## In Bahrain, Human Rights Defenders Are Under Attack – But We Won’t Be Deterred

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http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/20/bahrain-human-rights-attack-tortured

On Tuesday my sister, Zainab Al-Khawaja, who is eight months pregnant, was arrested again, after only recently [serving one year in prison](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26224501). She was attending a court hearing on charges of “destroying government property” after tearing a picture of Bahrain’s king during a protest in 2012.

In court, she took out a picture of the king, and tore it up, declaring: “I am the daughter of a proud and free man. My mother brought me into this world free, and I will give birth to a free baby boy even if it is inside our prisons. It is my right, and my responsibility as a free person, to protest against oppression and oppressors.”

She was detained on the spot. A new case was immediately initiated at the upper criminal court, which means she faces the possibility of a maximum sentence for “publicly insulting the king”; seven years and a 10,000 Bahraini dinar (approximately £16,500) fine.

Zainab has rejoined a large list of human rights defenders in the country who are languishing in prison in Bahrain for their human rights work and criticism of the regime; namely practising their right to free expression. Prior to my sister’s arrest, [Nabeel Rajab](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/22/bahrain-grand-prix-angry-protests), the president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, [was arrested less than 24 hours after](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29454283) he arrived back in the country on 1 October 2014 following an advocacy tour in Europe. The justification for his arrest was a tweet he wrote criticising Bahraini government institutions for serving as “incubators for Isis ideology”. Nabeel’s main topic during his tour? My own arrest and detention in Bahrain.

I was insulted, assaulted by four police officers, and detained upon my arrival in Bahrain from Copenhagen in late August 2014. I went to Bahrain to visit my hunger-striking father whose life was at risk – another human rights defender serving a life sentence in Jau prison after being severely tortured. Officers at the airport told me that I was not welcome in my own country, kept me in a freezing cold room and assaulted me after switching off their own cameras. They later charged me with assaulting two police officers.

My release from prison was the result of international pressure. People like Nabeel – who had only recently completed an arbitrary two-year sentence in prison for organising anti-government protests – were at the forefront of creating the international pressure that forced the Bahraini authorities to release me after spending 19 days at the Isa Town women’s prison. Nabeel and other colleagues travelled to different countries in Europe, meeting with government officials and NGOs to advocate for my release. [Friends and colleagues wrote for media outlets](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/02/maryam-alkhawaja-arrest-bahrain-us-uk), spoke at the European parliament, and worked hard to get my case raised at the United Nations during the latest Human Rights Council session. Our roles have now reversed.

When I visited the Index on Censorship on Wednesday, the chief executive told me: “It would be funny if it was not so sad that only a month ago Nabeel was sitting in exactly this room talking to us about how we can get you out of prison. Now you are sitting here thinking about how to get him released.”

I have been working in the field of human rights since 2010. What has become increasingly clear to me is that international pressure on the United Kingdom and the United States, the closest allies to Bahrain, is how we can have an influence. Unfortunately, the government of Bahrain has become increasingly comfortable with its state of impunity for human rights abuses. Such impunity, enabled by governments such as the US and UK, can only be reversed through a tough universal stance by the international community. Until then, human rights defenders and the people of Bahrain will continue to be systematically targeted for practising their fundamental rights to free expression and assembly. I will continue with my work despite the risks that we face, because fighting for human rights should be the norm and not the exception.