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Bahrain: Reforms risk appearing hollow as violations continue

The Bahraini government's response to the findings of an international commission of inquiry has proved inadequate as human rights violations continue, Amnesty International said in a new report on Tuesday.

The 58-page [*Flawed Reforms: Bahrain fails to achieve justice for protesters*](#) reveals that piecemeal reforms have failed to provide justice for victims of human rights violations, despite the government's insistence that it will learn from the events of February and March 2011.

"With the world's eyes on Bahrain as it prepares to host the Grand Prix, no-one should be under any illusions that the country's human rights crisis is over," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director.

"The authorities are trying to portray the country as being on the road to reform, but we continue to receive reports of torture and use of unnecessary and excessive force against protests. Their reforms have only scratched the surface.

"The government's huge financial investment in international experts to help them reform will go to waste unless it shows real political will to take difficult decisions - in particular, holding to account senior members of the security forces accused of violations, releasing prisoners of conscience and addressing the underlying discrimination against the Shi'a majority population."

Following the November 2011 report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) – sometimes known as the “Bassiouni Commission” - Amnesty International has found that despite some institutional and other reforms, the government's overall response has been inadequate.

Lack of accountability

The government pledged to hold accountable members of the security forces responsible for violations against protesters and created a special office to do so. But Amnesty International said that this office lacks independence and impartiality and noted that only a handful of low-ranking security and police officers have been put on trial.

No senior members of the security forces, including the National Security Agency and Bahrain Defence Force, have been held to account. A number of security officers accused of being responsible for torture during last year's protests are believed to still be in their posts without having been investigated.

Even the eight policemen, including two Bahraini nationals, known to have been charged in connection with deaths during protests have not been suspended and are reported to remain in their roles at the Ministry of Interior while the case proceeds.

Prisoners of conscience

Scores of prisoners, tried unfairly in military courts and sentenced to long-term prison sentences, have not been released, even though they were convicted solely for leading and participating in anti-government protests without using or advocating violence.

The cases achieving most prominence involve the 14 opposition members arrested in March and April 2011. The verdict in their appeal case is expected to be heard on 23 April. Several of the men have reported being tortured following their arrest.

Charges against the men included "setting up terror groups to topple the royal regime". Some of the prisoners publicly called for an end to the monarchy and its replacement with a republican system. They have not used or advocated violence.

One of the men, human rights activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, has been on hunger strike for more than two months in protest at his unfair imprisonment. Amnesty International understands his physical condition is critical.

In December, the Public Prosecutor ordered that all charges related to the right to freedom of expression should be dropped. But very few detainees have benefited from this measure, since the vast majority of people detained were charged with several offences, including "participation in an illegal gathering of more than five people".

Continuing violations by police in the midst of reforms

Following the BICI report, the government has introduced a new code of conduct for members of the security forces, established a new office in the Ministry of the Interior dedicated to investigating complaints against the police and embarked on human rights training for police officers.

But Amnesty International said that in practice, the security forces remain largely unaffected by these institutional changes. Although they have reduced the use of shotguns since late 2011, security forces continue to face protesters with unnecessary and excessive force - particularly tear gas, which has resulted in several deaths in recent months. At least 60 people have now been killed in connection with protests since February 2011.

Amnesty International recognizes that the Bahraini security forces sometimes face groups behaving violently, such as by throwing Molotov cocktails at them or their vehicles. But the security forces must respect international human rights law and standards.

Amnesty International has received reports that, at the same time as police reforms are being introduced with much fanfare, detainees are facing torture and ill-treatment in unofficial detention places, including unused government buildings, police vehicles and in open areas.

Eighteen year-old student Hassan 'Oun was arrested by policemen in civilian clothes on 3 January in 'Arad district and taken to the Samaheej police station where he was interrogated.

Hassan's family told Amnesty International that when his lawyer saw him the next day at the Public Prosecutor's office he saw signs of torture on his body and that his leg was swollen. Hassan 'Oun told his lawyer that at the police station forced to stand up for about 11 hours and that he was beaten on his feet with a hosepipe and threatened with rape.

The Public Prosecutor's Office decided to detain Hassan 'Oun for 45 days pending investigation and have since charged him with illegal public gathering. He was previously detained in connection with anti-government protests in 2011.

Calls for change

Amnesty International is calling on the Bahraini government to immediately and unconditionally release

all prisoners of conscience and to ensure that those suspected of torturing and killing, including those with command responsibility, are held accountable.

"The establishment of the BICI was a real breakthrough and raised expectations that things would be different in Bahrain," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director. "Yet, nearly five months after the report's publication, real change has not materialized."

"It is time for the Bahraini government to match its public pronouncements with genuine actions."

Notes for editors

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