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Written statement* submitted by Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 August 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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The plight of female political prisoners in Bahrain

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) wishes to take the opportunity at the 42nd session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) to raise awareness and voice concerns around Bahrain's detention of female political prisoners.

Background

In a forthcoming report, "'The treated us like animals:' Uncovering abuses against female political prisoners in Bahrain," ADHRB and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) explore the stories of nine current and former female political prisoners in Bahrain, detailing abuses from the moment of arrest through their interrogation and torture, unfair trials, and discriminatory treatment and inhumane conditions at the women's prison in Isa Town.

The report covers the cases of Ameera AlQashami, Ebtisam AlSaegh, Faten Naser, Hajer Mansoor, Medina Ali, Najah Yusuf, Zahra AlShaikh, Zainab Marhoon, and Zakeya AlBarboori. As of August 2019, Hajer Mansoor, Medina Ali, and Zakeya AlBarboori, remained imprisoned.

Arbitrary, excessive, and warrantless arrests

The nine women featured in the report came into custody through summonses for interrogation and arrests during or following house raids. They reported multiple abuses perpetrated by officers during their arrest, including that the officers failed to inform them of the reason for their arrest or summons.

Four women received summons which detailed the date and location of their interrogation without receiving an explanation for the order. In two instances, the women were accompanied by a lawyer, only for the authorities to deny the lawyers entry. In one instance, the summons was deceptive, with officers claiming the woman needed to sign a pledge for her son although she was the focus of their investigation.

Five women were arrested during house raids, which were typically conducted with an excessive number of plainclothes officers and, in some cases, security forces and vehicles. One woman reported that the officers beat her head against a wall, leaving a scar, while another reported violence against her family during her arrest.

All nine women further reported that the authorities failed to present warrants for the arrest, searches, and seizure of belongings. In one instance, the property they seized has not been returned. The women's testimonies also suggest that officers arrested them in a chaotic manner meant to frighten them. In three cases, the women were forcibly disappeared and held in solitary confinement after their arrest.

Coercive interrogations

Of the nine women in this report, seven were interrogated by officers from the Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID), while two were interrogated by the National Security Agency (NSA). Their interrogations ranged from repeated, 20-minute-long interrogations, to daily 12-hour-long interrogations for two weeks.

Although no two women reported identical interrogation experiences, all nine women reported several violations throughout their interrogations, including various forms of abuse, and the denial of legal counsel. Two women also reported being sexually assaulted, while another three were forcibly disappeared.

Psychological torment was most regularly employed by interrogating officers. Threats of death, rape, physical abuse, or imprisonment were commonly levelled against the women

and their relatives. In two cases, the women were forced to listen to relatives allegedly being tortured.

Five women said that officers verbally abused them during interrogation, often resorting to religious and sexual denigration. Four women also reported physical abuse in their interrogations, ranging from slaps to beatings so intense that the victim required hospitalization, and officers sexually assaulted two women during interrogation.

Four women further reported other forms of ill-treatment during interrogation, including sleep deprivation, being placed in cold and dark cells for hours, or being blindfolded. All nine women were denied legal representation throughout their interrogations.

Under such pressure, five women eventually confessed.

Unfair trials

The courts convicted eight of the nine women, and issued sentences ranging from six months to five years in prison. Five women exhausted all legal remedies, and only two managed to reduce their sentences on appeal. The only woman not convicted was released from detention due to her case not going to trial, but was not told that her case had been closed until over a year after her release.

All eight women convicted reported several violations to their rights to fair trial. The court used confessions made by the women or their relatives under duress to convict six of them, and ignored attempts to recant forced confessions in four cases. The medical examinations performed on the women to justify these dismissals failed to meet international standards, as the doctors were not independent.

The court also deemed the absence of physical evidence to be irrelevant in assessing guilt in two cases, convicting the women solely based on coerced confessions. Five women reported restrictions on or denial of access to legal counsel before and during trial. Three of these women were also tried in mass trials, further hindering their ability to mount an adequate legal defense.

Notably, the authorities charged six women with terror-related offences under Bahrain's broad counter-terror law, which allows the Bahraini government to criminalize dissent.

Prison conditions

Isa Town Women's Prison and Detention Centre is the only detention facility for women in Bahrain – where all of the women at one point were detained and where three of the women remain. These women have accused the prison administration of punishing them for international attention to their cases, and believe the prison uses collective punishment against the entire prison population to alienate them from other inmates.

Several of the women report that guards have confiscated their belongings, physically assaulted them, and more generally infringed on their privacy – monitoring them while in the prison yard and during family calls and visitations. The administration has also restricted their opportunities for family visitations and their time allowed outside their cells.

The prison also restricted the women's right to freedom of belief. The administration scheduled meals to conflict with prayer times, and prohibited the women in these cases from commemorating the holy day of Ashura. When some of the women attempted to commemorate it, the guards assaulted them.

These women have also reported denial of and restrictions to medical care, with health issues ranging from diabetes to possible cancer receiving only superficial attention. One woman also observed that the prison administration's negligence in cleaning cells and other rooms created an unsanitary environment.

These women have likewise reported that meals and drinking water in Isa Town Prison fall below basic standards, and that guards have denied prisoners drinking water. As a result,

several prisoners, including three of the women in the report, have experienced stomach pains, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Government indifference

Complaints were submitted on behalf of six of the women to various institutions, including Bahrain's Ministry of Interior (MOI) Ombudsman, NSA Ombudsman, National Institution for Human Rights (NIHR), and Special Investigation Unit (SIU). These institutions have failed to take action in each case, with most dismissing the complaints out of hand.

Despite the deterioration of Bahrain's human rights record, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland continues to provide military and technical aid to Bahrain, often taking the word of the Bahraini government at face value. The United States of America and Bahrain also have a longstanding security relationship, and the US recently dropped all reform conditions from weapons transfers to Bahrain despite knowing of Bahraini human rights violations.

Recommendations

In light of these continuing abuses, ADHRB calls on the Government of Bahrain to:

- Release Hajer Mansoor, Medina Ali, and Zakeya AlBarboori, in light of the unfair nature of their trials;
- Amend its counter-terror law to align with international standards, and to cease application of this law in a discriminatory and political manner;
- Provide a timely, transparent, and thorough investigation into allegations of arbitrary arrests, coercive interrogation tactics, and physical and sexual assault, ensuring that all responsible officers are held accountable;
- Conduct an impartial, independent review of conditions at Isa Town Prison and hold perpetrators of human rights abuses accountable; investigate allegations of medical negligence, assault, punitive measures, and denial of religious rights; and assure that all prisoners are provided full protections under international standards; and
- Release all political prisoners.

ADHRB calls on the international community and particularly other HRC Member States to:

- Raise these cases with the Government of Bahrain and call for their release; and
- Ensure that Membership in the Council is not used to obscure human rights abuses perpetrated by Members;
- Refer cases of abusers to the UN Security Council, in particular Brigadier Mubarak bin Huwail AlMerri, Colonel Bassam Mohammed AlMuraz, Lt. Fawaz AlSameem, Lt. Col. Adnan Bahar, Major Maryam AlBardouli, Brigadier Abdulaziz Mayoof AlRumaihi, and Minister of Interior Lieutenant General Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa;
- Suspend Bahrain's membership on the Council until and unless it respects international standards of human rights, complies with international treaty obligations, and takes steps to hold abusers accountable.