

12 April 2016

HM Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa
King of Bahrain
Riffa Palace
Manama, Bahrain

Dear King Hamad,

We, the undersigned Bahraini and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), would like to unequivocally condemn your government's arrest of human rights defender Zainab Al-Khawaja along with her infant son. The implementation of Ms. Al-Khawaja's prison sentence for merely exercising her right to free expression and assembly amounts to arbitrary detention is wholly unacceptable. While Foreign Minister Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa indicated an intention to release her, she has not yet been freed from prison and we are concerned that these arbitrary charges remain against her. We therefore call on the Government of Bahrain to secure her immediate and unconditional release.

On 14 March 2016, security forces [raided](#) the home of Ms. Al-Khawaja's parents-in-law looking for her. When they did not find her there, they went to her apartment and arrested Ms. Al-Khawaja along with her 15-month-old son, Abdulhadi. After they temporarily [detained](#) her and her son at the Al-Hooraa police station, the authorities informed Ms. Al-Khawaja that she would be taken for a medical examination at the Ministry of Interior before being transferred to the Isa Town Detention Center to serve out her prison term. From the time of her arrest at 3:45 pm until her midnight arrival at the detention facility, security services denied Ms. Al-Khawaja any food for her son, despite repeated requests. Isa Town Detention Center has recently suffered an outbreak of Hepatitis C which puts both mother and son at [risk](#). The demeaning and dangerous conditions of the detention center where Ms. Al-Khawaja and her infant son are kept indicate a gender specific attempt to destabilize and hinder her peaceful human rights advocacy.

Bahraini courts [sentenced](#) Ms. Al-Khawaja to a total of three years and one month in prison, as well as a BHD 3,000 fine, on several charges related to her peaceful dissent and free expression. In December 2014, a court sentenced Ms. Al-Khawaja to three years and three months in prison on charges related to allegedly insulting a police officer during a peaceful protest and insulting the king by tearing up a photograph. In October 2015, Bahrain's appeals court confirmed her conviction for insulting the king but reduced her sentence to one year in prison. Additionally, on 2 February 2016, the appeals court [upheld](#) a 9-month prison sentence against Ms. Al-Khawaja after she tried to visit her father, human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, in Jau Prison when he was on a hunger strike in August 2014.

The international community has repeatedly expressed grave concern over your government's decision to prosecute Ms. Al-Khawaja for exercising her right to free expression and assembly. In 2014, the UN Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of opinion and expression, human rights defenders, and freedom of peaceful assembly and of association [urged](#) your government to drop all charges against Ms. Al-Khawaja, warning that her detention could be considered arbitrary. A year later, these same Special Procedures issued a [joint communication](#) to your government stating that Ms. Al-Khawaja's sentencing appears to "indicate a *prima facie* violation of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and to freedom of association,

as set forth in articles 19 and 22 of the ICCPR [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights].” The United States Government has previously [expressed concern](#) over the fairness of Ms. Al-Khawaja’s trial, and – most recently – the Government of Denmark has raised Ms. Al-Khawaja’s case at the 31st session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, insisting that she and her son be released. Furthermore, Ms. Al-Khawaja’s arrest comes during a session of the UN Committee on the Status of Women, where your government is taking part in discussions on how to protect women rights globally, while targeting women human rights defenders locally.

On 7 April 2016, the Foreign Minister, Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, [stated](#) that the authorities intend to release Ms. Al-Khawaja on humanitarian grounds. Sheikh Khaled provided no timeline for her release and her family has received no further guarantee that the government will release Ms. Al-Khawaja from prison. However, the foreign minister did indicate that the government will not drop any of the charges against Ms. Al-Khawaja, leaving her vulnerable to her re-arrest at any time.

We would like to join this growing chorus of international voices in calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Zainab Al-Khawaja and her infant son. The broad criminalization of peaceful dissent and free expression in Bahrain, as well as the government’s continued harassment and detention of human rights defenders, contravenes your obligations under international law, and is wholly unacceptable.

Sincerely,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)
Arab Center for the Promotion of Human Rights (ACPHR)
Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)
Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)
Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)
Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
Cartoonists Rights Network International
CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation
Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)
European-Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR)
European Center for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)
Freedom Forum
Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
Human Rights Network for Journalists - Uganda
Human Rights Sentinel
Index on Censorship
Institute for the Studies on the Free Flow of Information (ISAI)
Institute of the Press and Freedom of Expression (IPLEX)
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) Asia Pacific
Justice Human Rights Organization (JHRO)
Kham Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture
Lawyers Rights Watch Canada (LRWC)
Maharat Foundation-Lebanon
MARCH
National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ)

Nazra for Feminist Studies (Egypt)
Observatorio Latinoamericano para la Libertad de Expresión (OLA)
Pacific Islands News Association
Pakistan Press Foundation (PFF)
PEN America
PEN Canada
Saudi Organization for Rights and Freedoms
Salam for Democracy and Human Rights
Social Media Exchange (SMEX)
Vigilance for Democracy and the Civic State
World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers