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Bahrain: Promises of reform broken, repression unleashed

Bahrain is facing a stark choice between the rule of law, or sliding into a downward spiral of repression and instability, Amnesty International warned in a new briefing today.

The briefing [Bahrain: reform shelved, repression unleashed](#) comes days before the first anniversary of a landmark report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), which was established by the country's authorities to investigate abuses during the 2011 anti-government protests.

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.

After BICI published its report in November 2011, the government committed itself to implementing the recommendations.

But as this briefing makes clear, instead of fulfilling this undertaking, the authorities swiftly moved to entrench 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.

“The scale and nature of the violations unleashed in Bahrain since the BICI made its recommendations are making a mockery of the reform process in the country,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

“As Amnesty International has documented in this briefing, the authorities have reneged on their promises to pursue the path of reform. Any claim by the government that it is committed to the rule of law and to improving human rights sounds hollow, in the face of a moribund reform process.

“Indeed, it has become evident that the authorities in Bahrain do not have the will to take the steps necessary to reform. Protestations to the contrary only underscore the gap between their rhetoric and reality.

“As the country is engulfed in entrenched unrest and instability looms, the international community, and especially Bahrain's allies, have a duty to condemn what is happening in the country and to stop using the BICI report a shield to avoid having to criticize the Bahraini authorities.”

The establishment of BICI, made up of international human rights and legal experts, was considered a groundbreaking initiative, but a year on, it has been effectively shelved.

For victims and their families, justice and reparation remain elusive.

One such victim is Roula Jassim Mohammed al-Saffar who was among health professionals sentenced by

a military court to between 5 and 15 years in prison in September 2011. She was subsequently acquitted by a civilian court on appeal. Following her arrest on 4 April 2011 she says she was tortured in detention. When Amnesty International met her in Bahrain while she was on bail she described what happened during questioning at the Criminal Investigation Department:

“A woman officer entered the room and said ‘I will blindfold you and I will deal with you now’. Then three men entered the room and started hitting me... She had an electric device in each hand and hit me with it on both sides of my head at the same time. I felt dizzy and lost consciousness. I don’t remember what happened straight after. Then they took me to another room and one of them called me a whore and insulted my family... On the third day she gave me electric shocks again and she asked if I went to the strike. Another woman started slapping me. She cut my hair with scissors. Then they burned my hair on the sides. They hit me and sexually harassed me by putting their hands all over my body... This continued for four or five days.”

Meanwhile, Amnesty International continues to document widespread violations by security forces, including the use of unnecessary and excessive force against protesters, sometimes fatal.

Hussam al-Haddad, 16, died on 17 August 2012 in al-Muharraq, the day after he was shot by riot police. His family say he had gone to a nearby cafe while demonstrations were going on in the area. A family member who was present alleged that after Hussam al-Haddad was shot and, while he was on the ground, a riot police officer hit him with his rifle and kicked him. Hussam al-Haddad was taken to the military hospital and then to Salmaniya Medical Complex. His family was informed about his death at around 2am that night. On 9 October the Special Investigation Unit determined that the policeman who shot at him was acting in self-defence after being attacked and the case was therefore closed.

Since the beginning of 2012, an increasing number of gatherings have involved participants reportedly throwing Molotov cocktails or blocking roads. According to the government, two policemen have died in recent weeks after having been reportedly attacked in riots. Such violent attacks are not protected forms of expression under international human rights law, and those suspected of carrying them out may be brought to justice in conformity with standards of fairness and due process.

However, the use of violence does not exonerate the authorities from their obligations to respect human rights. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Bahraini authorities to refrain from using excessive force against protesters; the organization considers that policing of assemblies should always be guided by human rights considerations.

An increasing number of children aged between 15 and 18 have been held in adult prisons and detention centres in Bahrain in the past few months. The total may number 80, according to lawyers and local human rights groups. Human rights defenders and activists denouncing such abuses are repeatedly harassed and some have been jailed for carrying out their human rights work and peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

And in an ominous move, the Bahraini authorities on 7 November stripped 31 opposition figures of their Bahraini nationality. A Ministry of Interior statement indicated that the group, including politicians, activists and religious figures, had their nationality revoked because they had caused “damage to state security”.

Bahrain risks sliding into protracted unrest and instability and is at a crossroads. The BICI report provides a roadmap to put Bahrain on the path of the rule of law; only the genuine implementation of the BICI report recommendations would halt the slide. Bahrain’s close allies, including the USA and the UK can no longer shield behind BICI and pretend it’s business as usual.