

Paris, 19 September 2016

UN Human Rights Council
Universal Periodic Review
27th session – May 2017

**Contribution by Reporters Without Borders (RSF),
a non-governmental organization with special consultative status,
on freedom of the media and information in Bahrain**

Freedom of information and the press have considerably deteriorated in Bahrain with the continued repression of journalists and other newsproviders as well as increased online censorship. In an environment increasingly hostile to criticism, no journalist or blogger, local or international, is now immune to arrests or arbitrary charges.

Bahrain ranks 162nd (out of 180) in the 2016 Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without borders. With about 14 journalists - professional or not - behind bars for having simply done their job, the country is among the biggest journalist prison in the Middle East.

Repression of journalists and other newsproviders

In an environment hostile to independence and pluralism, journalists must regularly exercise a certain amount of auto-censorship. Beyond the **traditional red lines** dealing with the King, Islam and national security, which can lead to prison terms, journalists treating sensitive subjects tied to human rights or anti-government demonstrations know that they risks reprisals.

A journalist indulging in criticism can quickly be accused of disseminating propaganda for terrorism. That is the case of **Mahmoud Al Jaziri**, a journalist working with *Ak-Wasat*, the only opposition newspaper in the kingdom, who is regularly a target of the authorities since 2011. Arrested in December 2015, he is charged with "supporting terrorist activities funded by the Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards". On the eve of his arrest, he had written an article on a proposed controversial law requiring the confiscation of the public lodgings of families whose leaders had been deprived of their citizenship.

Many journalists covering pro-democracy demonstrations have been physically assaulted, detained, sometimes tortured and condemned to heavy sentences

going occasionally up to life terms in prison. That is the case of the internationally known photographer **Ahmed Humeidan**, who was insulted, threatened and tortured during his interrogation on 29 December 2012 and, on 31 August 2014, condemned to 10 years in jail under the false pretext of "assaulting security forces" and "participating in an illegal gathering". There is also the case of the freelance photographer **Sayed Ahmed Al Mousawi**, recipient of about 100 international prizes, who received the same sentence in appeal on 13 June 2016 in addition to being deprived of his citizenship. He had been previously arrested on 10 February 2014 and charged for having allegedly "distributed sim cards to persons implicated in terrorist acts". The photographer **Jaffar Marhoon**, detained since December 2013, has received a life sentence on 24 February 2015 for "having assaulted the police forces".

On 14 February 2016, Bahraini authorities arrested the American freelance journalist **Anna Therese Day** and 3 of her colleagues in Sitra, south of Manama, as they were covering the 5th anniversary of the 2011 uprising. Accused of working without permit, they were detained 3 days, during 2 of which they were deprived of sleep and refused water, food and access to medical help before being freed while awaiting the results of the investigation.

Denial of justice for journalists

The issue of impunity is another stumbling block to the protection of journalists. Since 2011, 3 journalists and citizen-journalists were killed and no one has been prosecuted for these 3 murders. Indeed, **Karim Fakhrawi**, founder and member of the management team of *Al-Wasat*, died in police hands on 12 April 2011 under still unclear circumstances. A few days before, citizen-journalist **Zakariya Rashid Hassan** was also found dead under similar circumstances while on 31 March 2012 another citizen-journalist, **Ahmed Ismail Hussein**, died of a bullet wound suffered while he was filming a peaceful demonstration in the village of Salmabad, south-west of the capital.

The case of **Nazeeha Saeed** is equally emblematic of the prevailing impunity in Bahrain when crimes against journalists are involved. Saeed, who is correspondent of *France 24* and *Radio Monte-Carlo Doualiya* had been tortured for 13 hours by police-women in May 2011 in a police precinct of Rifa'a for covering pro-democracy demonstrations. After an investigation which lasted years, the Ministry of Justice argued that there was insufficient proof and no concrete conclusion was reached. In June 2016, Ms Saeed, without any explanation, found herself forbidden to leave the country and was refused a renewal of her accreditation for the French medias. Although her travel ban was lifted at the end of August 2016, she has still not received her licence and is now being charged with "working without permit".

Increased online repression

Beyond the repression of traditional media, the Government is increasingly restricting internet freedom. Bahrain is among the most connected country in the region and is also the country where online surveillance is most severe. In 2012, the country became part of the list of "Enemies of the Internet" published by Reporters without borders.

Nabeel Rajab, the well-known Bahraini human rights defender and President of the Bahraini Centre for human rights (BCHR) is another emblematic case of this brutal repression. He is in provisional detention since 13 June for having issued tweets criticizing Bahrain's intervention in Yemen in the framework of the Arab coalition as well as the deplorable conditions in the prison of Jaw. He is liable of incurring a 15 years jail term.

In 2016, the Government introduced **new legal regulations limiting the possibility for media to publish online content**: they are no longer authorized to place broadcast directly online and internet service providers are obliged to use a filtering system facilitating Government censorship of the internet.

Another well-used censorship method consists in slowing down and blocking the internet by the authorities, especially during demonstrations.

Reporters without borders (RSF) recommends:

- Cease all exactions and harassment of journalists and newsproviders.
- Free immediately and unconditionally, and abandon all charges against all journalist, professional or not, detained for having simply exercised their right to freedom of information online or through traditional media.
- Free all journalists detained for having simply covered demonstrations repressed by the police forces.
- Put an end to impunity and prosecute those responsible for offences and crimes against journalists and other newsproviders.
- Put an end to the filtering and blockage of the internet as well as to online surveillance.
- Revise the 2002 press and publications code as well as the telecommunications law in order to eliminate all restrictions of press freedom, internet control and censorship, in accordance with Article 19 of the International covenant on civil and political rights.
- Depenalize defamation and offences related to the spread of false information.

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