

US-backed Bahrain regime upholds jail sentences for doctors and nurses

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The US-backed Bahraini dictatorship of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa on June 14 upheld jail sentences of up to five years for medics rounded up during fierce repression of anti-government protests in 2011.

Twenty doctors and nurses from the Salmaniya Medical Complex in the capital, Manama, were sentenced to between five and 15 years in prison by a military court in September 2011. The attorney general allowed a civilian retrial amid mass outrage at the convictions.

Throughout the proceedings the defendants were prevented from speaking, as they insisted they had been tortured into giving signed confessions. The medics have been on bail since late last year, unable to return to work.

In the latest ruling, orthopaedic surgeon Ali Alekri was sentenced to five years jail, down from fifteen, and Ibrahim al-Damstani, the Bahraini Nursing Society secretary general, will face three years, according to AFP. Seven others have been handed sentences of one year or less, and the remaining nine who appealed their convictions were acquitted. Two did not appeal their sentences and are reported to have fled the country.

The medics' arrest in March 2011 was part of a campaign of repression and intimidation by security forces. A protest encampment in Manama's Pearl Roundabout, calling for the downfall of the regime, was crushed by tanks and troops brought from the neighbouring despotic gulf states Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

Security forces repeatedly raided hospitals looking for injured patients to arrest. The sole "crime" of the medics was treating civilians who were beaten, shot and gassed during this repression. At least sixty protesters have been killed by security forces since February last year, though the real figure is likely far

higher.

In a statement following the recent ruling, the government attempted to claim the convictions were not for treating protesters. Making clear the political character of the charges, it asserted that the doctors and nurses were guilty of "politicising their profession, breaching medical ethics and... their call and involvement in the overthrow of the monarchy." The government has not attempted to explain how it obtained signed confessions of guilt from those who have now been acquitted entirely.

The medical workers and human rights' organisations condemned the judgement. The Voice of America reported: "The medics say they were prohibited from using some witnesses in their defense and were also unable to raise their complaint of torture in custody."

VOA quoted Dr. Fatima Haji, who was acquitted after being sentenced to five years at last year's military trial. "Some of them will go back behind bars for five years, which is absolutely unfair because we all did the same thing. We were exactly in the same place, we were in the same rooms in the hospital, we did the same thing: treating people who were in need."

Dr. Ghassam Dhaif, whose 15-year sentence was reduced to one, responded to the ruling: "It shows you how inconsistent these courts are and how much they are politicized. There is no comparison between 15 [years] and one year, and even with this one year it's illogical and it's baseless."

The government's account of events, published in the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, alleges that the medics' actions ranged from "directing ambulance cars in a haphazard manner... with the purpose of spreading terror," to performing "unneeded surgical operations with the aim of

aggravating existing wounds,” and providing inflated reports of civilian casualties to human rights’ authorities. In the latest trial, the government reportedly dropped its claim that the medics were “stockpiling” weapons in the clinic and had occupied the hospital.

The Obama administration’s response to the trial has been consistent with the cynicism and hypocrisy that surround its foreign policy. US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland said that the US was “deeply disappointed” by the ruling, adding, “... we are discouraged that the Bahraini government did not use alternative means to address these cases.”

The reality is that the US has given its full support to King al-Khalifa’s continuing suppression of protests since February last year. In the latest move demonstrating its backing of the government, the Obama administration announced in May that it was recommencing arms sales to the country, including air-to-air missiles, harbor patrol boats, and upgrades for the military’s fighter jets.

At the same time, under the banner of “humanitarianism,” the Obama administration—aided by a pliant Western media—has arrogated to itself the right to intervene and overthrow any government it chooses. Unlike Syria, where the US and its allies are directly fomenting civil war as a means of toppling the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the monarchy in Bahrain—home to the US Fifth Fleet—is a key US ally.

Following the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, documenting widespread torture and abuse by government forces, the regime has simply continued the same practices. In May, the king ratified empty changes to the constitution which retain the monarch’s right to appoint the judiciary as well as the Shura Council “upper-house,” which has the right of veto over all legislation passed by the powerless parliament. This has not prevented the US and its allies from claiming that the government is enacting “reform.”

Indicative of continuing human rights abuses, the verdict on 11-year-old Ali Hasan will be announced on July 5. Hasan was arrested May 13 and charged with “taking part in a public assembly aimed at disturbing security.” He was reportedly interrogated for four hours by police until he confessed. According to Amnesty International, he was refused access to a lawyer until his third appearance in court on June 6.

While media reporting is very limited, protests are continuing on a daily basis. Last Friday, police fired tear gas, rubber bullets and sound bombs on tens of thousands of protesters taking part in a peaceful march organised by al-Wefaq, the main Shiite opposition party. Among those injured were Sheikh ali Sulman, the head of al-Wefaq.

A *New York Times* article commented on Saturday: “Every night, protesters march and clashes erupt, in a violent standoff that often seems a breath away from an explosion.” In Nabi Saleh in the capital, police suppress protests daily using tear gas.

The *Times* article noted the hostility which is felt by broad layers of the population toward US support for Bahrain’s dictator, noting “several protests last month that focussed on Bahrain’s decades-old alliance with the United States,” including a march to the US naval base that was blocked by riot police and fired upon with tear gas.



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