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Bahrain protester convictions upheld at sham military trial

The decision today by a Bahrain military court to uphold the guilty verdicts against a group of prominent opposition activists exposes yet again the inherent unfairness of the trial process, Amnesty International said today.

In proceedings that lasted less than five minutes, the military-run National Safety Court of Appeal in Manama confirmed life sentences for seven of the defendants and shorter jail sentences for 14 others – seven of whom were tried in absentia.

The defendants were appealing the verdict and prison sentences handed down by the National Safety Court of First Instance, also a military court, in June on charges they wanted to change the political system and incited violence during peaceful pro-reform protests earlier this year. They all deny the charges.

“By upholding this verdict, Bahrain’s military justice system has once again showed it has no intention of meeting international fair trial standards for anyone the authorities perceive as a political foe,” said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“These men should never have been brought before a military court.”

According to an observer present in the court room, the defendants were brought before the judge in civilian clothing, raising hopes that they might be released.

Officials prevented the defendants from speaking to relatives who were in the court room, possibly to punish them for launching a hunger-strike last Saturday over the Bahraini security forces’ detention of 45 women and girls during protests the day before.

After the ruling, the defendants were allowed to meet privately with their defence lawyers, who plan to lodge an appeal before Bahrain’s Court of Cassation, in the civilian justice system. However, the Court of Cassation will only examine procedural matters and will not look into the substance of the charges, the evidence presented, or allegations of torture by some of the defendants.

The Bahraini authorities have not initiated any independent and impartial investigation into allegations of torture made by some of the defendants in this case, including ‘Abdulahdi al-Khawaja, a prominent human right activist.

“After today’s all-too-predictable outcome, it is high time for Bahrain’s King, Shaikh Hamad bin ‘Issa Al Khalifa, to end this travesty once and for all by ordering the immediate release of the defendants or, failing that, their fair re-trial before a properly constituted civilian court,” said Malcolm Smart.