



Bahrain: Women targeted in mass arrests over “popular referendum”

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB), the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) condemn in the strongest terms the arrest and alleged torture of at least thirteen women in Bahrain. These women have reportedly been charged with “establishing and organizing a public referendum, inciting hatred against the regime and disrupting the elections.”

On 12 November 2014, security forces raided the homes of 8 women, seizing electronic devices in the process. Warrants were not presented during the home raids and police summons were only handed out following the seizure of electronic devices. During these home raids, some of the women were also subjected to bodily searches. The women were then detained the next morning after receiving a summons to appear at the Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID). Following their arrest, no information was provided to the women’s family members despite enquiries made at the Criminal Investigations Department, the Public Prosecution and Isa Town Police Station. The detainees were prevented access to their lawyers during their interrogation and initial detention.

On 13 November 2014, a limited number of lawyers were able to meet with their clients following their interrogation. The detainees alleged that they were tortured and ill-treated and deprived of sleep, food and water. One of the victims reported that the women were kept in a cold room where they were humiliated and insulted. She also reported that they were subjected to death threats.

The public prosecution interrogated the women on the night of 13 November until the early hours of the morning. Their lawyers were informed of the charges and the detainees were remanded for at least 7 days pending further investigation. Two of the women detained are pregnant, one of whom was detained with her 6-month-old infant and had to carry the baby while being interrogated.. She was also not allowed to change her baby’s diaper for over 12 hours until her child was picked up by a family member. One of the lawyers claimed that his client was “shivering from pain” following her ordeal.

Further, On 14 November 2014, four more women were summoned for interrogation in relation to the same charges. Among them the human rights activists Ebtisam Alsaegh who remains in custody at the CID.

A public referendum was recently initiated polling Bahraini nationals over their preference for political self-determination, to be supervised by the United Nations. Awareness campaigns were conducted in a number of villages about the referendum and its objectives.

This is not the first time women have been targeted in Bahrain. Civil society organisations have documented a recent surge in the number of women arrested in Bahrain. Last month, prominent activist Zainab Al-Khawaja was arrested and detained for “publicly insulting the king” after tearing up a picture of Bahrain’s monarch. She is eight months pregnant and is facing up to seven years in prison.

In April 2013, Rihanna Al-Mosawi was arrested, detained and tortured after she attempted to stage a protest during the Formula One race. She was stripped twice during her detention and threatened with rape. The Bahrain Center for Human Rights has documented the deaths of at least 13 women as a result of the excessive use of force by security forces since 2011.

We condemn the arrest and detention of these 13 women in Bahrain. We call on Bahrain to respect its obligation under international law including the right to self-determination under Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the right to freedom of expression and the right to hold opinions freely. We call for the immediate release of these women and for the government to drop all the charges against them. We also call for an immediate independent investigation into the allegations of torture against these detainees and those parties found responsible to be held accountable.