

# Bahrain: Show trial sentences critics of regime

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A military court in the US-allied monarchy of Bahrain has handed down lengthy prison sentences to 21 people involved in anti-government protests earlier this year.

Eight people were given life sentences and others sentenced to prison terms of up to 15 years. All those convicted by the specially convened military tribunal are from the Shiite Muslim faith, the religious majority in the small Persian Gulf nation. The Sunni Muslim al-Khalifa royal family rules Bahrain, while Shiites face discrimination in employment, the provision of housing and other services.

The regime in Bahrain faced weeks of mass anti-government protests in February and March. Following a military intervention by troops from the neighboring monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Bahraini government declared martial law on March 15 and launched a vicious crackdown on all signs of dissent.

Security forces killed at least 30 demonstrators, and hundreds have been arrested. Many of those detained by the authorities have been held incommunicado and suffered torture. The state has taken further punitive action against its critics, firing thousands of public sector workers accused of participating in protest marches.

Those sentenced on Wednesday include human rights activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, and two opposition politicians, Abd al-Jalil Singace and Hassan Mushaima. Seven of those convicted were tried in absentia, including one Internet blogger who received a 15-year sentence.

Faraz Sanei of Human Rights Watch described the manner in which one of those convicted, Jaafer al-Hasabi, was brought into custody: "Like others, he was picked up by masked gunmen, in the middle of the

night, held incommunicado ... He was part of an organization [the Bahrain Freedom Movement] which wasn't even outlawed."

One of those tried in absentia, Ali Mushaima, escaped to Britain in March. In an interview with the *New York Times* on Wednesday, Mushaima, a 28-year old pro-democracy activist, said he was not surprised at the outcome of the trial. "We know this court very well, and we know that the regime is targeting leaders of this movement," he claimed.

Amnesty International condemned the trial and the sentences, stating its belief that, "some of the defendants may be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for peacefully expressing their political beliefs and organizing pro-reform rallies."

"These sentences are extremely harsh, and they appear to be politically motivated, since we have not seen any evidence that the activists used or advocated violence," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty's Middle East director. "Civilians should not be tried in a military court, and these trials were patently unfair."

Amnesty, as well as other groups and family members of those convicted have accused the Bahraini government of torturing the prisoners and forcing them to sign false confessions. Those convicted were given very limited access to legal counsel.

The Bahraini regime has also accused the anti-government protesters of being linked to the Shiite Hezbollah organization in Lebanon and the Shiite clerical regime in Iran. Protest organizers have consistently denied such accusations, which they claim are intended to criminalize the opposition and whip up anti-Shiite bigotry in the country. In fact, a common feature of the demonstrations earlier this year was the call for unity between Sunnis and Shiites against the dictatorial al-Khalifa regime.

While the crackdown by Bahrain's security forces, backed by Saudi and UAE troops, has quelled the mass expressions of opposition to the regime in the capital, Manama, huge resentment remains. The conviction of the 21 activists has reanimated the protests in Bahrain, with hundreds of demonstrators defying the threat of arrest or beating by police to set up barricades and roadblocks on the day the verdict was read.

Police in Manama fired teargas into a crowd of people attempting to reach the center of the city on Wednesday. There have been calls to renew the mass protest marches in order to demand reforms and the release of political prisoners.

In addition to the 21 people sentenced yesterday, there are 47 healthcare workers on trial in Bahrain. They face an outrageous mix of charges, including embezzlement, assaulting police officers, possession of weapons, and attempting to overthrow the monarchy. Human rights groups say the charges are politically motivated—punishment for the medics treating demonstrators or speaking to the media about the horrific injuries protesters had suffered.

With the aim of limiting criticism of his regime, Bahrain's King Hamad al-Khalifa has promised a "national dialogue" on political reforms. Even as the Bahraini government continues its repression and carries out show trials against its opponents, the United States has praised this cosmetic exercise. During a visit by Bahrain's crown prince, Salman al-Khalifa, to Washington two weeks ago, President Barack Obama issued a statement welcoming "the Crown Prince's ongoing efforts to initiate the national dialogue" that could lead to "a just future for all Bahrainis."

Washington has backed the al-Khalifa regime throughout the protests and the subsequent crackdown. Bahrain has been an ally of the US for decades, and is the home of the US Navy Fifth Fleet, which patrols the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. This location gives Washington a major military foothold in the world's most important oil-producing region, close to Saudi Arabia's vast oilfields and within striking distance of Iran.



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