Dear Lewis Hamilton,

We at the European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR) are writing to you on the eve of the Bahrain Grand Prix to remind you of serious human rights violations happening in Bahrain. We are currently running a campaign called ‘[We Race for Freedom](https://www.ecdhr.org/?p=1618),’ through which we advocate for the release of Bahraini-Danish human rights defender, 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 taking place in the whole Arabic Gulf. We would like to take this opportunity to applaud the principled stances you have taken throughout the years to raise awareness about human rights violations occurring in the countries F1 stages its races, and ask for your support in speaking to the public about Mr. Al-Khawaja 's case.

Following his participation in the 2011 peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations in Bahrain, in April 2011, security forces dressed in civilian clothing [arbitrarily arrested](https://usercontent.one/wp/www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/WGAD-6-2012-Abdulhadi-Alkhawaja.pdf) Al-Khawaja. In June 2011, he was [sentenced](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/abdulhadi-al-khawaja) to life imprisonment by a Bahraini military court, the National Safety Court, following an unjust trial that did not align with international standards. He was charged with terrorism solely for exercising his right to freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and association, all granted by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The only evidence the conviction was based on was a confession [extracted](https://www.adhrb.org/2022/04/profile-in-persecution-abdulhadi-al-khawaja/) under torture.

Since his arrest, Mr. Al-Khawaja has been subject to various forms of [abuse](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), including [torture](https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/10/bahrain-activist-bears-signs-abuse), beatings, verbal abuse, threats of sexual assault and long periods of solitary confinement. Mr. Al-Khawaja has protested dreadful prison conditions and other forms of reprisals by conducting six [hunger strikes](https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/950). He is being denied adequate medical attention and [suffers](https://www.adhrb.org/2022/04/profile-in-persecution-abdulhadi-al-khawaja/) from severe complications as a result of torture and his overall mistreatment in detention.

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.

In light of Mr. Al-Khawaja’s enduring unlawful detention , the European Parliament (EP) [adopted](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0447_EN.html) a resolution in December 2022, which condemned his enduring detention⁠ and demanded 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)). Almost all of them included a call for the release of Mr. Al-Khawaja. In spite of this, his condition has not seen any improvements.

We have launched our campaign ‘We Race for Freedom’ with the aim of pressuring the Bahraini government to immediately and unconditionally release Abdulhadi al-Khawaja. We agree with your statement that it is not the drivers’ responsibility to bring about change in human rights. As you have rightly pointed out, however, authorities are failing to “redress the countries’ record on human rights,” despite the fact that the motorsport governing bodies are “duty bound” to raise awareness on these issues.

This is even more relevant now that the FIA restricted 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 the International Sporting Code for 2023, threatening to sanction all drivers who do not maintain a neutral stance on personal, political or religious matters.

Although 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 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.

It is thus crucial that, in moments like the Bahrain Grand Prix, when the country is placed under the spotlight, influential personalities like yourself speak up to prevent the Bahraini government for sportswashing and exploiting these major sports events to rehabilitate their image in front of the world, when in fact, they continue carrying out atrocities against their citizens.

As you have pointed out in your previous statements, only scrutiny and pressure can bring change, and this is why we ask for your support and for your help in raising awareness about the case of. Abdulhadi al-Khawaja. We thus encourage you to keep spreading messages of solidarity with those who are suffering at the hands of the Bahraini authorities, supporting the organizations that are fighting relentlessly to help them, raising awareness on Al-Khawaja’s case and demanding accountability from perpetrators.Your voice has a profound impact on those who suffer from human rights violations, whether they are wrongfully detained or tortured for peacefully exercising the right to freedom of expression. We hope your openness to be informed about the human rights situation in the countries you race in will inspire others to follow your example, because, as you have rightfully pointed out, “one person” can only make a certain amount of difference, and there is a “need for collective support to make a difference.”

We thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

ECDHR Staff.