

17 November 2016

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales
Clarence House
London
SW1A 1BA

Cc. Tobias Ellwood, Minister for the Middle East and Africa, Foreign and Commonwealth Office,
King Charles St, London SW1A 2AH

Sir,

Former opposition leader Ebrahim Sharif faces reprisals following the visit of HRH the Prince of Wales to the Kingdom of Bahrain

We, the undersigned, write to raise with you our concerns regarding the recent charges brought to prominent political opposition figure Ebrahim Sharif following your visit to Bahrain. Sharif is facing up to three years in prison for speaking to the Associated Press (AP) about your tour of the country. This is a violation of his right to freedom of expression and a reprisal against his political activity, and we ask that you publicly condemn this action and for the UK to call for the charge to be dropped.

On 13 November, Bahrain's Public Prosecution charged Sharif with "inciting hatred against the regime," under article 165 of its penal code.¹ His prosecution is the latest development in the Bahraini Government's crackdown on civil society in the past year and exposes the lack of progress on human rights or democratization in the country.

Sharif had expressed his views to AP on current politics in Bahrain and your visit. He believed that the government should work with an opposition that is "flexible" and "realistic." He stated: "All parties should compromise. We can't have absolute power in the hands of the ruling family." These are simply calls for democracy, for which he faces imprisonment.

Sharif feared that your visit to Bahrain would "whitewash" human rights abuses, remaining unconvinced that human rights had been adequately raised to the highest levels. He said: "I don't see what's gone on behind closed doors or whether the prince raised any questions of human rights. Bahrain's government values its relations with the U.K. and if the U.K. puts its weight behind the improvement of human rights in Bahrain, the government will listen. They need friends." His call on the U.K to raise human rights concerns more strongly with the Bahraini government has led to charges and a potential three-year imprisonment.

Mr. Sharif is a prominent opposition figure in Bahrain. He is the former leader of the National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad), and was released from prison in July 2016 after serving one year under the same charges of "incitement to hatred against the regime" in relation to a political speech calling for continued peaceful opposition. In addition, he is a member of the Bahrain 13,

¹ <http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/755430>

a group of high profile activists arrested, tortured and sentenced by military court in 2011. He is currently subject to a travel ban.

Mr Sharif's arrest is the latest development in a wider crackdown on civil society which has accelerated over the past six months, affecting human rights defenders, political opposition and religious leaders. There are as many as 4,000 political prisoners in Bahrain, and major opposition leaders remain in detention. Over 300 individuals have had their citizenship revoked, including journalists, human rights defenders and political activists. As a result, many are stateless. In June, the government dissolved the largest political party, Al Wefaq, and seized its assets. In August, five UN Special Rapporteurs found Bahrain engages in the "systematic harassment" of its Shia population, which they described as a "persecution".² Protests in the country continue to this day following the decision in June to revoke the nationality of Sheikh Isa Qassim, Bahrain's leading Shia spiritual leader.

Mr Sharif's case echoes the development in the case of prominent human rights defender Nabeel Rajab. In June, Mr Rajab was arrested on a number of freedom of expression charges for comments made on the social media platform Twitter. Following the publication of his letter from prison in the New York Times, he was additionally charged with the "deliberate dissemination of false news." He now faces up to 16 years' imprisonment.

These events contextualised your recent visit. With the escalation of human rights violations, not least against religious communities, in a country where you celebrated religious tolerance, the concern that your tour would be a "whitewash" was real and credible. The new charge brought against Mr Sharif is a consequence of your visit to Bahrain and underlines his original concerns. We ask that you publicly condemn this reprisal against Ebrahim Sharif's freedom of expression and political participation.

On Monday, the US State Department called for all charges against Sharif to be dropped. We ask the UK government to do the same.

Yours sincerely,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)
ARTICLE 19
Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)
Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)
European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)
Index on Censorship

² <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20375&LangID=E>