2013 after he was summoned to the al-Budaya Police Station in the capital, Manama. He was arrested in relation to speeches he had given on 5 July during political rallies. During these speeches he allegedly “insulted” the King and called for an “illegal gathering”. He was held for seven days in Dry Dock Prison and on 15 July the Public Prosecutor ordered his detention for a further 45 days pending investigation. His trial by Branch 3 of the Lower Criminal Court began on 26 August. He was sentenced on 30 September to one year's imprisonment for “insulting the King” and received a further three months for “calling for an illegal gathering”. His lawyer is appealing against the verdict. Immediately after the verdict was announced Mahdi Sahwan was transferred from Dry Dock Prison, where he had been held since arrest, to Jaw Prison which is about 30km south of Manama.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Calling on the Bahraini authorities to release Mahdi Sahwan on the basis that the only charges against him should not be considered criminal offences and contravene Bahrain's obligation to uphold the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly;
- Calling on them to ensure that Mahdi Sahwan is protected from torture and other ill-treatment and that he has regular access to his family and lawyer;
- Urging them to repeal laws that criminalize the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression, in line with Bahrain's obligations under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 18 NOVEMBER 2013 TO:

King

Shaikh Hamad bin 'Issa Al Khalifa
Office of His Majesty the King
P.O. Box 555
Rifa'a Palace, al-Manama, Bahrain
Fax: +973 1766 4587 (keep trying)
Salutation: Your Majesty

Minister of Interior

Shaikh Rashid bin 'Abdullah Al Khalifa
Ministry of Interior
P.O. Box 13, al-Manama, Bahrain
Fax: +973 1723 2661
Twitter: @moi_Bahrain
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:

Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs
Shaikh Khalid bin Ali bin Abdullah Al Khalifa
Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs
P. O. Box 450, al-Manama, Bahrain
Fax: +973 1753 1284
Email: minister@justice.gov.bh
Twitter: @Khaled_Bin_Ali

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

On 14 April 2013, Bahrain’s cabinet endorsed an amendment to Article 214 of the Penal Code, increasing the penalty for offending the king, Shaikh Hamad Bin ‘Issa Al Khalifa, or the country’s flag and other national symbols. The amendment, which was approved by parliament in June and is awaiting the King’s ratification, would make such offences punishable by up to five years in prison in addition to steep fines.

Article 214 of Bahrain’s Penal Code states: “A prison sentence shall be the penalty for any person who offends the emir of the country [the King], the national flag or emblem”; this violates the right to freedom of expression.

Two-and-a-half years after the popular uprising in Bahrain, and beneath the fanfare of reform, prisoners of conscience, including some arrested during the protests, remain behind bars and the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly continue to be suppressed. In recent months, not only have prisoners of conscience not been released, but more people have been jailed simply for daring to express their views, whether via Twitter or on peaceful marches. A number of women activists have been detained too. Bahraini courts have appeared more concerned with toeing the government’s line than offering effective remedy to Bahrainis and upholding the rule of law.

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), appointed by Royal Order on 29 June 2011, was charged with investigating and reporting on human rights violations committed in connection with the 2011 protests. At the launch of the BICI report in November 2011, the government publicly committed itself to implementing the recommendations set out in the report. The report recounted the government’s response to the mass protests and documented wide-ranging human rights abuses. Among its key recommendations, the report called on the government to bring to account those responsible for human rights violations, including torture and excessive use of force, and carry out independent investigations into allegations of torture.

However, many of the government’s pledges remain unfulfilled. The establishment of BICI and its report was considered to be a groundbreaking initiative, but, almost two years on, the promise of meaningful reform has been betrayed by the government’s unwillingness to implement key recommendations around accountability; this includes its failure to carry out independent, effective and transparent investigations into allegations of torture and other ill-treatment and excessive use of force, and to prosecute all those who gave the orders to commit human rights abuses. For further information see *Reform shelved, repression unleashed* (Index: MDE 11/062/2012), November 2012, <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE11/062/2012/en>.

On 28 July 2013 Bahrain’s parliament held an extraordinary session and then submitted 22 recommendations to the king. The recommendations toughen punishments laid out in the 2006 anti-terrorism law. A few days later the king issued several decrees curtailing the right to freedom of expression further, including banning all protests, sit-ins and public gatherings in Manama indefinitely and giving the security forces additional sweeping powers.

On 9 September 2013 a joint statement by 47 countries at the UN Human Rights Council, expressed serious concern about the ongoing human rights violations in Bahrain.

Name: Mahdi Sahwan
Gender m/f: m

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