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Bahrain urged to quash convictions of protest medics

The High Criminal Court of Appeal in Manama has upheld the conviction of nine health professionals tried for their role in anti-government protests last year, prompting Amnesty International to call on the Bahraini authorities to quash the convictions.

The court reduced the sentences against nine medics, on charges including “calling for the overthrow of the regime by force”, “illegal gathering” and “instigating hatred against another sect” to sentences ranging from one month to five years for their alleged role in the protests. Nine other doctors and nurses were cleared of charges.

“This is a dark day for justice in Bahrain,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“These are politically motivated charges against medical professionals who were working to save lives amid very trying circumstances.”

Another two doctors, who were originally sentenced to 15 years in prison, had their appeal rejected because they were not present during the whole appeal process. The sentences of 15 years in prison imposed against them by a military court still stand until they appeal.

Most of the 20 medics were working at the Salmaniya Medical Complex in the capital Manama in February and March 2011, when security forces used excessive force to quash anti-government protests.

No evidence was presented to prove they committed any crime and Amnesty International believes the accusations against them are unfounded.

One of the medics, Ghassan Dhaif, was charged with “illegal gathering”, “instigating hatred against another sect” and “kidnapping for a terrorist purpose” but had his sentence reduced from 15 years to one year. “Today's achievement is thanks to the international community pressure, but we still need more effort until we can see ourselves cleared of all charges,” Ghassan Dhaif told Amnesty International.

“I brought in six witnesses who deny these allegations. All the charges and the trial itself has been politicized and I am being punished for speaking to the press,” he said.

Meanwhile, arrests orders have been issued against four of the defendants - ‘Ali ‘Esa Mansoor al-‘Ekri, Ghassan Ahmad ‘Ali Dhaif, Ebrahim ‘Abdullah Ebrahim and Sa’eed Mothaher Habib al Samahiji.

“The convictions upheld today indicate once more that the real reason for targeting these health professionals is the fact that they were very vocal in denouncing the excessive force used by the security forces against peaceful protesters to the international media and exercised their rights to freedom of expression and association during marches and protests,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“If imprisoned, the medics would be prisoners of conscience, solely held for the peaceful expression of their views. With these convictions the only thing the Bahraini authorities are showing is the lack of independence of the judiciary.”

Many of the 20 health professionals allege they were tortured in detention, including by being beaten, kicked, subjected to electric shocks, forced to stand up for prolonged periods, deprived of sleep and going to the toilet and held in solitary confinement. No independent investigation into their allegations of torture is known to have been made public.

“These allegations of torture are deeply troubling. The Bahraini authorities must immediately disclose whether any investigations into these allegations have been held, make public their findings and ensure that anyone found responsible for abuses is brought to justice,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

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