

The forgotten story: The inexorable silencing of dissenting voices in Bahrain

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At a time when the world is transfixed by events in Saudi Arabia, Bahrainis speak about the inexorable silencing of dissenting voices

Mohammed al-Tajer is a brave man. He is a Bahraini lawyer who has defended activists in the Gulf island kingdom for over a decade, among them the well-known human rights advocate Nabeel Rajab. He has been detained and tortured. He has been harassed and threatened in social media. Despite that he has continued to speak his mind and somehow maintain his equilibrium with a mix of thoughtful insight and wry humour.

But even he has been staggered by the fate that has befallen his younger brother Ali, a man with no history of political activism. On 4 November last year he was arrested and for nearly a month his family did not hear from him. After weeks of worry they were informed of an official interrogation which took place on 30 November.

Two lawyers from his brother's firm were allowed to represent Ali, after Mohammed launched a letter writing campaign to the authorities demanding that they honour the right to legal representation, one guaranteed in law but often ignored. He publicised the letters online: "They (the authorities) could not flee after that."

The lawyers came away with a grim story. Ali told how he had been deprived of sleep and forced to stand for 20 days, how he was repeatedly beaten around his head, torso and genitalia. He said those who beat him taunted him: "We don't have your brother but we are glad to get (another) one from the al-Tajer family."

The clothes that Ali was arrested in were handed over. They were bloodstained.

Al-Tajer is in no doubt that his work as a human rights lawyer is what led to his brother's arrest. He says it is an attempt to silence him, to drive him away from defending peaceful activists who have run afoul of the regime's attempts to stifle criticism.

The authorities have said that on 4 November, 47 people were detained, among them Ali and that those arrested were planning imminent terror attacks.

"The organisation has strong links with Iranian parties and terrorists residing in Iran," the interior ministry claimed at the time of the arrests, adding that some members had received training on weapons and explosives in the Islamic republic.

Ali had visited his father in law, a Bahraini academic at the University of Tehran and a critic of the Bahrain regime, on a personal family matter. The authorities allege that on that visit Ali received military training and, bizarrely, advice on how to respond under interrogation, allegations that Mohammed al-Tajer says are absurd: "They have no proof at all, just general claims and false

evidence from others extracted under torture.”

Mohammed al-Tajer saw his brother on 24 December: "Mentally he is okay, he is very strong, he is still smiling." But a doctor who examined him has recommended that Ali be referred to a urologist and an orthopaedic surgeon.

“This is because of the beatings he sustained and the fact that he was forced to stand for such a long time,” his brother says.

Ali has still not seen the specialists.

For friends and family of the Al Wasat journalist Mahmoud Jaziri, arrested on the 28 December, the wait continues. His brother received one call from Mahmoud saying only that he was being held in a criminal investigations unit. He had not been told why he was arrested.

Al Wasat, the only independent news outlet operating in Bahrain, had just published an article by Jaziri, the paper’s Shura council correspondent, about a politically sensitive story related to the stripping of citizenship, a punitive tactic increasingly being used by the government against its critics.

On the 31 December, a senior leader of the opposition Al-Wefaq society, Khalil Marzook, was summoned to the public prosecutor’s office together with another Wefaq official. At the same time a prominent cleric Sheikh Maytham al-Salman, an internationally acclaimed interfaith peace activist, was called in for questioning.

On the 2 January, immediately following the mass executions in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain’s Interior Ministry, citing article 168 of the penal code, warned that it “will not accept interference in any form in the verdicts of the Saudi judiciary or any other brotherly or friendly countries”.

Article 168 stipulates imprisonment of up to two years “for any person who deliberately disseminates false reports, statements or malicious rumours seeking to damage public security, terrorise the population or cause damage to the public interest.”

The article, part of Bahrain’s draconian anti-terror legislation, has been used extensively to charge, convict, fine and jail regime critics.

Thus any critical comment on the execution of senior Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al Nimr by the Saudis was criminalised.

And so 2015 ended with the government dramatically accelerating its campaign against independent voices, relentlessly driving them into silence, using the so-called war on terror as a convenient cover.

“We cannot breathe - anything we say may be used against us, the walls are closing in on us,” said one such voice, asking not to be named for fear of arrest.

It is understandable that in such an environment people will not speak out. What is neither understandable nor acceptable is the virtual silence from Bahrain’s allies in the west. They should listen to the lawyer Mohammed al-Tajer.

When asked if he was afraid of repercussions for himself and his family should his comments be reported, he replied: “Not at all. We won’t back down. Go ahead.”

It is precisely the sort of courageous statement Washington and Westminster should be listening to. How disgraceful is it that they are not?

Bill Law

P.S.

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* Bill Law is a Middle East analyst and a specialist in Gulf affairs.