

Press release 26.09.2013

THE 2013 RAFTO PRIZE IS AWARDED TO BAHRAIN CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (BCHR) FOR THEIR LONG AND COURAGEOUS FIGHT FOR FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS IN BAHRAIN

THE FIGHT FOR "INCONVENIENT" HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE GULF

The 2013 Rafto Prize is awarded to the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) for their long and courageous fight for fundamental human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of association in Bahrain.

By awarding the Rafto Prize to BCHR, we turn the spotlight on the systematic violations of human rights in a region where abuse is too often met with silence from western governments. The prize recognises an organisation that has consciously worked for the rights of Bahraini citizens and the many migrant workers in the country. BCHR has promoted non-violent protests against the current government and used digital media to spread its message in a very effective manner.

"To know the human rights situation in a country, ask where the human rights activists/defenders are. In #bahrain they are behind bars," Maryam al-Khawaja, acting President of BHCR on Twitter, 01.05.13.

Enormous courage is required if you are to criticise the authorities in the Gulf states of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Demanding political rights is often perceived as a personal criticism of the ruling Emir or King and is punished very harshly. The Arab Spring led several Gulf states to increase their use of imprisonment for any criticism of the regime. As late as June 2013 the 37-year-old Kuwaiti teacher, Huda al-Ajmi, was sentenced to 11 years in prison for criticising the Emir on Twitter. Also, in the Kingdom of Bahrain, insulting the King or the flag can be punished with a five year prison sentence.

In Bahrain, a wave of protests arose at the same time as the Arab Spring, and since they started in 2011 the protests have been met with an increasingly harder hand by the authorities. BCHR has played a key role in documenting many of the regime's violations of human rights before 2011 and in the period since.

Bahrain Centre for Human Rights – a long-term fight at great expense

Bahrain Centre for Human Rights was founded in 2002 and has worked for democracy and human rights in a region where varying degrees of autocracy and systematic discrimination has been the norm rather than the exception. In September 2004, BCHR was ordered to close down by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, after its president at that time had criticized the

Prime Minister of Bahrain in a public seminar. Despite the threats and lack of official recognition from the government, the BCHR has continued its grassroots activities. It exists, de facto, due to support and recognition from the local communities it serves and several international human rights bodies.

Since its foundation, BCHR has aimed to “promote human rights in accordance with international norms and conventions” in Bahrain. Throughout this time the centre has used media campaigns – currently, particularly internet-based media – seminars, and reports to the UN and other international organisations such as Amnesty International. BCHR has consistently and over a long period promoted ideals that go directly against many Gulf states’ fundamental structures, particularly equal rights for all irrespective of gender, religion and ethnic background. In addition, they have done a lot for the large group of migrant workers who find themselves in the Gulf states on what are at times slave-like contracts.

Over many years, the centre’s activists have provided education about human rights. Recently they have had a special focus on “digital activism”, and are particularly active on Twitter and Facebook. The digital fight is taking place where increasingly strict laws limit traditionally organised human rights campaigns, and much of the current human rights activism is conducted precisely in the digital arena. However, this has not prevented the authorities from arresting and sentencing critics.

Many of those arrested are tortured, something that the BHCR has also reported. Even juveniles are not spared and the story of the 17-year-old Ali Omran is typical. In April 2012, he was arrested during a house search and thereafter kicked and beaten. In prison, he was tortured using methods such as simulated drowning. Finally, he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, where he is serving his sentence with several other juveniles in a prison intended for adults.

Doubly vulnerable migrants

Bahrain has more than 450 000 migrant workers, primarily from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines and Indonesia, and these make up almost 80% of the country’s workforce. The majority work in non-skilled jobs in the construction industry, retail and as domestic workers. Despite Bahrain having received international recognition for improving the legal rights of migrant workers this last decade, their situation remains incredibly difficult. A change in legislation in 2008 made it illegal for employers to confiscate migrants’ passports upon arrival in Bahrain, but the practice continues at almost the same level as before. BCHR has highlighted their situation on several levels, amongst other things by providing employers and employees with information.

The centre has also focused in particular on female migrant workers’ doubly vulnerable position: as women and as migrants. It has published several reports on the matter. Women make up the vast majority of the country’s 87 000 domestic workers. Contrary to other migrant workers, domestic workers are not covered by the country’s legislation, which makes them particularly susceptible to human trafficking. In a report from 2010, BHCR writes that domestic workers face a number of problems: long working hours, low pay, salaries being withheld, difficult living conditions, and limited access to food. A survey conducted by ILO in 2005 showed that domestic

workers in Bahrain work on average 108 hours a week and have one free day a month. In addition, Human Rights Watch has documented that many domestic workers are subject to psychological and physical abuse, including rape. Bahrain is not alone with such an exploitative system; quite the contrary, according to a new Amnesty report these practices are widespread in the Gulf states.

Weapons exports to the oil-rich Gulf

In August 2012, Nabeel Rajab (49), BCHR's President, was imprisoned for having criticised the Prime Minister on Twitter. Then, he was sentenced to three years imprisonment, later reduced to two years for having "encouraged illegal gatherings". He is still in prison. Abdul-Hadi al-Khawaja (52), BCHR's co-founder, is serving a life sentence in prison accused of being a part of a terrorist organisation. His daughter Zaynab al-Khawaja (30), is serving a consecutive multiple short prison sentences that have accumulated to around 12 months for multiple charges including "entering the Pearl Roundabout area". Today, the centre is led by al-Khawaja's youngest daughter, Maryam al-Khawaja (26), who, since March 2011 has lived in exile.

For many years, BCHR has reported violations of human rights, and the fact that the Gulf occupies a special position as criticism of the regimes is not only dismissed by the regimes themselves, but often ignored by their western supporters, in particular the USA. Norwegian authorities expressed uneasiness with developments in Bahrain in 2011, but have not commented on the matter since. Since 2011, US, German and British governments have increased their exports of weapons to the Gulf, normally citing the need for stability in the region. In the oil-rich Gulf, there is far too much to lose for those with vested interests, and fundamental human rights are sacrificed for economic and strategic reasons.

Maryam al-Khawaja calls what is happening in Bahrain "the inconvenient revolution" and points out through her Twitter account and numerous press reports that human rights also apply to the Gulf and to everyone, including women, minorities and migrant workers.

2013: Increase in number of human rights violations in Bahrain

When the Arab uprising broke out in February 2011, tensions quickly increased in Bahrain. The demonstrators demanded, as before, the departure of the regime. This has a different ring in the Bahrain compared with for example Egypt.

Firstly, the country has only approximately 700 000 citizens, of which 2/3 are Shia Muslims. The governing al-Khalifa family is Sunni and has its military supporters in neighbouring Saudi Arabia. It also uses a divide-and-conquer policy and plays on the Sunni population's fear of a Shia government. When the protests started it was this divide-and-conquer policy that was one of the main complaints and a slogan often used was "*La Sunni, La Shia, bas Bahrayni*", which means "Neither Sunni nor Shia, just Bahraini". Nabeel Rajab and Maryam al-Khawaja have, in their interviews, speeches and on social media, emphasised that the resistance against the regime in Bahrain is a peaceful fight for fundamental human rights, not a sectarian conflict.

Secondly, Bahrain is a strategically important country for the USA and Europe as it is an important oil producer and port for the USA's fleet in the Persian Gulf. This has resulted in

protests being quashed with the help of Saudi military forces without any significant outcry from western governments.

The protests continue today and demonstrations are met with increasingly brutal means. The announcement of demonstrations on the 14th August 2013 led to arrests prior to the demonstration, blockades in certain areas and excessive use of military force. Fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of association have been heavily restricted and voluntary organisations are subject to surveillance or are arbitrarily dissolved. In July 2013, a new “anti-terror” decree was introduced which in practice establishes special courts for activities considered a threat to the country’s security. It also gives the authorities extended rights to, for example, revoke an individual’s citizenship and pass long sentences with a reduced burden of evidence.

No-one knows exactly how many have lost their lives since 2011. BCHR has documented over 80 deaths, which is incredibly high in such a small country. Health workers who have helped those injured in the clashes with the security police have themselves been arrested and accused of “conspiring against the state”. In June 2012, Ibrahim al-Dimistani, a nurse, was sentenced to three years in prison for having “been illegally present at a hospital” and for having spread propaganda against the regime. It should also be noted that other health organisations have been closed.

Even activists that do not actively participate in demonstrations are arrested, harassed and subject to house raids, usually at dawn. Disproportionately strict laws regulate all activities for non-governmental organisations and severely limit freedom of speech. Since the new decrees were introduced in July 2013 a number of people have been arrested, including the blogger Mohammad Hasan. On 8th August 2013 his defence lawyer, Abdul Aziz Moussa, was arrested after having used Twitter to confirm seeing torture marks on the body of Hasan. On a day-to-day basis, the remaining BCHR employees in the country face increasingly limited freedom of speech and the threat of prison.

BCHR: Democracy and human rights for all

Nabeel Rajab and Maryam al-Khawaja have used Twitter in particular as a medium for their activism. Today, Maryam al-Khawaja has more than 90 000 followers. She also maintains e-mailing lists, writes a continuous stream of press reports for international organisations and regularly gives presentations about the situation in Bahrain and the Gulf in various forums. In this way, she represents a new type of human rights activist in a political regime where all other forms of protest are impossible. Maryam al-Khawaja is one of the leaders in a regionally oriented Gulf Centre for Human Rights, which is a network of human rights activists and independent journalists throughout the Gulf. Since January 2012 she has lived in Denmark knowing that most of her colleagues in Bahrain have already been arrested. In August 2013 she attempted to return to Bahrain but was denied boarding at the Copenhagen airport as a *persona non grata* in Bahrain, both as a Danish and Bahraini citizen.

A reminder for international community

This year’s Rafto Prize goes to Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, whose President, Nabeel Rajab, and several of his colleagues, have paid a high price for their fight for basic human rights. The

Prize is a strong call to the Bahraini authorities to comply with international human rights obligations, release political prisoners, introduce freedom of speech and freedom of association, introduce equal and democratic rights for all of the country's citizens, and give migrant workers real legal protection. The Prize is also a reminder to the international community that basic human rights cannot be sacrificed for short-term economic and strategic interests.

The Rafto Foundation, Bergen, Norway, Thursday 15 August 2013

The 2013 Rafto Prize is awarded at the National Venue of Theatre (Den Nationale Scene), in Bergen, Norway, on Sunday, 3 November 2013 at 18:00.

The Rafto Foundation in Bergen, Norway, was established after the death of Professor Thorolf Rafto in 1987, in gratitude of his longstanding work to help people who are oppressed and persecuted, and in the realization that this work must be ongoing.

The Rafto Prize is a human rights award established in memory of Professor Thorolf Rafto. The Prize is awarded annually by the Rafto Foundation. Several Rafto Laureates: Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma (Rafto Prize in 1990), people of East-Timor by Josè Ramos-Horta (Rafto Prize in 1993), Kim Dae-jung, South-Korea (Rafto Prize in 2000), and Shirin Ebadi, Iran (Rafto Prize in 2001), have subsequently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

www.rafto.no

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