

GIDHR marks Nelson Mandela Day and urges Gulf authorities to release and honour their prisoners of conscience

July 18 2020: The world celebrates on July 18 of every year the international day of the prominent African leader Nelson Mandela, who has spent his life in serving humanity, fighting for humanitarian issues and democracy and promoting a global culture of peace. On this occasion, the United Nations persistently calls on individuals around the world to reflect on his legacy and "make the world a better place."

Indeed, multiple activists and academics in the Gulf followed the footsteps of Mandela's peaceful demand for political reform, democracy and the basic rights of their people. However, they have ended up in prisons serving long terms and endured various types of torture and other forms of inhuman treatment.

Bahrain

Almost the most prominent figure that has been associated with Mandela's struggle in the recent years has been Bahrain's Sheikh Ali Salman. The detained peaceful figure served as the Secretary General of the now-dissolved Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, which deemed to be the largest political bloc in the Gulf region. Sheikh Ali is serving a life sentence in Bahrain's prisons; a price he has to pay for his national stances, as he always stressed on national unity, public participation in administrative rulemaking. He also insisted that peace is the sole method to achieve the demands of the Bahrainis. International human rights organisations have occasionally hailed him as a freedom, justice and equality campaigner.

For his part, Mr. Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, a prominent international campaigner and human rights advocate, who founded and served as the chairman of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and who held other positions at regional and international human rights organisations, is serving a life sentence in Bahrain's prisons following an unfair trial marred by many violations and abuses and serious allegations of torture linked to his activism and his participation in the peaceful pro-democracy protests that erupted in 2011.

Another prominent opposition leader is Abdul Wahab Hussain who played a key role in demanding the legitimate rights of the people of Bahrain. Hussain had already been arrested during the 1990s because of his activism and his refusal to submit to the Bahraini authorities

dictatorial and discriminatory policies. Abdul Wahab Hussain has been serving a life sentence since 2011.

Further, Hassan Mushaima is one of Bahrain's most prominent opposition leaders who served as the Secretary General of the Haq Movement. He was arrested 5 times between 1995 and 2011 due to his political activism. Mushaima is meanwhile serving a life sentence in prison after being arrested in 2011 along the rest of opposition political leaders following the bloody crackdown on the 2011 pro-democracy protests.

Saudi Arabia

Late activist and thinker Sheikh Abdullah Al-Hamid was an advocate for reforms in Saudi Arabia. He and a number of reformers established a stream of advocacy for constitutional political reform, and he was one of the founders of the first human rights association in Saudi Arabia in 1992. Al-Hamid was expelled from the university where he was lecturing and was banned from traveling for more than 5 years. He was also arrested several times because of his activism, the last of which was in 2013. Al-Hamid passed away while in prison as a result of intentional medical negligence.

Sheikh Salman Al-Aouda was among the signatories of the 1991's Speech of Demands, which called for legal, administrative, social and media reforms. In 2013, he renewed his calls for the release of prisoners of conscience. Al-Aouda was arrested multiple times because of his continuous calls for reforms in Saudi Arabia and he was banned from traveling and giving public lectures in 1993. Sheikh Salman Al-Aouda was arbitrarily arrested in September 2017 from his home in Riyadh. Meanwhile, he is held in a solitary confinement and convicted with 37 charges, while the Saudi authorities refuse requests by independent parties to attend his litigation procedures.

For his part, Raef Badawi, a writer and a human rights activist, was arbitrarily arrested in 2012, and sentenced to 7 years imprisonment and 600 lashes. In 2014, his sentence was commuted to 1000 lashes and 10 years imprisonment in addition to a fine of one million Saudi riyals (approximately \$ 267,000 USD). International organisations considered him a "prisoner of conscience, held solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression."

Walid Abu Al-Khair is a lawyer and human rights activist. Since 2011, the Saudi authorities have pursued him on several charges, one of which is demanding constitutional monarchy. He was arrested in 2014 while attending the fifth session of his trial and was held in Al-Ha'ir prison without the knowledge of neither his family nor his lawyer. Al-Khair's wife claimed that he was subjected to severe torture and reported that he was beaten with chains for political reasons. Al-Khair is serving a 15-year prison sentence, followed by a 15-year travel ban.

United Arab Emirates

Ahmed Mansour is an engineer, blogger, poet and human rights defender who was assaulted, beaten and banned from traveling because of his activism. He is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence in Emirates prisons after his arrest in 2017. Mansour and four other Emirati intellectuals launched a petition in March 2013 calling for democratic reforms in the country, for which he was arrested three months later. UN rights experts considered the arrest and detention of Mansour "a direct attack on the legitimate work of human rights defenders in the UAE."

Also, Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith, an Emirati academic and jurist, is spending his fifth year in prisons linked to tweets in which he had exercised his right to express his opinion. Dr. Bin Ghaith is one of the Emirates's academic elites and was the first Emirati to lecture at the French University of Sorbonne, Abu Dhabi branch. He is also one of the five thinkers arrested in 2013 for their petition. He was arrested again in August 2015 from his home without being informed of the reason behind the arrest. In 2017 he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment after an unfair trial.

Accordingly, the GIDHR believes that those prisoners of conscience are paying the price for their political and rights activism. Their only crime is demanding reforms, democracy and their peoples' legitimate right to manage their countries' affairs and wealth, which is guaranteed by international laws and covenants.

What has been highlighted in this brief report is the tip of the iceberg of violations, torture and inhuman treatment, those peaceful activists have been subjected to, and which are still subjected to in Gulf prisons, along with thousands of political detainees and prisoners of conscience.

The Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human Rights seize the Nelson Mandela's day, to salute the heroic men of peace. Those conscientious emblems have never feared to say the truth and struggle to achieve legitimate demands, at any cost and pressure. The path these brave human rights defenders have paved would definitely trigger a sharp shift against the overwhelming dictatorship policies. It would lead to social justice, equitable distribution of wealth, and people's participation in the administrative rulemaking of their homelands.

Besides, the Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human urges the Gulf governments to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience and to put an end to the reprisal against peaceful activists, thinkers, academics, media workers and others linked to their legitimate exercise of their right to express their opinion. The GIDHR calls for honouring those prisoners of conscience at the national level, to recognise their sacrifices made for the sake of their countries, and eventually to compensate all those affected by these practices and hold accountable those involved in abuses and violations.