



8 August 2019

Dear Amal Clooney,

We, the undersigned Bahraini and international non-governmental organisations, are writing to express our deep concern about the intensifying clampdown on freedom of expression in Bahrain since 2011, especially over the past two years. As the United Kingdom's Special Envoy on Media Freedom, we hope that you can urge the UK government to abide by its stated commitment to protect journalists and promote free media and to press its ally, Bahrain, to respect freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Freedom of Expression and Press Freedom restricted

The right to freedom of expression and press freedom are severely restricted in Bahrain and journalists, human rights defenders and activists are targeted for doing their human rights and journalism work. According to the Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ), six journalists are currently imprisoned in connection with their work. In addition, Reporters without Borders (RSF) has documented seven journalists who have had their citizenship revoked since 2011. Bahrain now sits 167th out of 180 countries in RSF's Press Freedom Index for 2019, one place lower than in 2018.

The repression intensified in 2017, when the only independent newspaper, Al-Wasat, was forcibly closed down and its employees dismissed. That year, the Ministry of Information Affairs effectively blocked the license renewal of several journalists working for foreign news agencies. Photojournalists and reporters for the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse and a cameraman for Reuters were all denied license renewal. Nazeeha Saeed, award winning correspondent for Radio Monte Carlo Doualiya and France24 was convicted and fined for working for international media outlets without a license. Those outlets, along with a coalition of press-freedom watchdogs, wrote to the King of Bahrain in April 2017 highlighting their concerns.

In Bahrain, criticising the King could result in conviction and a seven-year sentence as the government does not tolerate any form of dissent. Prominent human rights defender, Nabeel Rajab is serving a five-year sentence for using Twitter to expose torture in Bahrain's Jau Prison and to criticise Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen. He was also charged for publishing an Op-ed in the New York Times. Opposition activist and high profile blogger, Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace, was jailed for life in 2011, when the government renewed its crackdown on peaceful dissent. In 2017, activist and blogger Najah Yusuf was sexually assaulted by the authorities and sentenced to three years in prison, partly for criticising the Bahrain Grand Prix on social media. Former Al-Wasat employee, Mahmood Al-Jazeeri, was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment and stripped of his citizenship. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) declared him arbitrarily detained. Similarly, award-winning photojournalists Ahmed Humaidan and Sayed Ahmed Al-

Mousawi continue to languish in prison with the latter also stripped of his citizenship. Photojournalist Hassan Qambar was sentenced to more than 100 years in prison over a “range of absurd charges” according to RSF, namely his coverage of local protests.

Cybercrime Law

We are dismayed that the Bahraini authorities are once again amending anti-terror and cybercrime laws to further criminalise political dissent and civil society activism. The situation is only worsening, following the government’s recent declaration that it intends to crackdown further on critical social media accounts and posts.

On 22 May 2019, the Ministry of Interior (Mol) accused Bahraini journalist Adel Marzooq of cybercrime for analysing politics in the region on Twitter. On 30 May 2019, Bahrain’s Mol announced that “those who follow inciting accounts that promote sedition and circulate their posts will be held legally accountable.” Two days later, a Mol official elaborated that “countering inciting social media accounts that promote sedition and threaten social fabric and civil peace was a national duty and part of the community partnership to protect the security and safety of the nation.”

Social media giant Twitter expressed concern about the Bahraini government’s recent declaration. In a tweet posted on 5 June 2019, Twitter stated that the implementation of such measures would “pose a significant risk to free expression and journalism” in the country. Twitter also provided advice to individuals who wished to view posts from specific accounts without having to follow them, in order to avoid the scrutiny of the Bahraini authorities.

Our hope is that Bahrain’s allies will be inspired by this principled action and follow suit in publicly condemning the growing crackdown on dissent. Regrettably, the UK is yet to take a strong public stance on the matter and instead provides its Gulf ally with unconditional political support, to the detriment of the Bahraini people.

Bahrain Ambassador to UK: Sheikh Fawaz bin Mohammad Al Khalifa

During the time that the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the UK, Sheikh Fawaz bin Mohammad Al Khalifa, has been in post, a number of smear campaigns targeting human rights defenders, activists, journalists and critics have been launched from the embassy in London.

Sheikh Fawaz is a member of the Bahraini royal family and was the president of the Information Affairs Authority (IAA) during the Arab spring, a time when the government systematically cracked down on human rights and civil society. The IAA regulates the state’s media channels and websites, including Bahrain TV and the Bahrain News Agency. The organisation was responsible for shutting down Al-Wasat, the only independent newspaper, leading to the censorship of the press and the deportation of foreign-national journalists and spreading hate speech through IAA-controlled TV stations. In 2009, the year before Sheikh Fawaz’s IAA presidency, Bahrain stood 119th in RSF’s Press Freedom Index. By the time his presidency ended in 2012, Bahrain had fallen to 165th place, attesting to Sheikh Fawaz’s devastating record and legacy on press freedom.

The Bahraini Embassy in London has escalated smear campaigns against human rights defender Nabeel Rajab and blogger Najah Yusuf, to whom they attributed tweets posted eight months after her conviction. The Embassy also justified the prosecution of journalist Nazeeha Saeed, blaming her for not renewing her own credentials as a foreign correspondent.

Despite this evidence being publicly available, the FCO responded to concerns raised about Sheikh Fawaz by a Member of Parliament by asserting that it “thoroughly reviews each State’s appointee as Head of Mission.”

Our Requests

It is evident that the British government prioritises its strategic relations with Bahrain over the right to freedom of expression and press freedom. While trade and security agreements made without a strong human rights component may appear expedient on the surface, in the long term a foreign policy that ignores human rights will likely encourage greater repression which in turn will undermine the UK’s international reputation.

In December 2018 you said that: “states should repeal criminal sanctions in laws that target speech like sedition, blasphemy and defamation, and they should narrow the scope of other laws that can easily be used to silence critical speech.” However, as long as Bahrain’s closest allies refuse to use their leverage to pursue these noble goals, they will remain impossible to achieve in the country.

In light of the above, we hope that you can use your position and access to the UK authorities to urge them to:

- Prevail on their Bahraini counterparts to release prisoners of conscience, including journalists, photojournalists and human rights defenders imprisoned solely for voicing their peaceful opinions, including specifically: **Mahmoud Al-Jaziri; Ahmed Humaidan; Sayed Ahmed Al-Mosawi; Hassan Qambar; Najah Yusuf; Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace and Nabeel Rajab;**
- Urge the Bahraini government to rescind the administrative ban on the activities of the independent newspaper, Al-Wasat;
- Urge the Bahraini government to allow visits of the Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Assembly to the country; and
- Call on the Bahraini government to lift the vague and overly broad cybercrime laws imposed to silence the right to freedom of expression and end legislation criminalising human rights, including criticism of the King.

We would particularly welcome any public statements you can make in support of freedom of expression in Bahrain.

Thank you for your time and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours Sincerely,

1. **Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)**
2. **Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)**
3. **Amnesty International**
4. **ARTICLE 19**
5. **Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)**
6. **English PEN**
7. **European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)**
8. **Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)**
9. **IFEX**
10. **Index on Censorship**
11. **International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)**
12. **PEN America**
13. **PEN International**
14. **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)**
15. **Women’s March Global**