



BAHRAIN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
Defending and promoting human rights in Bahrain



A report on
Prison Conditions in Bahrain
July 2022

Introduction

Since 2011, Bahrain authorities have sentenced thousands of people in connection to the February 14 popular movement and for pro-democracy activities, including 3314 individuals in the last five years. Many of them were charged under Bahrain's severe anti-terrorism law. The lack of fair trial guarantees is a systematic problem in Bahrain's criminal justice system. There have been continuous violations of defendants' due process rights, including enforced disappearances, coerced confessions, torture and inadequate access to legal counsel. Women human rights defenders have not been spared torture, abuse and sexual assault.

In 2021, 132 individuals were sentenced to varying prison terms, including nine life sentences. Many of these trials involved more than one defendant, up to 33 in one case. The charges ranged from joining "terrorist groups" to "illegal assembly" and "insulting the judiciary." During the year, the Bahraini courts handed down and upheld 984 years of prison terms and 101,134 BD (254,000 EUR) in fines in total. It should be noted that these figures are not comprehensive, as they depend mainly on what was published by local newspapers.

The authorities arrested 173 individuals in 2021 in relation to pro-democracy activities. The majority of arrests were carried out after summons for interrogation. Many were carried out arbitrarily in-house raids, where security forces did not present arrest warrants nor inform the arrestees and their families about the reason behind their arrests. A number of individuals were arrested on the spot, for example, in protests, in the street, in a hospital, and at the airport.

Spread of Diseases in Prison

The prison conditions remained poor, and there have been persistent reports of failure to provide adequate medical care to prisoners in Bahrain. In addition to overcrowding, the sanitary conditions in Jau prison are inadequate, and the hygiene and sterilization procedures are deficient, which led to two outbreaks of Covid-19 inside the prison in March-April and May-June 2021. The government was not transparent about the numbers of Covid-19 infections inside the prison; however, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) received the names of dozens of inmates who contracted the virus.

The government failed to protect the inmates' rights to health, failing to provide face masks and hygiene supplies. It allowed inmates to register for vaccination but did not provide regular screening tests as a preventive measure. The prison administration prevented many inmates from calling their family members and loved ones, sometimes for up to several weeks at a time, during the Covid-19 outbreaks in Jau prison.

On 6 April 2021, political prisoner **Abbas Malallah** died of a heart attack amid reports of medical negligence. His family had previously reported his poor health and that he was not receiving a proper medical attention in prison. He served ten years of his 15-year sentence, which he was handed down in connection to the 2011 popular movement. After Malallah's death, Jau prison inmates organized a peaceful sit-in to protest about "conditions of detention, in particular the lack of access to medical treatment."

On 17 April 2021, police special forces used excessive force to clear the sit-in, throwing stun grenades and beating detainees on their heads, badly injuring many of them. They held many prisoners incommunicado for weeks after dismantling the sit-in.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Bahraini government to launch a “thorough and effective investigation into the violent repression of the sit-in in Jau prison.” However, neither an impartial investigation was conducted nor was the prison administration held to account. UN Special Rapporteurs have been denied access to visit Bahrain for the last decade.

On 9 June 2021, political prisoner **Hussain Barakat** died of Covid-19 complications after being transferred to Al-Salmaniya Medical Complex (SMC). Hussain was serving a life sentence in Jau prison. He was convicted in May 2018 on terrorism-related charges after an unfair mass trial with 114 other defendants. Amnesty International reported that his cell was overcrowded, and he had been feeling unwell in late May and unable to breathe properly. Hussain reported his condition to the prison guards; however, they failed to transfer him to the hospital immediately.

Another political prisoner, **Hassan Abdulnabi Mansoor**, died on 25 July 2021, also amid allegations of medical negligence. He died of sickle cell complications after being transferred from Dry Dock Detention Center to the SMC. There were serious allegations of the prison administration’s failure to give Hassan his prescribed medications and take him to the prison clinic despite his repeated requests for medical attention.

There are also recent concerns about reports of tuberculosis in Jau prison starting in February 2022. There was one confirmed case of tuberculosis in prison in early June, while another two inmates have symptoms of the illness.

Political prisoner **Hassan Abdullah Habib**, who spent eight years in prison of his 27-prison term, [was transferred to Salmaniya Medical Complex](#) in June 2022 after an episode of severe pain due to sickle cell anemia. Hassan suffers from several health conditions, including problems in the colon and spine, sickle cell anemia, and thalassemia. In the hospital, doctors informed Habib that he had tuberculosis. However, he was transferred back to Jau prison despite his confirmed contagious illness.

In a [recording](#) released online, Hassan explained his medical conditions and accused Jau prison administration of medical negligence. He called on Bahraini governmental oversight bodies to follow up on his case and ensure he gets proper medical attention or work on his release to continue his treatment outside prison.

Another two political prisoners, **Sayed Nizar Al-Wadaei** and **Mortada Mohammed Abdulredha**, [had symptoms](#) of the illness as they were in close contact with Habib. Their families reported the prison administration’s failure to carry out prompt tuberculosis tests for them. All three shared a cell with a fourth prisoner, **Ahmed Jaber**, who was released from prison under the Alternative Penalty Law in late February 2022 after months of illness.

On 2 June 2022, the Bahraini Ministry of Health confirmed that Habib’s illness is tuberculosis in a statement. The Ministry said that Habib’s condition is stable and he is getting treatment although Habib’s voice recording from prison on 1 June 2022 says otherwise. The Ministry also added that it was “conducting the necessary precautionary checks on the rest of the inmates who were in contact with Hassan.” However, American for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) [reported](#) that Al-Wadaei was held in solitary confinement for three days in the first week of June after requesting proper testing for tuberculosis, and his mother was threatened with arrest when she visited the prison on 1 June 2022 to demand her son get tested.

Prisoners including Al-Wadaei [were finally tested](#) on 6 June 2022 but results were not immediately made available to families.

In early June 2022, it was not clear where Hassan Abdullah Habib is being held in Jau prison and if he is being held separately from other inmates to prevent a tuberculosis outbreak. Moreover, the Ministry of Health did not explain what exactly the measures taken in prison for contact tracing and isolation and when tuberculosis tests will be carried out in prison.

Denial of Medical Treatment

Another prisoner who has been subjected to mistreatment and abuse is Dr. **Abduljalil Al-Singace**, a prominent opposition figure and human rights defender and a member of the group known as the “Bahrain 13,” for whom the authorities have continuously denied medical treatment for his pre-existing medical conditions. Rights groups have been advocating for his release continuously, particularly as [he has been on a hunger strike for a year](#), and the Bahrain Institute for Rights & Democracy (BIRD) has organised protests in London, including in June and July 2022 to mark the one-year anniversary of his hunger strike.

Dr. Al-Singace began a liquids-only hunger strike on 8 July 2021 to protest against ill-treatment and harassment in Jau prison. He resorted to a hunger strike after negotiations with the prison administration had failed to recover the cultural research he had worked on for four years. The prison authorities confiscated his research on 9 April 2021, and they have since refused to return the manuscript to Dr. Al-Singace or his family, although it is a study of Bahraini dialects and culture without any political content.

In July 2021, the Bahrain Ministry of Interior Ombudsperson [declared](#) that Dr. Al-Singace’s work could not be given to his family until a “legal decision” was made. In November 2021, a legal decision clarified the apolitical nature of the book, yet Dr. Al-Singace’s research remains in the hands of authorities.

In March 2022, a representative from the Ministry of Interior Ombudsman visited Dr. Al-Singace in the Kanoo Medical Centre and requested that he edit his work so that they may review it again. They told him that if published without editing, he would face legal consequences for its contents. Dr. Al-Singace does not want to publish the work, he only demands it be given to his family.

In December 2021, his family expressed concern that [he was suffering](#) “from vertigo episodes, where he feels dizzy and falls,” and the prison authorities are denying him specialized medical attention. He has not been seen by his assigned doctor since 17 January 2022. He also suffers from severe intermittent headaches, a prostate problem, arthritis in his shoulder joint, numbness, and diminished eyesight. The family maintained that the prison authorities have refused for months to replace the rubber stoppers for his crutches. The slippery rubber stoppers have caused him to fall on multiple occasions; however, Dr. Al-Singace’s requests for a replacement remained unanswered. He has Sunday visits with his family but video calls have been arbitrarily suspended since last year, which is particularly difficult when he has two new grandchildren he has not seen.

He takes milk and sugar in his tea, as well as a vitamin drink, to keep up his energy, but his family says “authorities regularly withhold sugar and milk from him in an effort to make him end his strike.” He has lost well over 25k and is pale and weak, but determined to continue his hunger strike.

The harassment of Dr. Al-Singace at Jau prison is part of the systematic mistreatment of political prisoners in Bahrain.

Prominent human rights defender **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**, former president and co-founder of BCHR and GCHR, has repeatedly protested poor conditions in prison, including denial of medical treatment. In a series of [recordings released](#) in March 2022 by his family, he talked about reprisals for talking about prison conditions, or for making any public protests. His calls have been cut while talking to his family if he mentions prison conditions, illustrating the difficulty in reporting news about mistreatment. He has been denied medical treatment for torture he suffered following his arrest in April 2011. Al-Khawaja was awarded the [2022 Martin Ennals Award](#) for his ongoing activism.

“In Bahrain's prisons, your basic needs such as food, medical treatment, communications with family, sleeping hours, access to open air, or even access to the toilet all are used to provoke you, oppress you, or punish you and eventually to undermine your integrity, self-confidence, and self-respect,” Al-Khawaja said.

He added, “If you dare to use any of the very few means of protest - the consequences are discouraging and dismantling. A scream of pain or protest would be harshly suppressed a hunger strike would be untolerated.”

One of the calls in which Al-Khawaja was talking about the prison conditions ended with the prison guard telling him he will cut the call and take his papers, as he spoke to his family, saying “This prison guard who is here now, the one who used to torture and beat people, is telling me why do you speak English you must speak Arabic, he is one of the torturers, they have put him here on purpose, they put people who are responsible for torture...”

Another prisoner of conscience, **Hassan Mushaima**, [was denied access](#) to proper medical care in Jau Prison. Mushaima, also a member of the “Bahrain 13,” suffers from cancer and diabetes, in addition to high blood pressure and gout. He needs regular medical examinations: every six months. He takes different types of medications for various health problems.

Al-Kawaja, Dr. Al-Singace and Mushaima are serving life sentences in Jau prison after being convicted on 22 June 2011 following a grossly unfair trial marred by torture allegations for their role in the 2011 popular movement.

Ineffective Oversight Bodies

Reports of ill-treatment and inadequate medical care in detention regularly emerge. Bahraini oversight bodies have been ineffective in preventing police abuses and bringing those involved in human rights violations to justice.

The Prisoners and Detainees Rights Commission (PDRC), which was created as a National Preventive Mechanism, seems to be unjustifiably inactive in the last two years 2020 – 2021. The last visit conducted by the PDRC to detention centers was on 20 November 2019 to the Psychiatric Hospital. The PDRC was also inactive during 2017.

The case of Dr. Al-Singace stirred international condemnation during 2021, and there were many [calls for his release](#). Sixteen human rights organizations, 101 international academics, and numerous British parliamentarians have raised concern about Dr. Al-Singace’s detention and his overall health after months of hunger strike and called for his immediate release.

British lawmakers sent a letter in solidarity with Dr. Al-Singace to the British Foreign Secretary accusing the UK of turning a blind eye to his case. The [letter read](#), “this silence risks emboldening Bahrain in their criminalization of peaceful dissent and torture of dissidents. The UK government must condemn Bahrain’s persecution of Dr. Al-Singace, call for the return of his intellectual property, and immediate and unconditional release. This miscarriage of justice must end.”

Women Human Rights Defenders Tortured in Prison

In a 2021 report, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) [documented](#) the ill-treatment that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) had to endure in Bahraini prisons, including one WHRD who undertook a hunger strike to protest terrible conditions in Isa Town women’s prison.

In March 2019, six UN experts [expressed serious concern](#) about the treatment of three WHRDs, who remain under travel ban for their activism. WHRDs faced torture, which seems a “preferred reprisal mechanisms of the Bahraini authorities against human rights defenders and activists who appeal to international human rights mechanisms.”

The treatment of WHRD **Ebtisam Al-Saegh** is one of the most harrowing examples of abuse. In 2017, Al-Saegh was [subjected](#) to severe torture and interrogations in retaliation against her participation at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2017. Women prisoners have been verbally abused, physically beaten and sexually assaulted, and threatened with rape and death if they did not provide confessions to the charges against them or [halt their human rights activism](#).

WHRDs have been detained pending trial on terrorism-related offences for engaging with international mechanisms. They have also faced unfair trials, and those who were sentenced to prison continue to be subjected to [punitive measures](#), including lack of access to medical care, sexual harassment and continuous intimidation.

Sixteen French MPs [denounced](#) Bahrain’s human rights abuses in a letter to the French ambassador to Bahrain in May 2021. The letter brought to the ambassador’s attention the deplorable prison conditions in Bahrain amidst the pandemic and the authorities’ failure to provide detainees with medical care and implement elementary sanitary protocols.” It also highlighted the shortcomings of the alternative sentencing in Bahrain. The MPs urged the French ambassador to “have a real dialogue with Bahraini authorities.”

Alternative Sentencing Unfairly Applied

Law No. 18 of 2017 concerning Alternative Penalties and Measures allowed courts to impose non-custodial sentences after detainees serve half of their sentences. In September 2021, Decree-Law No. 24 of 2021 expanded the application of the Alternative Penalty Law, dropping the requirement of detainees serving half of their terms. The new amendment also allowed courts to “replace the original sentence imposed with one or more alternative penalties before its execution.”

Several prisoners were released during 2021, including political prisoners, either under the Alternative Penalty Law or a special royal pardon. On 2 April 2021, the Assistant Attorney General announced that 126 prisoners would be released under the Alternative Penalty Law after studying their cases, while the release of 73 other prisoners was announced after about a week. These releases came amid the Covid-19 outbreak in Jau prison and the increased pressure and demonstrations of the inmates' families to release their loved ones.

On 12 September 2021, 30 prisoners were conditionally released under the law. Among t those released in April 2021 was **Mohamed Hasan Jawad**, known as **Parweez Jawad**, a member of the "Bahrain 13." Parweez was arrested dozens of times for advocating for the rights of detainees and prisoners. Many of these arrests were in the 1990s. His last arrest was on 22 March 2011 in relation to the 2011 popular movement. He was convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of allegedly "conspiring to topple the regime forcibly and collaborating with a terrorist organization working for a foreign country" in a grossly unfair military trial marred by torture allegations.

In September 2021, an official at the Department of Execution of Sentences at the Ministry of Interior announced that 3552 prisoners were released under the Alternative Penalty Law since its application. However, dozens who are eligible for alternative sentencing have not been granted conditional release.

Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja submitted a request to the Ministry of Interior to serve his remaining prison term at home, but his request remains unanswered. He has previously expressed that applying for a non-custodial sentence is "less evil," as it allows prisoners to be among their families. Another 196 prisoners were released during 2021 under a special royal pardon: 91 on the occasion of Ramadan and 105 on 15 December 2021, marking the Bahraini National Day.

Recommendations:

The Bahraini authorities must:

- Immediately and unconditionally free all prisoners of conscience, including Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace, Hassan Mushaima, Hassan Abdullah Habib, Sayed Nizar Al-Wadaei and Mortada Mohmmmed Abdulredha, and all other human rights defenders from prison;
- While they are in prison, guarantee that all prisoners are afforded basic rights according to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules), including to allow all prisoners to have phone calls with their families, and unhindered access to medical care and medical equipment; and to ensure they are not subjected to ill-treatment and abuse;
- Return all prisoners' confiscated writings to them, including giving Dr. Al-Singace's research to his family as requested;
- Hold accountable all those who involved in human rights violations, especially torture, sexual assault and other abuse in prison;
- Guarantee in all circumstances that human rights defenders in Bahrain are able to carry out their legitimate activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.