

= Bahrain health worker trials =

The Bahrain health worker trials were a series of legal cases in which forty @-@ eight doctors , nurses , and dentists faced charges for their actions during the 2011 @-@ 2012 Bahraini uprising . In September 2011 , twenty of the health workers were convicted by a military court of felonies including " stockpiling weapons " and " plotting to overthrow the government " . The remaining twenty @-@ eight were charged with misdemeanors and tried separately . The following month , the felony sentences were overturned , and it was announced that the defendants would be retried by a civilian court . Retrials began in March 2012 , but were postponed until June 14 . Convictions against nine of the defendants were quashed and reduced against another nine . The Court of Cassation upheld the sentences against the remaining nine on 1 October .

The case drew international attention and criticism , with organizations including the United Nations , the World Medical Association , Médecins Sans Frontières , the International Council of Nurses , Amnesty International , and Human Rights Watch expressing their concern over the health workers ' military trials and sentences . An independent commission organized by the King of Bahrain concluded in November 2011 that many of the detained health workers had been subject to torture and abuse while in police detention .

= = Role of health workers in the Bahrain uprising = =

Beginning in February 2011 , Bahrain saw sustained pro @-@ democracy protests , centered at Pearl Roundabout in the capital of Manama , as part of the wider Arab Spring . Authorities responded with a night raid on 17 February (later referred to by protesters as Bloody Thursday) , which left four protesters dead and more than 300 injured .

Health workers played an important role in documenting the injuries , which were at the time downplayed or denied by the government of Bahrain . Rheumatologist Fatima Haji , for example , appeared on Al Jazeera television news in a " hysterical " state , describing Isa Abdul Hasan , a man in his 60s who died in her hospital of a head wound he had received from police : " I just started shouting : ' What the hell did this guy do , he was an old man . What did he do to deserve this ? ' " She later stated that following her arrest , her interrogations were centered on this television appearance .

At Salmaniya Medical Complex , doctors joined the protests themselves , speaking to protesters and media from the hospital stairs , after authorities blocked ambulances from bringing injured protesters there for care . The military responded by naming the hospital an opposition stronghold , taking it over on March 16 .

= = Arrests and charges = =

In March and April 2011 , twenty health workers were arrested on a variety of felony charges for their actions during the protests , while an additional twenty @-@ eight were arrested for misdemeanors . The total number of arrested health workers exceeded seventy . Dr. Ali Al @-@ Ekri was arrested while performing surgery at Salmaniya Medical Complex .

Charges against the doctors included " occupying a hospital , stockpiling weapons , spreading lies and false news , inciting hatred of Bahrain 's rulers and calling for their overthrow , and withholding treatment of Sunnis " . The government additionally alleged that blood from hospital blood banks had been used to exaggerate wounds , that health workers had transported weapons to the protesters by ambulance , and that AK @-@ 47s had been confiscated inside the hospital on a police raid . State media described the defendants as having " a terrorist aim " .

According to the prosecutor 's case , al @-@ Ekri acted as the group 's ringleader , organizing staff at Salmaniya to oppose the Bahraini government . Al @-@ Ekri was well known in Bahrain previous to the uprising for a January 2009 trip to the Gaza Strip to provide aid to Palestinians during the Gaza War . On his return , he received a number of awards , including one from the king . After his arrest , Al @-@ Ekri stated that he was being persecuted for his comments to the media about

police violence : " They know we witnessed all the crimes of the regime and we stood strong by injured people and we talked to the media ... Anywhere , like in Gaza and in Yemen now , doctors speak about what they see . "

The defendants denied all charges and maintained that the accusations were politically motivated . In a joint statement , they held that " our only crime was that during the unrest earlier this year , we were outspoken witnesses to the bloodshed and the brutal treatment by the security forces . " Bahraini MP Jamal Fakhro responded that Bahrain jails only " people who prefer to play politics rather than be doctors " , not " doctors who treat people " . A spokesman for Bahrain 's Information Affairs Authority stated that the health workers were fabricating their stories and that they were " collaborating with the hard liners " in " an attempted coup d 'etat " .

British journalist Robert Fisk , who had been present at the protests , accused the Bahraini government of dishonesty : " Doctors I saw , drenched in their patients ' blood , desperately trying to staunch the bullet wounds of pro @-@ democracy demonstrators shot in cold blood by Bahraini soldiers and police , are now on trial ... How could these fine medical men and women have been trying to " topple " the monarchy ? The idea that these 48 defendants are guilty of such a vicious charge is not just preposterous . It is insane , a total perversion ? no , the total opposite ? of the truth . " In response , Bahrain 's Information Affairs Authority threatened him with libel action .

The BICI supported the government account that medics occupied the first floor of Salmaniya hospital . However , it rejected the claim that medics had supplied protesters with weapons and stated that evidence supporting allegations that medics denied health care to patients was " hardly conclusive , " as paraphrased by Al Jazeera English .

= = Trials = =

= = = Felony trials = = =

The twenty health workers facing felony charges were found guilty and sentenced on 29 September 2011 by the military National Safety Court of First Instance . According to the International Federation for Human Rights , the trial lasted only a few minutes . Thirteen of the twenty received sentences of fifteen years ' imprisonment , while five were sentenced to five years and two were sentenced to ten years . The sentences were a blow to the hopes of human rights groups lobbying on the health workers ' behalf , which had predicted authorities would ease their stance after releasing some defendants on bail .

The defendants were scheduled to be retried by civilian courts after widespread international criticism . The prosecutor 's office stated that the defendants ' confessions , which had allegedly been given under torture , would not be used as evidence .

On 10 March 2012 , Bahrain 's Information Affairs Authority announced that the criminal charges against fifteen of the twenty would be dropped , and referred to a review board . Their decision was reversed without explanation the following week . The trials were postponed to 14 June .

On 14 June the court acquitted nine medics and downgraded sentences against nine others . Ali Al @-@ Ekri was sentenced to five years imprisonment , another doctor to three years and seven were given from one month to one year . Two other doctors did not appeal their sentences of 15 years ' imprisonment , instead fleeing the country . On 1 October , the Court of Cassation , the country 's highest court , closed the first case involving twenty medics by upholding jail sentences on the remaining nine . Although the verdict is final , activist Mohamed al @-@ Maskati said that they could still be pardoned by the king .

= = = Misdemeanor trials = = =

Of the 28 health workers charged with misdemeanors , 23 were convicted and five acquitted on 21 November 2012 . Those convicted were sentenced to either serve three months in prison or pay 200 dinars (US \$ 530) . On 28 March 2013 , 21 of the 23 convictions were overturned by an appeals

court . The remaining two health workers had chosen not to appeal their sentences .

= = Torture of health workers = =

Many of the detained health workers stated that they were ill @-@ treated or tortured while in custody , leading Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International to call for independent investigations . Authorities reportedly forced detainees to stand for long periods , beat them with boards and rubber hoses , and deprived them of sleep in an effort to force confessions . In one case , a prisoner alleged that he had been forced to sign papers while blindfolded . Dr. Fatima Haji alleged that she was blindfolded and beaten in an effort to make her confess to faking the injuries to protesters during her Al Jazeera interview ; she later identified her interrogator as a distant relative of the king . Ibrahim al @-@ Demastani , head of the Bahrain Nurse 's Society , alleged that he was deliberately kicked and kneed by guards in his back at a spot where he had told them he had a prolapsed disc ; he was then denied medical care until he happened to meet a police officer to whom he had once taught first aid .

In an investigation by Human Rights Watch , Dr. Rula al @-@ Saffar stated that she had been given electric shocks in the hands and face , and threatened with rape . Al @-@ Ekri described being " constantly beaten by cables , hoses , and fists " , as well as being forced to stand for a full day . Dr. Ghassan Dhaif stated that he remained handcuffed and blindfolded for 21 days , and " was beaten every hour " . Dr. Basim Dhaif alleged that he was beaten in front of his children at his home at the time of his arrest , and eventually signed a false confession while in custody after authorities threatened to harm his family . Dr. Nader Dawani , a pediatrician , stated that he was forced to stand for seven days while being beaten by a female officer , and that other officers had tried to force a bottle into his anus .

The BICI verified that " many detainees were subjected to torture and other forms of physical and psychological abuse " . The report stated that medics were among the tortured .

= = Reactions = =

= = = Domestic = = =

Many Sunnis supporting the government of Bahrain stood against the doctors , accusing them of " deliberately worsening patient injuries for cameras " as well as " causing the deaths of protesters in order to discredit security personnel " . The BICI report said that some of the Shia health workers refused to treat Sunni patients and instead used their positions to support activists by promoting their causes .

= = = International = = =

The trials drew sustained international attention , with governments , medical professional organizations , and human rights organizations issuing statements on behalf of the health workers .

= = = = Governments = = = =

The U.S. State Department stated that it was " deeply disturbed " by the sentences and urged the Bahraini government " to abide by its commitment to transparent judicial proceedings , including a fair trial , access to attorneys , and verdicts based on credible evidence " . Following the conviction of nine medics on the retrials , the department said it was " deeply disappointed " that not all medics were acquitted and that " convictions appear to be based , at least in part , on the defendants ' criticisms of government actions and policies " . United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki @-@ moon also expressed concern at the legality of the military trials , calling on the Bahraini government " to ensure the application of due process and respect for international human rights norms " . A

spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted the office 's " severe concerns " over " serious due process irregularities " in the trials .

= = = = Health worker organizations = = = =

In a letter published in The Guardian , the British Medical Association expressed its " deep concern " over the twenty felony convictions , stating that " all the independent evidence points to a politically motivated trial which has demonstrated a disregard for proper judicial process and fundamental principles of medical neutrality . " The Australian Medical Association condemned the prosecutions , describing the defendants as " simply doing their jobs in places of conflict " . Doctors Without Borders criticized doctors at Salmaniya Hospital for joining the protests , but described the military response as " exponentially more damaging " to medical neutrality . In May 2011 , the group issued a statement on behalf of the health workers , urging that " doctors and nurses must be allowed to provide healthcare in line with medical ethics , without the fear of reprisal . " The World Health Organization expressed similar concerns , stating that " health @-@ care workers must be able to carry out their duty to treat injured people , regardless of their political affiliation , and even in times of conflict . "

The International Council of Nurses and World Medical Association issued a joint statement objecting to the closed military trial and stated its belief that " Doctors and nurses have an ethical duty to care for patients irrespective of their race , colour , creed and political affiliation . No health professional should be put on trial for looking after injured and dying people . " The U.K.-based Royal College of Nursing wrote to the Bahraini government on the health workers ' behalf , as well as sending them a direct video message of support in which General Secretary Peter Carter said , " All you were doing was your job . You were trying to care for people . " Despite ? past and ongoing ? human rights violations by the regime , the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland programme in Bahrain has been accredited by the Irish Medical Council , led by CEO Dr Caroline Spillane .

= = = = Human rights organizations = = = =

International human rights groups said the accusations against doctors were " reprisals for treating injured protesters " . Amnesty International described the charges as " ludicrous " and a " travesty of justice " . The organization called for a letter @-@ writing campaign on behalf of the convicted health workers , stating its belief " that the charges were politically motivated , that the proceedings did not meet international fair trial standards and that [the health workers] may be prisoners of conscience " . Following the conviction of nine medics in the retrials , Amnesty said it was a " dark day for justice " and named them prisoners of conscience .

Freedom House called the trials part of " a pattern of repression that belies any promises of reform and honest political discourse by the government or the ruling family " . Front Line Defenders also described the arrests as part of a " widespread pattern of repression " . Human Rights Watch protested the alleged torture of the medics , condemned what it called the " fundamental unfairness " of the trials , and urged the appeals court to overturn the " flawed convictions " . The Gulf Centre for Human Rights called on Bahrain 's king to " intervene personally and immediately " to have the charges against the health workers dropped . The U.S.-based Physicians for Human Rights also called for the health workers ' immediate release .