

2 February 2015 - On this day in 2013, two French journalists were murdered in Mali. To commemorate their loss, the United Nations (UN) proclaimed 2 November the *International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists*. The corresponding UN resolution dedicated the date to all members of the press who have suffered from violence. It condemned the continued imprisonment, torture, and murder of journalists who simply strive to do their job with professionalism and integrity. Accordingly, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Americans for Human Rights & Democracy in Bahrain (ADHRB) and Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) would like to take this occasion to express grave concern regarding the Government of Bahrain's continued harassment of those who exercise their freedom of speech through traditional and social media.

Since the onset of unrest in 2011, the Government of Bahrain has increasingly criminalized the freedom of expression, in part by systematically prosecuting journalists and bloggers. This year, Freedom House [rated](#) Bahrain "Not Free" in its annual report, noting that ambiguous legal provisions "allow the state to imprison journalists for criticizing the king or Islam or for threatening national security." As BCHR, ADHRB and BIRD have extensively documented, the authorities have used such legislation to prosecute, imprison, and torture members of the press. Empowered by an administrative decision made earlier this year, the government has even revoked the citizenship of several journalists, bloggers, and social media activists.

Currently, the Bahraini authorities hold at least ten journalists and photographers on charges related to their freedom of expression.

Arrests and Detentions

Journalists and Photographers

Ahmed Humaidan, an award-winning photojournalist, is serving a 10-year prison sentence for documenting the pro-democracy demonstrations in Sitra. He has been incarcerated since December 2012, accused of taking part in an attack on a police station. During Ahmed's interrogation, the authorities subjected him to ill-treatment. They beat him, forced him to stand in freezing temperatures for hours at a time, and threatened to arrest and fabricate criminal cases against his brothers. Throughout his detention, the government has prevented Ahmed from consistently communicating with his family, and on several occasions it has denied their visitation rights.

Security forces arrested photographer **Jaffar Marhoon** on 26 December 2013. Prior to this official arrest, the authorities interrogated Jaffar for three days, reportedly subjecting him to torture. A Bahraini court later convicted him on several politically motivated cases; on 24 February 2015, the court sentenced Jaffar to life in prison.

Hussein Hubil, a freelance photographer, was arrested before boarding an international flight to Dubai on 31 July 2013. Hussein was interrogated for four days, during which time the authorities reportedly tortured him and threatened him with rape. Hussein's lawyer called for an internal investigation into these reports, but his request was denied. On 28 April 2014, a court sentenced him to five years in prison on charges related to his right to free expression, including "using social media networks to incite hatred of the regime", "calling on people to ignore the law" and "calling for illegal demonstrations".

On 2 August 2013, Bahraini authorities arrested **Qasim Zainal Deen**, a freelance photographer who previously filmed opposition protests, at his home. By December 2013, a court had convicted Qasim on

charges of illegal assembly, sentencing him to three months in prison. A month later, in January 2014, he was convicted on new charges of illegal assembly and vandalism, and sentenced to an additional six months imprisonment. On 25 February 2015, the appellate court upheld Qasim's sentence of three years in prison. Most recently, on 10 March 2015, a riot broke out at the prison where Qasim is currently detained, preventing his family from visiting. Security forces badly beat many of the prisoners during the riot, including Qasim, who now suffers from a back injury.

Sayed Ahmed Al-Mousawi, a photographer who has won 127 international awards for excellence in his field, was arrested on 10 February 2014, after security forces raided his house. According to Sayed Ahmed's father, the authorities took him and his brother into custody. They also seized several of Sayed Ahmed's belongings, including 4 hard disk drives, a laptop, his cameras, and other professional photography equipment. Following the raid, Bahraini officials subjected Sayed Ahmed to enforced disappearance for at least four days. During this period, security forces tortured Sayed Ahmed by beating his genitals, hanging him on a door, forcing him to stand for days, stripping him naked, and electrocuting various parts of his body. Throughout the interrogation, officials also deprived Sayed Ahmed of his right to due process, denying him access to a lawyer.

On 4 September 2014, security forces arrested three journalists, **Hussam Suroor** (17 years), **Ahmed Zainaldeen** (20 years) and **Mustafa Rabea** (19 years), as they raided their houses in Duraz. These three men were subjected to enforced disappearance for up to five days following their original arrest. On 30 September 2015, a court sentenced the men to 10 years in prison for illegal assembly and charges related to an explosion in Duraz. Ahmed Zainaldeen is also awaiting a court ruling in a separate case.

Bloggers and Internet Activists

BCHR, ADHRB and BIRD have also documented the government's prosecution of bloggers and social media activists. During the last several years, the Government of Bahrain has intensified its repression of free speech on the internet, most recently passing a broad Cybercrime Law that further criminalizes online dissent. The authorities have routinely used such legislation to prosecute and incarcerate peaceful critics of the government. Since 2012, Bahrain's courts have collectively sentenced activists to more than 400 months in prison for exercising their right to free expression on independent social media.

Security forces arrested **Jaleela al-Sayed** on 10 February 2015. During their raid on Jaleela's house, the authorities confiscated her computers and mobile phones. Later, they charged her with misusing social media, inciting hatred against the regime and insulting the king on Twitter. The authorities also subjected Jaleela to ill-treatment, causing her to faint and require medical attention. Following the initial arrest, Bahraini officials additionally prevented her from contacting her family or her lawyer. Jaleela is currently held at the Isa Town Women's Prison.

Blogger and Internet activist **Ali al-Mearaj** was arrested on 6 January 2014. The authorities accused him of misusing information technology and insulting the King on his blog, "Awal Pearl." During his interrogation at the Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID), officials allegedly beat Ali, threatened to harm his youngest son, and verbally abused him. In court, the judge reportedly refused to listen to defense witnesses or receive evidence in Ali's case. Nonetheless, on 9 April 2014, the court sentenced Ali to 30 months in prison. Ali is currently awaiting his next appeal hearing on 1 December 2015. The court continues to refuse submissions of evidence from the defense.

Masked security forces abducted **Jassim al-Nuaimi**, an Internet activist, from his home on 31 July 2013. The authorities reportedly subjected Jassim to torture for at least four days before they took officially detained him on charges of inciting anti-government hatred and posting messages on social media calling for illegal demonstrations. During one of his hearings, Jassim told the court that he had not been in the country at the time the alleged messages had been posted, and that he had actually sold the computer from which he could have submitted said posts. The criminal court rejected Jassim's alibi and sentenced him to five years in prison on 28 April 2014.

In October 2015, Bahraini authorities raided the house of **Ebrahim Karimi**, confiscated his electronic devices, and arrested him – all without ever presenting a warrant. The security forces took Ebrahim to the CID where he was subjected to ill-treatment including forced standing for prolonged hours and sleep deprivation. Officials also threatened to harm his family if he did not confess. During his interrogation, the authorities questioned Ebrahim about posts on the Twitter account "FreejKarimi", and prevented him from contacting his lawyer. The public prosecution later charged Ebrahim with inciting hatred against the regime, insulting the king, and misusing of social media, among other related offenses. In 2012, the Government of Bahrain additionally revoked Ebrahim's citizenship through an administrative decision. The court has since ordered his deportation, a decision Ebrahim is attempting to appeal.

In September 2015, security forces arrested the two social media activists behind the "**BuKhamis**" and "**HajiAhmed**" Twitter handles. The Ministry of Interior announced that it had arrested them because of their posts on Twitter were insulting to the country's martyrs in Yemen. The posts in question allegedly denounced and criticized Bahrain's participation in the ongoing military operation in that country.

In January 2015, the Bahraini authorities [arrested another nine Internet activists](#) for alleged criticism of the late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia on Twitter. The Ministry of Interior stated that these individuals were arrested for "misuse of social media," and that according to Bahrain's Penal Code, they could face imprisonment for up to two years as well as a BHD200 fine.

The authorities arrested several other social media activists on similar charges of social media misuse, dissemination of false news, and/or insulting government officials in Bahrain or other GCC countries. BCHR's President **Nabeel Rajab** was sentenced to six months in prison for a tweet in which he described Bahrain's military institutions as incubators of extremist ideologies. The government is also prosecuting him on charges related to tweets about the war in Yemen, and for insulting a statutory body on social media; it is currently holding Nabeel under a travel ban.

Likewise, the Bahraini authorities also arrested political activist **Fadhel Abbas** on charges related to a tweet in which he denounced the war in Yemen. A court sentenced him to five years in prison.

Citizenship Revocation

In January 2015, the government revoked the citizenship of 72 Bahrainis, of whom the majority were activists. Among those whose citizenship was revoked were four members of the independent media: founder of the Bahrain Online forum **Ali Abdulemam**, critic and blogger **Ali al-Dairi**, journalist **Abbas AbuSafwan**, and blogger **Husain Yousif**. The government stated that it had revoked their citizenship because of "acts resulting in harm to the Kingdom's interest."

Suspension and Prosecution of Free Media

The Government of Bahrain has also targeted entire media outlets. In February 2015, the Bahraini authorities suspended the *Al Arab* television channel after only its first day on air. According to the government, *Al Arab* did not have the proper licenses to operate in Bahrain. Other sources have contradicted this claim, however, reporting that the suspension was [related](#) to the “failure of those in charge [of *Al Arab*] to abide by the prevailing norms in the Gulf, including the neutrality of media positions and staying away from anything that could negatively impact the spirit of Gulf unity”. During *Al Arab*’s first and only program, it aired an interview with a Bahraini opposition leader about the government’s revocation of citizenship.

On 6 August 2015, the Information Affairs Authority (IAA), part of Bahrain’s Ministry of State for Information Affairs, announced that it had indefinitely suspended *Al Wasat* newspaper for “violation of the law and repeated dissemination of information that affects national unity and the Kingdom’s relationship with other countries.” The IAA had previously suspended *Al Wasat* in 2011, and had also issued it an official [warning](#) regarding an [opinion column](#) it had published. The article, written by Hani al-Fardan, discussed persons who accuse opposition members of treason on social media; al-Fardan criticized the activity in general, and did not specifically name anyone in his column.

Though *Al Wasat* was later allowed to resume its work, in June 2015, a member of parliament filed a case against Hani al-Fardan and *Al Wasat*’s Editor-in-Chief, Mansoor al-Jamri. The law suit accused them of defaming the Member of Parliament in an article that addressed the MP’s meeting with an illegal armed group in Syria. *Al Wasat* had a similar case filed against it in 2014 as well, because of yet another opinion column.

Al Wasat is widely considered to be the only independent newspaper in Bahrain that covers both government and opposition news. It is also the only newspaper in Bahrain that publishes content related to Shia community events and political demonstrations.

The Government of Bahrain has systematically targeted those who dissent from the official state narrative, or who present an opportunity for alternative discourse. Be they photographers who document abuses of authority with their cameras, or journalist and bloggers tell the stories of wounded protestors, members of the media represent a democratic challenge to government repression in Bahrain. Rather than acknowledge or protect the independent press, Bahraini authorities have worked with authoritarian efficiency to constrain and silence it. To conceal its unremitting violation of human rights, the government continues to maintain a general media blackout – starting with the prosecution, imprisonment, and intimidation of journalists.

The Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Americans for Human Rights & Democracy in Bahrain and Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy call on the Government of Bahrain to:

- Release and pardon all wrongfully imprisoned journalists, photographers, bloggers and social media activists; and
- Repeal any laws that restrict, criminalize, or otherwise infringe on the freedoms of expression, speech, and press in Bahrain.