

Bahrain continues to target Shia doctors

Bahrain's ongoing violations of medical neutrality have been condemned by human rights campaigners, who say that the country's health system is under attack. Sharmila Devi reports.



Orthopaedic surgeon Ali al-Akri faces 5 years in jail

Human rights groups have called on Bahrain to stop what they called the targeting of doctors who saw their jail sentences upheld last week (Oct 1) by the country's highest court for their role in treating protesters during political unrest last year.

"Upholding the conviction of these medical professionals on spurious politically motivated charges continues the government's broad and systematic attack on the country's health system", said Richard Sollom, deputy director of Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), who attended part of the doctors' trials in Bahrain but has since been refused a visa.

"Bahrain's allies, especially the United States, should exert maximum pressure on the Bahraini authorities to end these gross violations of medical neutrality."

The USA, whose Navy's Fifth Fleet is based in the Sunni-ruled Gulf Kingdom, said the court's decision was a setback for reconciliation. "We're also concerned that these convictions serve to further restrict freedom of expression and hurt the atmosphere that's so necessary in Bahrain for national reconciliation", said Victoria Nuland, US State Department spokeswoman. "So we've repeatedly voiced concern about this case. We're going to continue to do it both publicly and privately at the highest levels in Bahrain."

After Bahrain crushed pro-democracy protests early last year, campaigners say that it has failed to fully implement recommendations from an independent inquiry that investigated abuses while clashes between police and protesters, mostly from the Shia majority, continue almost nightly.

Bahrain originally detained around 95 doctors and nurses and charged 48 of them with offences ranging from possessing firearms to refusing to

treat Sunni patients at the Salmaniya Medical Complex in the capital Manama. Many of those detained say they were tortured in prison to extract false confessions.

During the past year, 28 were charged with misdemeanour offences and are now free. Of the other 20 who faced felony charges, nine were acquitted, two went into hiding, and three were allowed to remain free on time served.

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Charges were upheld against the remaining six and they were rearrested last week although there were reports that one of them was released on Oct 7 for the time served before his conviction.

Sollom of PHR said he spoke with Ali al-Akri, one of the most prominent doctors because of his media interviews who faces 5 years in prison, just before he was rearrested on Oct 2. "Everyone was hoping the crown prince would pardon them but all six were carted off to prison where they can't accept phone calls", said Sollom. "The medics are only one of many issues in Bahrain but they're the vanguard, they've become the symbol of the oppressed whether they like it or not."

A systematic attack was being waged against Shia medics and the health system, he said, citing a circular issued on Oct 4 by the Bahrain Medical Association (BMA) to the 11 medics acquitted of felony charges saying they would be charged with ethics violations, which would mean losing their jobs. "The BMA is unlike other medical associations because

it isn't independent, it's part of the government", Sollom said.

"They've fired Shia doctors who headed departments and replaced them with Sunnis, so the whole medical leadership is changing. Medicine had been one of the last bastions for the Shia, who are barred from other professions, such as the police, education, and justice."

The court's decision in the case of the medics came only days after Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was denied release from prison and Zainab al-Khawaja, another activist, was sentenced to 2 months in prison for tearing up a picture of the Bahraini king.

"The Bahraini authorities have no intention to reform, calm the public, and resolve the political, security, and human rights crisis", Hadi al-Moussawi of the Al Wefaq Society opposition group, told a press conference in Bahrain. "Quite the opposite is true; they continue to violate human rights through the continued use of the military apparatus, security forces, and politicised trials against activists, protesters, and all those who participated in the protests."

In September, a group of human rights organisations sent a letter to Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, urging the end of US military assistance and arms transfers to Bahrain of more than US\$300 million since 2002. "Whether pending arms transfers are 'assistance' or 'sales', the human rights violations perpetrated with weapons and equipment previously supplied by the United States mandates that both assistance and sales to the [Bahrain Defence Force] and police cease immediately", said the letter.

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