



Event Summary: Examining Bahrain's Electoral and Human Rights Reforms since 2011

5 December 2014—Washington, D.C. — Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB), in conjunction with the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, hosted a briefing on Capitol Hill entitled “Fact or Fiction: Examining Bahrain’s Electoral and Human Rights Reforms since 2011.”

Ms. **Megan Williams**, Director of Advocacy at ADHRB, moderated the discussion. Ms. Williams began the panel by providing an update on the situation of sisters Maryam al-Khawaja and Zainab al-Khawaja, who were both sentenced on politically motivated charges this week. “Since the release of the BICI report in 2011, human rights violations have continued,” Ms. Williams continued. She noted that protests continue to occur on a near daily basis while critics of the government face ongoing arrests and harassment. “Meanwhile, political solutions to Bahrain’s crisis have remained elusive,” Ms. Williams said, highlighting the abandoned National Dialogue process and the poor turnout at parliamentary elections last month. “Instead of political reconciliation, Bahraini citizens once again struggle to maintain the already untenable status quo,” Ms. Williams concluded.

Matar Ibrahim Matar, former Member of Bahraini parliament, discussed the evolution of the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain since 2011, as well as the Bahraini government’s failures to address demands for reform. “In 2011, the opposition created the Manama Document, which outlined five areas of reform the opposition felt were necessary for the government to address to bring an end to the political crisis,” Mr. Matar explained. However, three years and two failed national dialogue attempts later, these concerns have not been addressed. “Earlier this year, the Crown Prince provided recommendations to the King of Bahrain based on his take on the areas of reform in the Manama Document, but none of the recommendations the Crown Prince presented equaled substantive reform,” Mr. Matar said. While the Bahraini government did reform electoral districts in the lead up to elections in November of this year, the reforms were superficial. “The Bahraini government is desperate to hold onto power in the present without realizing the consequences for the country in the future,” Mr. Matar said. Furthermore, the Government of Bahrain embarked on a campaign of coercion to increase voter turnout in support of government-backed candidates. “While the U.S. government does not feel a sense of urgency when it comes to Bahrain, the situation will continue to deteriorate if not addressed, which will effect U.S. interests and the Naval Fifth Fleet,” Mr. Matar cautioned.

James Suzano, Legal Officer at ADHRB, introduced a new report from ADHRB and the Bahrain Institute for Rights on Democracy entitled, “Subservient and Unaccountable: A Shadow Report on the Bahrain Ministry of the Interior’s Ombudsman and the Bahrain National Institute for Human Rights.” A substantial portion of the report came from ADHRB’s own complaint program, through which more than 30 complaints were submitted to the Office of the Ombudsman and Bahrain’s National Institute for Human Rights. “ADHRB’s finding from that study had mixed results,” Mr. Suzano said, with some complaints receiving response but most going unanswered. Mr. Suzano also discussed the mandates of the two offices, which enjoy very little independence from the government they are tasked with monitoring. “The establishment of a Ministry of the Interior Office of the Ombudsman and the Bahrain National Institute for Human Rights is a positive, if small, initial step in the right direction,” said Mr. Suzano. “However, with the youngest of those organizations now having passed its one-year

anniversary, we feel it's long since time to see not only words but actual progress, not only in how these institutions address their mandates, but in how the government responds to their recommendations.”

Cole Bockenfeld, Director of Advocacy at the Project on Middle East Democracy, examined the failure of the recent elections and the impact of the situation in Bahrain on U.S. security interests. “The lack of substantial electoral reform in the lead up to the November elections, combined with the ongoing harassment of opposition figures, poisoned the well and led to the opposition’s decision to boycott,” Mr. Bockenfeld explained. “By limiting any space for civil society or political opposition to function, the Bahraini government is attempting to quell dissent by facilitating the narrative that such groups are rejectionist,” he said. Mr. Bockenfeld discussed the inherent flaws within the electoral system in Bahrain, which include a lack of voter registry, a refusal to permit international election monitoring, and substantial threats against voters. “Additionally, Bahrain uses general voting locations, which allow a person to vote outside of their registered district,” Mr. Bockenfeld said. While this measure is presented as allowing Bahrainis to vote more easily, the truth is that votes cast in those ballot boxes are inherently more difficult to track and more susceptible to fraud and manipulation. Turning to domestic policy, Mr. Bockenfeld urged the US government to provide an honest assessment of the elections. “Additionally, officials should utilize the Manama Dialogue, which starts tomorrow, to have a frank conversation about the Bahraini government’s role in creating internal threats to stability,” said Mr. Bockenfeld. He also urged congress to broaden the conversation around extremism in the region to discuss the root causes and to meet with Ambassador William Roebuck, who was confirmed last month as Ambassador to Bahrain.

Shadi Mokhtari, Assistant Professor at the School of International Service at American University, lamented the Bahraini government’s failures to reform following the 2011 uprising, noting that if they had, “Bahrain could be a success story today.” Mrs. Mokhtari then addressed regional trends that should be of great concern to the United States. “There is an increase in anti-American sentiments in the region, fueled in part by the United States’ willingness to support monarchies,” Mrs. Mokhtari said. She also noted that while the United States is very outspoken in support of the theory of universal human rights, in particular women and minority rights, there is a lack of willingness to raise concerns over such violations with allies. Additionally, the main demand of the Arab Spring, political reform and representative government, is rarely addressed by the United States. “A growing trend in the region is for authoritarian governments to implement superficial reform to appease western allies,” Mrs. Mokhtari explained. However, without substantive political reform, the types of human rights abuses that have occurred in the past are likely to occur again. Mrs. Mokhtari then discussed the ways in which authoritarian governments in the Gulf region fan the flames of sectarianism to suppress challenges to their rule. “The Bahraini government created the narrative that the uprising was sectarian to divert attention from the legitimate demands for self-determination of its people,” Mrs. Mokhtari stated. “We are now seeing the fruit of this policy in the expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

During the Q&A, Mr. Matar responded to a question about Saudi Arabia’s influence in Bahrain by arguing that allowing Bahrainis to participate in a free and fair political process would not pose a threat to the Saudi monarchy. “There is room for Saudi Arabia to improve its influence on Bahrain to urge reform,” Mr. Matar said. Mr. Bockenfeld responded to a question about U.S. influence by urging

members of the executive and congressional branches to have a frank conversation of the root causes of extremism in the region. Mr. Bockenfeld also urged congress to renew the \$3.5 million in democracy and governance assistance to Bahrain that was a part of the FY2014 appropriations budget. However, he cautioned that military funding for Bahrain should be limited to Expanded International Military Education and Training, which restricts funding for countries that engage in human rights abuses. Mr. Suzano urged congress to address the case of Taqi al-Maidan, a U.S. citizen currently imprisoned in Bahrain that alleges he was tortured by Bahraini security forces.

In response to a question about where Bahrain will be a year from now, Mr. Matar stated that Bahrainis are unlikely to back down from their calls for political reform. Mr. Matar cautioned that the current policy of suppressing peaceful dissent could lead to radicalization and extremism. "It takes only one person who is committed to violence to change the tides of the uprising," Mr. Matar said. He also expressed concern over the growing influence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which could lead to increased sectarian violence in Bahrain. Mrs. Mokhtari noted that the Bahraini government still has the opportunity to enact meaningful reform and end the political crisis, but cautioned that time was of the essence. Mr. Suzano expressed concern over the overcrowding in Bahraini prisons. "The government has prioritized incarcerating political prisoners over actual criminals," Mr. Suzano said. As facilities run out of space, it is possible the government may release violent offenders, which could lead to an increase in the crime rate in the country. Mr. Bockenfeld urged the US government to take a more active role in asserting what reforms are necessary for the Bahraini government to implement, but acknowledged that such actions takes substantial courage and political will.