

Bahrain: a background briefing May 2014

Produced by MENA Solidarity, Bahrain Watch and Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy



February 2011 - A popular uprising erupts

A popular and peaceful uprising began in Bahrain on 14 February 2011. Bahraini citizens demonstrated for full democratic rights, alongside demands for greater socio-economic justice, respect for human rights, land reform and an end to public sector corruption and state-sanctioned discrimination in employment. These demands were ultimately met with a brutal government crackdown. Dozens of citizens were killed and hundreds were arrested, tortured and sentenced before military courts, including doctors who had treated injured protesters. As well as this, opposition places of worship were destroyed, thousands of workers were sacked and state controlled media was used to incite sectarian hatred.

Responding to international pressure, the Bahrain government established the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). The BICI report was published in November 2011. It documented gross human rights violations, including the systematic use of torture, and found that security forces operated under a "culture of impunity". The Bahrain government pledged to follow the recommendations of the report and reform itself accordingly. However, rather than reform, further repression has followed.

In spite of this, protests have continued on a daily basis. Human rights defenders, political leaders, academics, journalists, medics and teachers remain behind bars. Torture persists. Tear gas is used extensively and excessively in residential areas as a form of collective punishment, and opposition members have been stripped of their citizenship. Throughout this period, the British government has supported the Bahrain government, aggressively promoting arms sales and other exports and announcing plans to expand the British military presence there.

Teachers' leader imprisoned

Mahdi Abu Deeb is the founder and president of the Bahrain Teacher's Association (BTA). In 2011, the BTA called for strike action seeking governmental reform. Shortly after, the government dissolved the BTA and arrested Mahdi and his colleague Jalila al-Salman. Mahdi was beaten and kept in solitary confinement for 64 days. He was then sentenced to ten years by a military court.

Mahdi remains behind bars, although following international pressure from trade unions and human rights organisations, in 2012 his sentence was reduced to 5 years on appeal. According to Amnesty International, Mahdi "suffers from neck, lower back and knee pain resulting from the torture and other ill-treatment he was subjected to". He is being denied access to civilian doctors.



Trade unions in the frontline

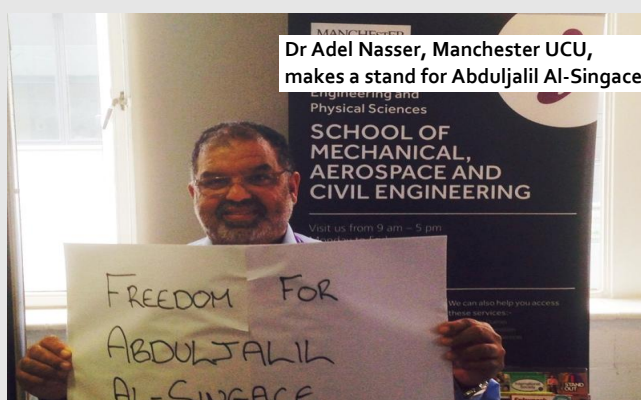
The General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions (GFBTU) brings together 70 trade unions and represents around 20,000 workers. On 19 February 2011 the GFBTU condemned the attacks on demonstrators and called for a general strike the following day, demanding the withdrawal of the security forces. The Bahraini Teachers' Association (BTA) issued a similar statement and called on teachers to join a strike calling for a constitutional monarchy, an elected government and for those responsible for killing civilians to be held accountable.

The GFBTU and BTA called off the strikes after the security forces made a temporary withdrawal, but attacks and victimisations of trade unionists increased over the following weeks. Another call for a general strike on 14 March by GFBTU was supported by the shipyard workers' union, the BTA and other unions. After a week, the federation leadership called off the strike after having received assurances from the government that workers would not be victimised for taking part. However, thousands of workers were subsequently sacked from public and private sector jobs. Although most workers were ultimately reinstated following international pressure, they were often forced to sign new contracts of employment with lower pay and status. Other workers remain out of work or even behind bars.

The BTA was dissolved by the Bahrain government and 55 GFBTU trade union leaders were dismissed. A pro-government trade union, the Bahrain Labour Union Free Federation (BLUFF), was created in 2012 and led a defamation campaign against GFBTU. The government also prevented 23 international observers from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and other organisations from attending GFBTU's 2012 annual congress.

Students expelled and lecturers jailed as universities come under attack

The University of Bahrain and Bahrain Polytechnic were sites of repression in 2011. Hundreds of students were expelled for taking part in or otherwise supporting the pro-democracy protests. In some instances, expulsion followed from simply "liking" something on social media. At least 15 professors were also arrested and imprisoned. Professor Mike Diboll, who was forced to flee Bahrain with his family, was an eyewitness to violent clashes at the University on 13 March 2011. By his own account, he saw how "a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration was attacked by a gang of 'loyalist' vigilantes who had arrived on campus equipped with pickaxe handles, iron bars, swords, spears and machetes; these were supported by Ministry of the Interior Police." In May 2011, the University began forcing students to sign a loyalty pledge to the ruling family. While many students were ultimately reinstated, others were sentenced to lengthy jail sentences.



Dr Adel Nasser, Manchester UCU, makes a stand for Abduljalil Al-Singace

Case study: Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace

Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace is a respected professor of mechanical engineering, who has worked at the University of Bahrain since 1995. He originally studied in the UK, obtaining his PhD from the University of Manchester. Dr Al-Singace is currently a prisoner of conscience, serving a life sentence simply for participating in the pro-democracy movement.

In March 2011, in the middle of the night, security forces broke into his home. He was beaten and ultimately taken to a military prison where he was held in solitary confinement and tortured, before being sentenced in a military court. Dr Al-Singace, who is paralyzed in one leg, was subjected to forced standing, beatings, sexual and verbal assault, and other tortures. He has suffered severe ill-health as a consequence of this, but has been routinely denied medical treatment.