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Bahraini human rights activist sentenced to three years

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NCR Today

Bahrain sentenced prominent human rights activist Nabeel Rajab to three years in jail Aug. 16 for "inciting" anti-government protests.

"The unexpectedly harsh sentence is likely to raise questions about the Western-backed Sunni monarchy's commitment to reform and embolden anti-government protesters who have been demonstrating for the past 18 months calling for greater rights in this Gulf island kingdom that is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet," The Associated Press wrote in its report on the sentencing.

Arrested July 9, Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was already serving a three-month sentence for a tweet criticizing the Bahraini prime minister. In the state-run media, the government denounced Rajab, saying he provoked his supporters to violence against security personnel. On Aug. 16, the Lower Court of Manama, the Bahraini capital, found him guilty of organizing "unlicensed demonstrations" using social media and ordered three one-year jail sentences, one for each protest he was accused of leading.

The stiff sentence surprised defense attorney Mohammed al-Jishi, who plans to appeal.

"They are peaceful protests, not violent ones," he told Reuters, adding that others found guilty of similar charges were given six months or released.

U.S. and European officials criticized the decision to imprison the widely admired Rajab, as did several human rights organization. On Aug. 10, 17 members of Congress and two senators sent a letter to Bahraini King Hamad Bin Isa al-Khalifa, urging him to order Rajab's release "under the universal principle that all citizens should have the right to peacefully express disagreement."

The U.S. State Department said it was "deeply troubled" by the verdict and has said it will ask the Bahraini government to vacate the sentence, according to *The Cable*, a blog of the magazine *Foreign Policy*.

Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui told *The Lede*, a *New York Times* blog, that Rajab's harsh sentence "marks the end of the façade of reform in Bahrain. The international community can no longer be under the illusion that Bahrain is on the path of reform when confronted with such blatant and ruthless tactics of suppressing dissenting voices. Bahrain's international partners need to make this loud and clear to the Bahraini authorities."

I first learned of Rajab in February. I was among a dozen internationals who responded to his invitation to come to his homeland to accompany human rights activists during demonstrations that marked the one-year anniversary of the country's uprising. He paid my airfare to Bahrain as well as that of another American activist.

Inspired by the popular rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt, thousands of Bahrainis took to the streets in February 2011 to demand constitutional and economic reforms that would limit the powers of the monarchy and narrow the divide between the country's Sunni elite and Shia majority. The monarchy's early efforts at dialogue failed to quell the unrest, and a severe crackdown followed. According to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, hundreds of people were jailed, many tortured, and thousands more fired from their jobs for supporting the demonstrations. Over the past 18 months, at least 50 people, some security personnel as well as protesters, have been killed in the near-daily protests.

Rajab hoped the presence of internationals might restrain the repressive actions of the security personnel and give heart to youthful protestors, increasingly impatient with his call to maintain a discipline of nonviolence.

But I never made it into Bahrain. Along with a number of Western correspondents and observers, I was denied entry. (See my blog post on the subject.) A fellow Catholic Worker, Brian Terrell, who spent a week in the Gulf Kingdom as a human rights monitor before the government deported him, saw Rajab in action and described him as a man of integrity and impressive courage.

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Until recently, Rajab was one of the few Bahraini human rights defenders not behind bars. Earlier this year, a military court sentenced Abdulwadhi al-Khawaja, former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, to life imprisonment for his role in the protests. That verdict was voided in April and al-Khawaja, along with other activists, is waiting for a new sentence after his retrial. His daughter, Zainab, one of the top tweeters in the Arab pro-democracy movement, was jailed last month.

The tragedy here is that in Bahrain, as in Syria, the popular uprising initially called for the reform, not overthrow, of the government. In attempting to silence voices like Rajab and al-Khawaja, Bahraini authorities make a peaceful resolution of the country's political conflicts less likely. Repression breeds a hardening of positions and cultivates militancy. The best way for the Bahraini government to reverse this deadening process is to release Rajab, al-Khawaja, Zainab and all who have engaged in peaceful dissent.

During a December interview with *The Cable*, Rajab spoke about the inconsistency and shortsightedness of U.S. tolerance for repressive regimes in the Gulf.

"There is full support for revolutions in countries where [the U.S. government] has a problem with their leadership, but when it comes to allied dictators in the Gulf countries, they have a much softer position and that was very upsetting to many people in Bahrain and the Gulf region," he said. "This will not serve your long strategic interest, to strengthen and continue your relations with dictators and repressive regimes. ... You should have taken a lesson from Tunisia and Egypt, but now you are repeating the same thing by ignoring all those people struggling for democracy and human rights. ... Those dictators will not be there forever. Relationships should be maintained with people, not families."

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