



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt. Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
Westminster
London
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8 November 2018

Dear Foreign Secretary,

As Members of this Parliament, we write regarding the upcoming elections for the Council of Representatives of Bahrain's National Assembly. The leader of Bahrain's largest dissolved political society, Sheikh Ali Salman, was sentenced to life imprisonment on 4 November 2018, for charges described by Amnesty International as solely related to freedom of expression. This verdict, occurring in the month of the elections, raises further concerns that the necessary conditions for free and fair elections are not currently in place in Bahrain. In light of the UK's long-standing relationship with the Kingdom of Bahrain, we urge you to take all the necessary measures to ensure the legitimacy and credibility of the upcoming elections.

Crackdown Against Political Opposition and Civil Society

Firstly, serious doubts remain over the legitimacy of the current parliament, given the repressive measures implemented by the ruling family to crush peaceful protests calling for democratic change. The Government of Bahrain has essentially eliminated political and civil space over the last few years. The arbitrary dissolution of Bahraini opposition parties, Al-Wefaq and Wa'ad, clearly indicates that the Gulf Kingdom is reluctant to allow any political participation. This is made all the more apparent by the imprisonment of a number of key political leaders, including Hassan Mushaima, Abdulwahab Husain and Sheikh Ali Salman. Sheikh Salman's life imprisonment is premised on charges of espionage for Qatar. Bahrain's High Court of Appeals overturned the initial decision to acquit Sheikh Salman of all charges in June 2018. Mr Mushaima's systematic denial of adequate medical care, family visits, and books, highlights the cruelty with which the authorities will suppress political dissent. In May this year, the Bahraini government legalised what they had established in practice by enacting an amendment to the Law on the Exercise of Political Rights. The legislation now bars anyone who has belonged to the aforementioned political parties and those who have spent more than six months in prison from running for elected office. In doing so, the law effectively bans major opposition figures from holding political office. Between the membership of the dissolved opposition groups and



the countless Bahrainis incarcerated on charges that criminalise freedom of expression and assembly, the ban affects tens of thousands of people.

Secondly, free and fair elections can only take place if citizens are able to express their views. Yet, the only independent newspaper, Al-Wasat, was forcibly closed in 2017, while at least 15 journalists are currently imprisoned. Bahrain's most prominent human rights defender, Nabeel Rajab, has joined his partner Abdulhadi al-Khawaja in prison, for comments deemed critical of the Bahraini state. The Bahraini authorities have also imprisoned activist Ali Hajji and human rights defender Naji Fateel. Family members of London-based Bahraini activist Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, are now serving prison sentences based on fabricated charges, in reprisal to his human rights work. We are dismayed that overstretched anti-terror and cybercrime laws to criminalise political dissent and civil society activism has become the norm.

Thirdly, the electoral infrastructure of the country itself presents some inherent disadvantages for the political opposition. Voting districts are organised in such a way that the Sunni minority is over-represented. Furthermore, the absence of ties between polling stations and specific constituencies leaves the system more open to abuse. No independent electoral commission currently exists, while international media and human rights bodies, including the UN, are consistently barred from entering the country, therefore no impartial body is capable of monitoring the elections.

Our Requests

Under these conditions, credible and legitimate elections do not seem possible. The unlawful life sentence handed to Sheikh Salman is the latest evidence that proves that the Bahraini Government will go to extreme lengths to silence political dissent. The US has called for Sheikh Salman's release, and the EU has also condemned the ruling, arguing that it is *'in the interest of the long term stability of the country and its citizens'* to reconsider the sentence upon appeal.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), on the other hand, is yet to condemn the ruling and call for Sheikh Salman's release, and has instead provided a weak statement which does not reflect the UK's strong commitment to human rights and democratic values. Equally, the FCO expressed public support for Bahrain's pseudo-elections, allowing them to maintain an appearance of legitimacy.

We therefore urge you to withdraw your support and amend the statement on Sheikh Salman to condemn the life sentence he faces and call for his immediate release. We, also urge you to apply maximum pressure on the Government of Bahrain to:

- Withdraw the May 2018 amendment to the Law on the Exercise of Political Rights, thereby restoring opposition groups and allowing them to participate in the elections;



- Release all political prisoners and human rights defenders, including: Hassan Mushaima, Sheikh Ali Salman, Abduljalil Alsingace, Abdulwahab Husain, Nabeel Rajab, Abdulhadi AlKhawaja, Naji Fateel, Ali Hajji and family members of Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei;
- Guarantee the presence of international media and elections observers before and throughout the electoral process;
- Protect freedom of expression and reinstate independent newspapers, including Al-Wasat.

Bahrain may be a key strategic ally to the UK, but human rights and democratic values are fundamental pillars of our society and foreign policy. Illegitimate elections and the imprisonment of political opposition leaders in Bahrain will precipitate greater violence by the hand of the Bahraini government, thereby damaging the stability of the country and the UK's position in the region.

Yours Sincerely,

Sir Peter Bottomley (Conservative)
Jim Shannon (Democratic Unionist Party)
Caroline Lucas (Green Party)
Andy Slaughter (Labour)
Chris Williamson (Labour)
Jim Cunningham (Labour)
Lloyd Russell Moyle (Labour)
Matt Western (Labour)
Roger Godsiff (Labour)
Alistair Carmichael (Liberal Democrat)
Christine Jardine (Liberal Democrat)
Lord Scriven (Liberal Democrat)
Tim Farron (Liberal Democrat)
Tom Brake (Liberal Democrat)
Ben Lake (Plaid Cymru)
Hywel Williams (Plaid Cymru)
Jonathan Edwards (Plaid Cymru)
Liz Saville Roberts (Plaid Cymru)
Stephen Gethins (Scottish National Party)
Stuart McDonald (Scottish National Party)