



To: H.E Erna Solberg
Prime Minister of Norway
The Office of the Prime Minister
P.O. Box 8001 dep.
(NO-)0030 Oslo, Norway
E-mail: postmottak@smk.dep.no

2 September 2019

Your Excellency,

Norway has been at the forefront of pushing forward mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders worldwide, supported by many non-governmental and civil society organisations. This is why we are dismayed by [reports](#) that the Prime Minister of Bahrain, Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, received an honorary award at an event organised by the 14 August Committee on 12 August 2019, [in your presence](#).

We the undersigned organisations would therefore like to accentuate the human rights violations systematically perpetrated by the Bahraini government, in particular against human rights defenders.

Bahrain has a legacy of torture and human rights violations; however, it seizes every opportunity to whitewash these violations, whether through diplomacy, sports events, or propaganda about the government's human rights advancements.

We would like to highlight two prominent Bahraini human rights defenders, who founded and led the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), as well as worked for and advised many leading international human rights organisations. They remain in prison for peacefully defending human rights and practicing their right to freedom of expression in Bahrain.

[Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#) is a Danish/Bahraini dual citizen, who founded BCHR and GCHR and was BCHR Executive Director, and worked with Front Line Defenders. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison on 22 June 2011 on trumped up charges related to the uprising of 2011. Since his arrest, Al-Khawaja has been subjected to deplorable treatment, including beatings, physical, psychological and sexual torture, denial of medical services and denial of visitation rights. He has protested these conditions several times through lengthy hunger strikes.

[Nabeel Rajab](#), who is BCHR's President and another of GCHR's Founding Directors, is currently serving combined sentences of seven years in prison for tweeting about Saudi Arabia's role Yemen's war and about torture practices at Jaw prison in Bahrain, in addition to giving media interviews. He has been repeatedly arrested and harassed for his peaceful human rights work since 2012.

In 2016, he was re-arrested shortly after being released for health reasons and has been subjected to degrading treatment and torture in prison. Numerous governments have called for Nabeel Rajab's release, including your own government in a [statement](#) in July 2017, which also expressed concern "about the increasing restrictions on fundamental human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly" in Bahrain.

Women human rights defenders have been constantly targeted by the authorities for exposing human rights abuses, violence and corruption via social media, leading to detention and torture. The undersigned groups have documented severe torture at Isa Town Women's Prison, including of women human rights defenders. Many women are currently living in exile in order for them to continue their activism and defense of human and women's rights in Bahrain.

Freedom of expression is routinely violated and media freedom is severely curtailed, which threatens democracy. In 2017, Bahrain's only independent newspaper, [Al-Wasat](#), was forcibly closed, and the Ministry of Information Affairs refused to renew the licenses of journalists working for foreign news agencies, including [Nazeeha Saeed](#), of Radio Monte Carlo Doualiya and France24, who was fined for working without a license – even though her application was refused. Furthermore, there has been no justice for Saeed, who was tortured in prison in 2011. Reporters Without Borders reports that many journalists, especially photographers and cameramen, have been detained, and foreign media can't enter the country.

There has been a resurgence in the use of the death penalty in Bahrain. Two young men, [Ali Al-Arab and Ahmed Al-Malali](#), were executed on 27 July after being convicted of "joining a terrorist group, committing murders, and possessing explosives and firearms to carry out terror acts." Both men were sentenced in a mass trial on 31 January 2018, and rights groups and the [United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions allege](#) the men were forced to sign confessions following torture, prevented from attending their trial and sentenced to death in absentia.

These executions happened only three weeks prior to Bahrain's Prime Minister receiving the 'Norwegian Guest of Honour' award 2019, "[in recognition of his efforts to promote regional and global peace, security, tolerance and harmony](#)." This makes us wonder if your esteemed governmental and non-governmental bodies are aware of such human rights violations.

We would like to express concern regarding the decision by the 14 August Committee to present this award and urge the Committee to more carefully consider its laureates in the future, especially in consultation with civil society actors working at the grassroots level. In addition, we are dismayed that the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights facilitated the invitation to Bahrain's Prime Minister. It is also worrisome that the Norwegian government may condone an award to an individual who should be held directly accountable for this blatant disregard for human rights and human life. Torture is widely documented in Bahraini prisons as detailed by [this account](#) written from within the notorious Jaw prison by Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja.

We have documented abuses of numerous human rights defenders being subjected to abuse (GCHR alone has records of 74 human rights defenders being persecuted for their work since 2011) and many remain in prison to this day. We have documented cases of severe physical and psychological torture, denial of access to medical treatment, denial of visitation rights and widespread use of isolation within Jaw prison, which houses political detainees and prisoners of conscience. As of 25 August 2019, over 600 prisoners of conscience in Bahrain are on hunger strike to protest the inhuman conditions.

These violations are current and ongoing. For example, on 26 August, GCHR reported that human rights defender [Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace has been denied adequate medical care](#) for over two years despite a decline in his health, because he refuses to wear shackles.

We respectfully remind the Norwegian government of [its own recommendations to Bahrain](#) during the third session of Bahrain's Universal Periodic Review, and request that the Office of the Prime Minister press the Bahraini authorities to:

- Release as soon as possible all individuals, including human rights defenders, having been imprisoned solely due to the exercise of their fundamental rights of expression and assembly;
- Investigate all allegations of torture and start prosecuting all individuals found responsible; and
- Commute all death sentences, declare a moratorium on executions and move towards an abolition of the death penalty (Norway).

Recommendations

Therefore, we the undersigned urge the Office of the Prime Minister of Norway to:

1. Promptly and publicly denounce the peacebuilding and democracy award given in Norway to Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa of Bahrain.
2. Urge the authorities of Bahrain to unconditionally release, overturn the sentences and drop all charges against prisoners of conscience.

We further urge the 14 August Committee to:

1. Rescind the award given to Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa of Bahrain for "peacebuilding and democracy".
2. Refrain from honouring known violators of human rights as laureates when presenting awards in the future.

Yours Sincerely,

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)

CIVICUS

English PEN

FIDH, in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

Index on Censorship

Norwegian PEN

PEN International

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders