



Bahrain: Repressive Mechanisms in Civil Society

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NGOs and Government Owned Non-Governmental Organizations

The Government of Bahrain (GoB) represses civil society by restricting the work of NGOs in the country. Human Rights Watch reports that Bahrain's Ministry of Social Development (the body responsible for monitoring NGOs) has consistently exploited its supervisory role in order to inhibit the activities of these groups.¹ The GoB accomplishes this by rejecting new NGO registration applications, limiting the ability of organisations to fundraise or receive funding, and dissolving groups deemed to have unfavourable political stances.² These constraints on Bahraini NGOs violate the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Bahrain is party. The GoB's regulations "significantly narrow the opportunities for establishing and operating political and civil associations" thus "do not adequately guarantee the right to freedom of association as set out in the ICCPR."³

Alongside imposing severe restrictions on NGOs, the GoB has created Government Owned Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs). These include the Manama Centre for Human Rights, Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, and Bahrain Monitor. These organisations present themselves as independent, however, they are in fact funded or formed by the GoB.⁴ Reports and work submitted by these organisations do not offer any substantial criticism towards the GoB or its policies.

¹ Mariwan R Hama, *"Interfere, Restrict, Control": Restraints on Freedom of Association in Bahrain*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 1.

² Marc Owen Jones, *Political Repression in Bahrain* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 111.

³ Hama, *Interfere, Restrict, Control*, p. 4.

⁴ Luke Bhatia and Ala'a Shehabi, "Shifting Contours of Activism and Possibilities for Justice in Bahrain," in *Bahrain's Uprising: Resistance and Repression in the Gulf*, ed. Ala'a Shehabi and Marc Owen Jones (London: NBN International, 2015), p 126.

GONGOs are used by the government to legitimise their human rights record and present a façade of liberal reform, in an attempt to repair their international reputation.⁵ For example, Hasan Mousa Shafi'i, who works for the GONGO Bahrain Monitor, regularly meets with international human rights panels and committees, alongside acting as an advisor in the Bahraini Embassy in London.⁶ Shafi'i also produces an electronic magazine for Bahrain Monitor, which publishes state talking points that emphasise the GoB's commitment to the progression of human rights.⁷ These activities are designed to give the government credibility amongst its citizens and international peers. However, little to no substantive progress in human rights is being made nor systemic change occurring in Bahrain.

GONGOs are also utilised to discredit and undermine the work of independent NGOs. The Bahrain Monitor, for instance, uses its wide magazine audience as an opportunity to attack political activists and human rights defenders in its articles.⁸ NGOs in Bahrain thus remain consistently impeded by legal restrictions and the use of GONGOs.

Personal Integrity Violations

One of the most widely condemned mechanisms of repression the GoB employs to contain civil society are personal integrity violations. These include practices such as torture and ill-treatment, police brutality, sexual violence, intimidation, and incarceration.⁹

Since 2011, the GoB has continued to use incarceration to disrupt and repress civil society. Imprisoning individuals for expression of their political views effectively upsets the organisational capacity of protest and opposition groups, whilst also serving to disincentivise

⁵ Marc Owen Jones, "From Geneva to London: How Bahrain Tries to Game Human Rights Accountability in the International Arena," *Orient XXI*, September 20, 2017, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/from-geneva-to-london-how-bahrain-tries-to-game-human-rights-accountability-in,2010>.

⁶ "A Report Presenting the Documents That Reveal the 'GONGOs' Organizations in Bahrain, Their Role," *BCHR*, November 27, 2009, <https://bahrainrights.net/?p=10469>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Owen Jones, *Political Repression in Bahrain*, p. 135.

citizens from speaking out against the GoB.¹⁰ During mass protests in 2011, Bahrain's security forces mainly targeted opposition leaders and prominent human rights activists because of their symbolic importance. Hassan Mushaima, leader of the opposition group Al-Haq, Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja, renowned human rights defender, and Abdul Wahab Hussain, another opposition leader, are all facing life sentences in prison for their part in the 2011 protests.¹¹ Human Rights Watch labelled these trials "manifestly unfair" as all of their protest activities "appeared to constitute the exercise of basic rights, rather than criminal conduct."¹² Both Abdul Wahab Hussain and Hassan Mushaima, for instance, were convicted on terrorism charges due to their participation in opposition group meetings and their advocacy of the unlicensed opposition group, Al-Haq.¹³ Over the past decade, Human Rights Watch has documented a rise in the number of normal civilian cases in which people are convicted of crimes solely on the basis of expressing their political viewpoint.¹⁴ In 2014, King Hamad increased the punishment for speaking out against the king to between one and seven years in prison.¹⁵ Incarceration is thus a popular method of stifling civil society in the country.

Torture and ill-treatment also remain prevalent tools employed by Bahraini security apparatus to combat dissent. After 2011, when Bahraini authorities tortured five protestors to death in detention, King Hamad was pressured by the international community into establishing the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI).¹⁶ Whilst the BICI recommended a number of changes needed to end torture in Bahraini detention facilities, Human Rights Watch has reported that torture is still used against detainees by Bahraini security forces on a wide scale.¹⁷ Their report is based upon interviews with ten Bahraini

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 190.

¹¹ "Bahrain: Free Leading Opposition Activists," *Human Rights Watch*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/13/bahrain-free-leading-opposition-activists>.

¹² Joshua Colangelo-Bryan and Jennifer Hassemmer, *Criminalizing Dissent, Entrenching Impunity: Persistent Failures of the Bahraini Justice System since the BICI Report*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 13.

¹³ Ibid, p. 13.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁶ Nicholas Mcgeehan, *"The Blood of People Who Don't Cooperate": Continuing Torture and Mistreatment of Detainees in Bahrain*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2015, p. 1.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 1.

citizens, all of whom stated that they endured torture and ill-treatment at the hands of Bahrain's security apparatus. Whilst in detention, the interviewees described suffering from abuses such as electric shocks, sexual abuse, exposure to extreme freezing temperatures, and being forced to stand in painful positions for hours or days on end.¹⁸ Bahraini authorities also use psychological torture on their detainees; this includes keeping the victims isolated until they lose any sense of time, injecting detainees with 'mystery' substances to provoke fear, and threatening to harm the detainees' family and friends. These practices violate the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to which Bahrain is party, alongside breaching Bahrain's ban of torture in its constitution.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 2.