



ARTICLE 19

Rights Groups Letter to F1 CEO Ahead of Bahrain Grand Prix: 20 Years of Sportswashing

Copy to: *Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), Teams, Drivers and Sponsors*

26 February 2024

Dear Stefano Domenicali,

We, the undersigned organisations, are writing to renew our concerns about Bahrain's use of the F1 Grand Prix to "*sportswash*" the country's dire human rights record. As you mark two decades of racing in Bahrain, and amid claims from F1 that it has been "[a force for good](#)" in the country, we urge F1 to launch an independent inquiry to evaluate its impact on the situation for human rights in Bahrain.

State media outlets have [heralded](#) the 20th anniversary of the first Bahrain Grand Prix in 2004 as "20 years of Formula 1 glory". Unfortunately, this does not reflect the reality on the ground in Bahrain, where authorities continue to harshly clamp down on citizens' freedom of expression and assembly, including around the race itself.

Despite [assurances](#) provided by F1 that they "*have always been clear with all race promoters and governments [...] worldwide, including Bahrain, that [they] take violence, abuse of human rights and repression very seriously*", Bahrain has continued to systematically violate citizens' rights, repress dissent, silence journalists, and routinely perpetuate violence, including torture and police brutality.

20 years of sportswashing and a horrific deterioration in fundamental freedoms

Bahrain's human rights record has become measurably worse over the past 20 years, with the Gulf kingdom becoming one of the most [repressive](#) states in the Middle East. It has experienced one of the largest deteriorations in human freedoms globally between

2007-2021, according to the [Human Freedom Index 2023](#). Bahrain has also [ranked](#) among the worst 10 countries globally for freedom of the press on Reporters Without Borders's 2023 World Press Freedom Index. Ten journalists continue to be detained in the country due to their journalistic activity, according to the organisation.

Since violently crushing a popular pro-democracy protest movement in 2011, authorities have [systematically eliminated](#) a broad range of political rights and civil liberties, dismantled the political opposition, and cracked down on dissent, particularly among the Shiite population.

The 2011 uprising led to the race's cancellation as the state granted its security forces unchecked authority to suppress protesters, resulting in fatalities both on the streets and in custody. Among the victims was Kareem Fakhrawi, co-founder of Bahrain's only independent newspaper, Al-Wasat, which was subsequently shuttered by the government in 2017 as part of what [Amnesty International](#) deemed an "all-out campaign to end independent reporting" within the nation.

Notable human rights violations during the Bahrain Grand Prix

Over the past two decades, numerous rights violations have occurred in the context of the Grand Prix or during the event, and F1 has failed to respond adequately. On the eve of the 2012 Bahrain Grand Prix, a protester, Salah Abbas Habib, was killed by a [shotgun fired](#) by a police officer. His death sparked widespread [protests](#) calling for the race to be cancelled, but despite mounting pressure, F1 went ahead with the race. The policeman accused of his murder was [acquitted](#) by a Bahraini Court in 2013, and F1 failed to unequivocally condemn his murder or investigate if his death was linked to F1's presence in the country.

In 2017, Bahraini activist [Najah Yusuf](#) was tortured, sexually assaulted and sentenced to three years in prison after posting criticism of the Grand Prix on social media. While Najah was [released](#) by royal pardon in August 2019 following sustained international pressure, she was subsequently fired from her public sector job.

F1's presence in Bahrain during the Grand Prix provides convenient cover and distraction whilst the Kingdom carries out egregious human rights violations. Even when such incidents were brought to F1's attention, it [failed](#) to protect human rights during F1 races in Bahrain.

False assurances by F1 last year

Based on the assurances given by F1 CEO Stefano Domenicali that "*individuals should be allowed to protest against and criticise our events without intimidation or reprisals*", four individuals staged a protest near the Bahrain international circuit, where the race was held on 5 March 2023. However, within minutes, they were [arrested](#), threatened, verbally abused and subsequently forced to sign a plea severely restricting their right to protest in the future.

When asked about the arrests, F1 [reiterated](#) a statement made by the Bahraini government denying their occurrence. However, the Ministry of Interior Ombudsman later acknowledged the arrests in an email sent to the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy in May 2023. Regrettably, F1 failed to correct the public record, which has the effect of helping to whitewash the actions of the Bahraini police.

In an interview with the Guardian, Stefano Domenicali [stated](#), “F1’s position is that the sport is better able to effect change by visiting these countries and holding them to commitments they have made that are legally binding.” F1 must translate these words into actions to substantiate its own rhetoric and to ensure that Bahrain complies with its human rights commitments and international law.

Our request

F1 must not continue to be a conduit to sportswash human rights violations in Bahrain. In that regard, we urge you to:

- 1) Commission an independent inquiry to evaluate F1’s response to unlawful arrests, extrajudicial killing of protesters, and suppression of freedoms of expression and assembly during the Bahrain Grand Prix to evaluate whether Bahrain has fulfilled its commitments to F1 and to assess whether F1 has taken appropriate measures to deter recurrent human rights violations in the context of the event.
- 2) Actively work to secure redress for those victims of abuses linked to your activities in Bahrain and ensure outstanding concerns are dealt with as a matter of urgency and make a public statement on this.
- 3) Seek written assurances from the Bahraini Government that individuals will not face reprisals for peaceful protests linked to F1.
- 4) Call on the Bahraini government to release all detained journalists in Bahrain and eliminate any obstacles jeopardising the public's right to access free, independent, and diverse information.

Sincerely,

1. Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)
2. ALQST for Human Rights
3. ARTICLE 19
4. Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)
5. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
6. CIVICUS
7. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
8. Democracy for Arab World Now (DAWN)
9. Fair Square
10. #FreeAlKhawaja Campaign
11. Football Supporters Europe
12. Freedom House
13. Global Legal Action Network (GLAN)
14. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
15. IFEX
16. ILGA World - The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
17. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
18. International Trade Union Confederation
19. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
20. MENA Rights Group
21. Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC)

22. Rafto Foundation for Human Rights
23. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
24. Reprieve
25. Sport & Rights Alliance
26. The Army of Survivors
27. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)
28. World Players Association

Background: Repression and human rights violations in Bahrain

Political prisoners

Bahrain has the [highest](#) prison population rate in the Middle East, with an [estimated](#) 1,300 political prisoners in Jau Prison, many of whom have been imprisoned since 2011. Authorities systematically deny political prisoners access to adequate medical care, causing unnecessary suffering and endangering the health of prisoners with chronic medical conditions.

On 7 August 2023, hundreds of prisoners launched a hunger strike in Bahrain's Jau prison to protest harsh prison conditions and ill-treatment, and was the [biggest](#) hunger strike, with over 800 inmates joining the strike [over](#) 36 days.

A report by the UN Committee Against Torture [concluded](#) in 2017 that there is "widespread torture" in Bahrain's penal system and a "climate of impunity" for perpetrators. Last September 2023, a [Bahraini](#) court [sentenced](#) 13 people to prison after an unfair mass trial marred with due process violations and torture allegations on charges of using force against prison guards and vandalism of prison property, following a peaceful demonstration organised by inmates in Jau prison in April 2021.

Human rights defenders and opposition leaders

Since 2011, well-known opposition figures and human rights defenders remain imprisoned solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and are continually subjected to human rights violations.

Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace, 62, is an academic, [blogger](#), [award-winning](#) activist, and human rights defender serving a life sentence in Bahrain, whose detention was [declared](#) arbitrary by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) in 2023. 3 April 2024 marks 1000 days since Dr Al-Singace began a solid-food hunger strike to protest the confiscation of his research manuscripts.

Hassan Mushaima, 76, is Bahrain's oldest political prisoner who is serving a life sentence in Bahrain solely for exercising his right to freedom of association and expression. Bahraini authorities have subjected Mr Mushaima and Dr Al-Singace to physical and psychological torture. Despite being held in a medical facility since July 2021, they have both been subjected to medical negligence, held in prolonged solitary confinement and denied access to sunlight.

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, 62, is a Bahraini-Danish [award-winning](#) human rights defender arbitrarily imprisoned since 2011 for his role in peaceful demonstrations and is currently serving a life sentence in Jau Prison. Al-Khawaja has been subjected to severe physical, sexual, and psychological torture, and his health has deteriorated significantly during his imprisonment. WGAD [declared](#) his detention arbitrary in 2012.

The UN Secretary General's [report](#) on reprisals against those who cooperate with UN mechanisms released in September 2023 named Bahrain for the fifth year in a row, highlighting that the imprisonment of human rights defender Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei's relatives, including **Sayed Nizar Alwadaei**, whose imprisonment was [declared](#) arbitrary by WGAD.

Death penalty

Bahrain continues to use the death penalty. A [report](#) from Human Rights Watch and Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) published in October 2022 revealed that Bahraini courts have convicted and sentenced defendants to death following manifestly unfair trials based solely or primarily on confessions allegedly coerced through torture and ill-treatment. There are currently 26 individuals on death row, all at risk of imminent execution.

This February marks a decade since the unlawful detention of death row inmates Mohammed Ramadan and Hussein Moosa, who were [sentenced to death](#) in an unfair trial marred by allegations of torture and have exhausted all rights to appeal their sentence. Their detention was deemed [arbitrary](#) by [WGAD](#), which called for their immediate release, and has been condemned by rights groups, including [Amnesty International](#).