

COMMENTARY

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Bahrain Detains Soccer Teams and Scores of Players and Athletes

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Bahrain has detained a soccer team as well as scores of other players and athletes since security forces squashed a popular uprising almost three years ago, according to human rights activists, journalists and officials.

In one of the latest rounds of detentions, authorities last month arrested three soccer and two handball players of Al Ittifaq Maqaba, a sports club in Diraz, a hot spot of continued protest against the government, the sources said. They said the athletes – soccer players Bahr Mohammed Jawad, Hassan Abdullah Marhoum, Qassem Habib Abdullah and handball players Ahmed Abdel Jalil and Ibrahim Juma'a – were lifted from their beds in a late night raid on 5 December. They said the athletes were among ten people taken away by security forces on suspicion of having participated in an illegal gathering.

A sixth athlete, Ahmed Fallah, a goalkeeper for Al Budaiya FC in the coastal town of Budaiya, which like its neighbour Diraz, remains a hot bed of anti-government sentiment, was detained around the same time as the others but has since been released.

The detained athletes joined an estimated 50 sports people being held in prison since the 2011 uprising during which 150 athletes and sports officials, including three national soccer team players, were arrested or fired from their jobs. Most of the 150 were quickly released and reinstated. Two national team players, who were at the time publicly denounced on television as spies and traitors, arrested and, according to them, tortured, now play for local clubs but were barred from rejoining the national squad.

Human rights activists and journalists charge that athletes are being targeted by Bahrain's minority Sunni Muslim government because of their Shiite backgrounds and their participation in protests demanding equal rights for the Gulf Island's majority Shiite population. Peaceful protests in 2011 at times turned violent as a result of the government's brutal crackdown and its portrayal of the uprising as sectarian rather than political.

"One look at the list of detained athletes reveals the sectarian nature of this revenge. They all belong to the majority Shiite community that is demanding democracy," said Faisal Hayyat, a sports journalist and activist.

The Bahraini government contends that it is battling Iranian-inspired terrorism rather than a wave of protests fuelled by government policies. Security forces announced in the waning days of 2013 that they had defused a car bomb in Manama; captured a speed boat that was smuggling out 13 fugitives; foiled an attempt to smuggle into Bahrain Iranian and Syrian arms, ammunitions and explosives; and seized weapons stored in three different locations on the island.

It is unclear if the detained athletes had participated in ongoing protests, had relatives who had taken part, or whether their arrests were arbitrary. Amnesty International noted in a report last month that Bahrain's juvenile law had been amended to hold responsible the parents of anyone under the age of 15 who takes part in a demonstration, public gathering or sit-in. Under the amended law, parents initially would receive a written warning from the interior ministry. If a second offence is recorded within six months of the warning, a child's father could face jail, a fine or both.

Bahrain Chief of Public Security Tarik Al Hassan has asserted that on average 90 per cent of all legal protests turn violent.

Faisal Hayyat said most soccer players refrained from political activity because they were financially dependent on the sport.

The crackdown three years ago pushed protests out of the capital Manama into local neighbourhoods whose perimeters are frequently patrolled by machine-gun mounted, armoured police vehicles. Graffiti on walls reflect the public mood. Slogans include: 'Down with King Hamad', 'Martyrdom is our habit', 'Our goal is toppling the regime', 'Death to the Saudis' and 'We bow only in front of God'. A local resident said: "This will never end. It's gone too far. Reform is the only way out."

An independent fact-finding commission made up of international rights lawyers that was endorsed by the Bahrain government concluded in November 2011 that those detained during the uprising had suffered systematic abuse. The commission said however that abuse was not policy,

but that five people had been tortured to death and other detainees had suffered electric shocks and beatings with rubber hoses and wires.

Amnesty International in its report asserted that children in Bahrain were being routinely detained, ill-treated and tortured. It said that scores of children arrested on suspicion of participating in anti-government protests – including some as young as 13 – had been blindfolded, beaten and tortured. Others, the group said, were threatened with rape in order to extract forced confessions. Amnesty said that at least 110 youngsters aged 16 to 18 were being held at the Dry Dock Prison, an adult penitentiary on Al Muharraq Island, pending investigation or trial.

Hayyat's picture was flashed on the screen of the television broadcast during which national soccer star Alaa Hubail and other athletes, including his brother Mohammed, were denounced. Hayyat was arrested three days later, imprisoned for 84 days, and according to his own testimony, tortured.

In a telephone call to the broadcast Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa, head of Bahrain's Supreme Council for Youth and Sport as well as its Olympic Committee and fourth son of King Hamad, congratulated the show for its denunciation of the players. "Well done, guys. Today, we at the Organization of Sports and Youth have nothing to do with politics and are concerned with sports and brotherly competition... People have involved themselves in matters and have lost the love of their fans... Anyone who called for the fall of the regime, may a wall fall on his head. Whether he is an athlete, socialite or politician — whatever he is — he will be held accountable. Today is judgment day. . . Bahrain is an island and there is nowhere to escape," Sheikh Nasser said.

A day after the broadcast, masked state security police men arrived at the national soccer team's training ground. Alaa and Mohammed were taken to what Alaa described to ESPN as an unknown place. "They put me in the room for beatings. One of the people who hit me said: 'I'm going to break your legs.' They knew who we were. There was a special room for the torture."

His words were echoed in ESPN interviews by table tennis champion Anwar al-Makki and Faisal Hayyat. "They would bring an electric cable, blindfold the person and put them on the floor," Makki said. "I was blindfolded. I couldn't see what was happening. He put a cable in my hand and said: Now I'll turn the electricity on."

Among those detained since is the whole squad of the Al-Ekar Youth Centre in the village of Al-Ekar. The 17-member team was arrested in October 2012 in a security operation following a bombing in which a police officer was killed. Opposition groups said the arrests had been arbitrary.

Other detained athletes, according to the journalists and activists, include Al Ahli and national soccer youth team players Ahmed Hassan Abdul Wahab, Younis Hader and Jaffar Al Asfoor; national youth handball team player Ali Almolani; beach volleyball midfielder Ridha Abdul Hussain; and Bahrain gymnastics champion Hussein Abdul Ghani.

The journalists and activists said that Abdul Wahab was sentenced to five years in prison for attacking a security patrol in Nuwaidrat. Younis Hader was arrested a year ago when he sought to renew his passport while Jaffar Al Asfoor was picked up while swimming. Hussein Abdul Ghani was sent to jail for burning a police car and Ali Almolani was sentenced to three years by a national security court for his role in anti-government protests in a university. Abdul Hussain was imprisoned for four years on charges of burning tires and organizing illegal protests. Al Ittihad handball players Murtadha Salah Darwish, and Baqir AlShabani were jailed for three years and Jassim Ramadan to eight years for participation in protests in Bahrain's financial district.

Bahrain Jiu-jitsu champion Mohammed Mirza was sentenced to several years in prison on charges of having participated in the kidnapping of a policemen. Journalists and human rights activists asserted that Mirza had signed his confession after being tortured. Race driver Hamad al-Fahd was arrested during the uprising and sentenced by a military court to life in prison.

Two dozen fans of Al Nejme SC were arrested earlier this year when they responded to pro-government chanting during a match with a popular Shiite phrase: "Praise God, his messenger Prophet Mohammed and the prophet's descendants."

Soccer officials and critics of the government say Bahraini soccer and other sports suffer from a lack of planning as a result of politicization. "There are no sports since the uprising. Matches serve as PR to show that Bahrain is back to normal," Hayyat said. "We have lost qualified managers. As a result, soccer suffers," added a soccer official.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2014/01/bahrain-detains-soccer-teams-and-scores.html>

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