

Middle East Studies Association of North America, Inc.

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March 18, 1997

His Highness Shaikh 'Isa ibn Salman al-Khalifa
The Emir of Bahrain
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Your Highness:

The Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF MENA) of the Middle East Studies Association is writing to express its deep concern and dismay at the continued violations on the part of the Bahraini Government of the rights of the academic communities of the country. The occasion for this letter is the summary dismissal of Prof. Zahra Isa Al-Zeera, assistant professor of Education in the Education Department of Bahrain University, for expressing views that allegedly threaten the security of the state. This case is unfortunately only one example of a whole series of violations and excesses committed against the academic community of Bahrain and against its civilian population, a policy which seems to have been pursued with vigor since 1995.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2600 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The Association publishes the respected *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

The situation of deteriorating human rights and academic freedoms in Bahrain is deplorable, especially in view of the outstanding legacy of achievements and academic excellence which the country has always enjoyed in the past. As the pioneer of education (for both males and females) in the Gulf region, with a significant stratum of professionals and academics influencing its cultural and literary life, it is a matter of very great regret that there have been so many reports of limitations on academic freedom. Of particular concern in this context are issues which relate to what seems to be a general policy of repressing academic freedoms, blocking and reducing opportunities for education, and the use of coercive, often excessive, measures against teachers and students.

Our main immediate concern is the military atmosphere that has pervaded the university for the last eighteen months. The administration, faculty and students seem to have become pawns in a process under which the community has been polarized into various sectarian and power alliances, directly and indirectly affecting the educational atmosphere. Through various shakeups and

tremors the University personnel has been weeded out, and all those holding dissenting opinions have been demoted, intimidated, or dismissed. While some high ranking officers have found it intolerable to be forced to implement these policies and have resigned, others have been suspended (such as Sheikh Abdul-Latif Al-Mahmoud, 1992-95 and Munira Fakhro, 1995-present), or dismissed as in the recent case of Dr. Al-Zeera.

In this later case, Dr. Al-Zeera was summoned on January 20, 1997 by the President of the University when she was accused of expressing her views on the situation in Bahrain, views considered to be a threat to state security, and she was ordered to resign. When Dr. Al-Zeera resisted the order she was given the choice of forcible dismissal or referral to the Intelligence Department, i.e. arrest and detention. Such cases have created an environment of terror in academic circles, promoting self censorship and acquiescence, and subsequently an unhealthy academic setting. It is significant to note that these acts contravene two articles of the Bahraini Constitution, Article 7(d) which proclaims the inviolability of educational institutions and Article 23 which provides for the "freedom of speech and scientific research". Furthermore, they also violate Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which endorses the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

Another major academic abuse has been the policy of selective admission to the University. As stated in the US State Department Report on Bahrain for 1996, "...the Government (of Bahrain) introduced a new university admissions policy that appears to favor Sunnis and others who pose no question of loyalty and security, rather than focusing only on professional experience and academic qualifications". This has been confirmed by victims of the policy, which seems to have been carried out by an administration "cleansed" to implement entirely non-academic criteria. At least sixteen university students have been dismissed in the middle of this academic year in conjunction with this policy. All of these male students are in advanced degree programs of engineering and sciences, and they are all Shiis. This policy violates Article 18 of the Bahraini Constitution which calls for "prohibition of discrimination based on religion or belief" as well as the basic human right of equal treatment for all citizens.

The case of a female University student, Sakina Salman, 24 years , mother of a child and in her last year of a science degree major, deserves special note. This student has been dismissed from the University and arrested early this January. So far she has been denied visits from her family and given no legal assistance, although there have been no formal charges against her and no explanation for her arrest. She remains in custody and her case brings forth great concern to her rights and condition, a situation that should be rectified immediately. The general intellectual and academic atmosphere outside the University is not much better.

Between October and December 1996 a wave of dismissals affected at least 24 high school teachers and 60 students. Under the pretext of state security and rooting out agitators, young people are deprived of their education. This will only aggravate the situation, quite apart from the effect of exacerbating frustration and contravening basic human rights. Such collective punishment is illegal, and violates Bahrainis' legitimate and internationally recognized rights to access to

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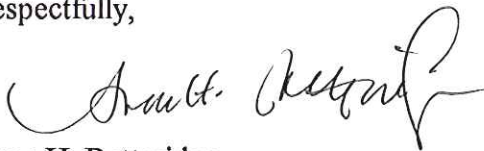
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education. It also contradicts due process when punishment is meted out without legal causes and proofs.

A similar disregard for the basic rights of citizens to free thought and expression is embodied in the case of the poet and author Ali Hassan Yousif. On February 16, 1997 he was arrested following his dismissal from his post in the Ministry of Information. His book "Isharat," which had previously been approved by the above ministry, was belatedly considered a threat to state security. He was accused of alluding in his book to the absence of freedom of thought and expression in Bahrain. As a result, the book was withdrawn, his home ransacked, his family terrorized and he has been interned.

We respectfully request that these abuses of the freedom of academic and intellectual rights of Bahrainis be addressed and rectified immediately. Dr. Al-Zeera's unjustified and illegal dismissal should be overturned and the military atmosphere lifted from the university and its community of administrators, faculty and students. It is a basic human right to propagate and seek education free from coercion and fear of reprisals. Furthermore, we request that the cases of Sakina Salman and Ali Hassan Yousif be subject to due process and that they have access to their families and lawyers. We also request that all students dismissed from the University and the high schools should be reinstated and their right to education guaranteed.

Respectfully,



Anne H. Betteridge
Executive Director

cc: His Excellency Shaikh Muhammad ibn Khalifa al-Khalifa, Prime Minister
Ambassador Dr. Muhammed Abdel-Ghaffar, Ambassador to the United States
Madelene Albright, United States Secretary of State
Malcolm Rifkind, Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom