Dear F1 drivers,

We, at the European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR), are writing to you on the eve of the Bahrain Grand Prix, as part of our campaign ‘[We Race for Freedom](https://www.ecdhr.org/?p=1618),’ launched to fight for the release of Bahraini-Danish citizen, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, imprisoned in Bahrain since 2011. He is a prominent, [award winning](https://www.martinennalsaward.org/fr/hrd/abdul-hadi-al-khawaja/) human rights advocate, who fought for over 20 years for the promotion of human rights and civil liberties in Bahrain and was outspoken against human rights violations and corruption in the whole Arabic Gulf.

Since the violent crackdown on the peaceful pro-democracy protests in 2011, the Kingdom of Bahrain has increasingly [turned](https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2022) into a police state where activists and civil society actors can no longer freely voice their opinions. It is in the wake of these protests that Mr. Al-Khawaja was [arbitrarily detained](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/730786?ln=en) by the Bahraini authorities and sentenced to life in prison on terrorism-related charges that [were proven to be unfounded](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/abdulhadi-al-khawaja) by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) in 2011. Similarly, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, [concluded](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G12/152/53/PDF/G1215253.pdf?OpenElement) in 2012 that Mr. Al-Khawaja’s arrest was arbitrary, as it resulted from him exercising his rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

Throughout his incarceration, he has been subjected to various forms of abuse. These include torture, beatings, verbal abuse, threats of sexual assault and long periods of solitary confinement. The severe physical torture he suffered forced him to undergo medical surgery multiple times and to experience acute chronic pain, especially in his back and head. He has protested his arbitrary detention conditions and other forms of reprisals by conducting six [hunger strikes](https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/950), which have taken a serious toll on his health. Mr. Al-Khawaja is currently being [denied](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/01/Bahrain%20-%20Abdulhadi%20Al-Khawaja%20Joint%20Letter%20En.%2022%20January%202021%20FF12%20%28002%29.pdf) adequate medical attention, which causes him to [suffer](https://www.adhrb.org/2022/04/profile-in-persecution-abdulhadi-al-khawaja/) from severe medical complications caused by the mistreatment in detention. Mr. Al-Khawaja is also [banned](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/abdulhadi-al-khawaja) from receiving in-person visits from his family.

In addition, Mr. Al-Khawaja continues to be judicially [harassed](https://www.amnesty.org/fr/documents/mde11/6345/2023/en/) by Bahraini authorities. He was convicted last November in absentia on two additional charges, one for breaking a chair and the other for insulting a prison guard. The Bahraini court of appeal, again without his presence, has recently [ruled](https://birdbh.org/2023/01/bahrains-high-criminal-second-court-of-appeal-upholds-sentence-against-leading-rights-defender-abdul-hadi-al-khawaja-after-his-defence-withdraws/#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20High%20Criminal%20Second,Pounds%20or%20%24160%20US%20dollars).) that he does not have the right to appeal these two convictions.

Despite the huge international outcry, [human rights organizations](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/joint-letter-urgent-call-release-abdul-hadi-al-khawaja-his-60th-birthday-and-10th), [MEPs](https://www.ecdhr.org/?p=1410), [various other European officials](https://www.mediasupport.org/international-push-for-the-release-of-al-khawaja-continues/), [UN Special Mandate Holders](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/06/bahrain-un-expert-alarmed-prolonged-detention-human-rights-defenders) demanding his release over the last 12 years, Mr. Al-Khawaja [remains imprisoned](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/abdulhadi-al-khawaja) at Jau Prison. In light of all of this, the European Parliament (EP) [adopted](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0447_EN.html) a resolution in December 2022, condemning his enduring detention⁠ and demanding his unconditional and immediate release. This was only the most recent among the numerous European Parliament resolutions on Bahrain that were passed since 2011 ([15](https://www.ecdhr.org/?p=1610)). Although all of them included a call for the release of Mr. Al-Khawaja, his condition has not seen any improvements.

As ‘sportswashing’ [has been](https://www.adhrb.org/2020/11/bahrains-sports-whitewashing-in-europe/) one of the Bahraini government’s most significant tools in maintaining its international prestige, we are very concerned that it will exploit the approaching Grand Prix to cover up the political and human rights situation in the country.

We are thus asking for your help in raising awareness on the story of Mr. Al-Khawaja’s case, spreading messages of solidarity with those who are suffering at the hands of the Bahraini authorities and supporting the organizations that are fighting relentlessly to help them.

This is of the utmost importance now that the FIA wants to take power over how drivers can express themselves through the [amendments](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/feb/06/f1-drivers-concerned-by-fia-ban-on-political-statements-says-albon) made to FIA’s International Sporting Code for 2023, threatening to sanction all drivers who do not maintain a neutral stance on personal, political or religious matters.

Although the FIA attempted to [justify](https://www.fia.com/sites/default/files/fia_guidance_on_the_principle_of_neutrality_-_2023-02-17.pdf) the ban by citing the organization’s duty to uphold the principle of neutrality enshrined in the International Olympic Committee’s Code of Ethics, the revised provisions are anything but neutral and contrast with the political stance the FIA [took](https://twitter.com/fia/status/1498745655690465287) against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Sports have always been used by athletes to take a stance on current affairs or to act as allies for others, manifestations which often took the form of protests against human rights violations and expressions of solidarity and that, in some cases, have prompted reactions from authorities. Rather than supporting its athletes’ fight against the global inequalities it [claims](https://corp.formula1.com/we-race-as-one/) itself to stand against, the FIA made these revisions to prevent pre- and post-race events from being used as such platforms in the future. The revisions, coupled with the lengthy [contract](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/oct/27/f1-faces-legal-challenge-over-over-bahrain-contract-and-sportswashing) signed between F1 and Bahrain that guarantees races will be held in the country until 2036, are proof that the governing body wants to oblige drivers to comply with its own political agenda, and underline the organization’s hypocrisy.

Reality is, FIA’s principle of neutrality itself is nothing but neutral. The organization of international events like the Grand Prix in countries with menacing human rights records is by itself an indirect avenue for those very countries to hide their political atrocities. This political disengagement is not the impartial stance FIA would like it to be, and if the organization continues to consider its events as playful parentheses completely detached by the socio-political contexts in which they are held, it will continue turning a blind eye to human rights violations in the world under the disillusion of neutral disinvolvement.

With the occasion of mega-events like the Bahrain Grand Prix, when the country is under the spotlight, influential personalities like yourself have the possibility to speak up to prevent the Bahraini government from sportswashing and exploiting these events to rehabilitate their image in front of the world, when in fact, they continue carrying atrocities against their citizens. This is crucial, because only public pressure can make a difference on the lives of people like Mr. Al-Khawaja. Therefore, we encourage you to remain unintimidated facing FIA’s attempt to silence you, and to help us by making firm stances, speaking up against the abuses perpetrated by the Bahraini authorities and speaking publicly about Mr. Abdulhadi al-Khawaja’s case.

We thank you very much for your consideration!

Sincerely,

ECDHR Staff.