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Bahrain: New move to crush dissent ahead of Grand Prix

A move by Bahrain's government to jail anyone found guilty of insulting the Gulf nation's King for up to five years is a new attempt to crush dissent before the country hosts the Formula One Grand Prix later this week, Amnesty International said.

According to state media, Bahrain's cabinet – chaired by the Prime Minister and the newly appointed deputy Prime Minister, the Crown Prince – on Sunday endorsed an amendment to Article 214 of the Penal Code, increasing the penalty for offending King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah or the country's flag and other national symbols.

The amendment, which has now been referred to the National Assembly, would make such offences punishable by up to five years in prison in addition to steep fines.

“Increasing the punishment for criticism of Bahrain's King is a further attempt to muzzle activists ahead of the upcoming Grand Prix,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“The authorities' reliance on a vaguely worded criminal ‘offence’ to avoid scrutiny of their record says a lot about their own failures and lack of commitment to reform.

“Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Bahraini authorities to repeal articles of the Penal Code used to criminalize freedom of expression, including Article 214 which this measure would amend to increase the punishment to up to five years in prison.”

The Bahraini authorities claim nobody is detained for peacefully expressing their views and exercising their rights to freedom of expression.

But activists have already served jail time for insulting the King.

Between 5 and 12 November 2012, ‘Abdullah ‘Alwi al-Hashemi, ‘Ali Mohammad ‘Ali and ‘Ali Abdul Nabi al-Hayeki were sentenced to between four and six months in prison for messages posted on their Twitter accounts since 2011 which were deemed to be insulting to the King.

Most of them have since been released after serving their sentences, but Abdullah Alwi al-Hashemi is still in prison and is due to be released at the beginning of May.

On 12 March 2013 the Public Prosecutor announced on state media that six people had been arrested for defaming the King on Twitter. Separate trials against the six started on 24 March. Amongst them, 17-year-old Ali Faisal al-Shufa has been charged under Article 214 of the Penal Code for “insulting the King of Bahrain on Twitter”.

The latest proposal seeks to use the Penal Code to impose even stiffer punishments in similar cases in the

future.

“These Penal Code articles are being used to jail dissenters in direct violation of the right to freedom of expression, since they impose restrictions that are not permitted under international law,” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui.

Public figures, including those exercising the highest political authority such as heads of state and government, are legitimately subject to criticism and political opposition, as highlighted by the UN Human Rights Committee.

In a briefing released in February, Amnesty International documented how, two years on from the 2011 protests in Bahrain, prisoners of conscience remain behind bars and activists continue to be jailed just for expressing their views – whether via social media or in peaceful marches.