



DEMOCRACY
COALITION
PROJECT



The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
US Department of State
2201 C Street
Washington, D.C. 20522

May 12, 2011

Re: Bahrain and Yemen at the Human Rights Council

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We welcome the strong outcome of the April 29 Special Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. The resolution's call for an investigation of the brutality used to silence peaceful dissent sends an important message that the violent suppression of pro-democracy movements will not be tolerated and that perpetrators of human rights abuses will be held accountable. We commend the United States for its leadership in obtaining such a robust HRC response to this crisis.

We urge the United States, as a matter of high priority, to show the same leadership in calling on the HRC to focus on the extremely serious human rights situations in Bahrain and Yemen. State security forces in these countries responded to pro-democracy protests with unlawful use of force and broad repression in a manner similar to that of the Syrian government. Moreover, in Bahrain, the government is pursuing a policy of punitive retribution against thousands of Bahrainis solely because they supported the pro-democracy protests there.

Until the United States made its call for a Special Session on Syria, member states of the HRC had agreed on the need to respond to the crises in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, and were debating what the most appropriate format to do so would be. The holding of the Syria Special Session should not undermine the efforts already made to address the other situations, and is certainly no justification for ignoring the situations in Yemen and Bahrain.

Effective US diplomacy was essential in obtaining recent HRC actions on Syria, as well as on Libya and Iran. And US engagement has strengthened the HRC in many ways. To solidify and build on these gains, it is crucial to demonstrate that the HRC can consistently and uniformly uphold international human rights law, even when the country responsible for serious human rights violations is an ally of the United States. Otherwise, the emerging success in building strong cross-regional coalitions in the HRC will founder on charges of selectivity and politicization.

The already worrisome human rights situation in Yemen has dramatically deteriorated into a full-fledged crisis that demands urgent HRC attention. Since daily demonstrations began in mid-February in opposition to the 32-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, state security forces and pro-government assailants acting with impunity have killed well over a 100 people during largely peaceful protests. Hundreds of protesters have been injured while others have been arbitrarily arrested and detained. As negotiations for President Saleh to leave office stall, the violent crackdown on protests has intensified.

In Bahrain in mid-March, state security forces (after the entry into the country of troops from Saudi Arabia) brutally quashed the largely peaceful protests for democratic reforms that had begun a month earlier, shooting to death a score of people. Since then, the government has conducted a campaign of repression apparently intended to punish all manner of pro-democracy activism, a situation that the US government has yet to unequivocally condemn in its public statements.

More than 600 Bahrainis -- activists, opposition party leaders, medical personnel, journalists and bloggers -- have been arbitrarily detained and in many cases feared to have been forcibly disappeared since the protests were crushed.

Since early April, at least four detainees have died in custody, apparently from torture or medical neglect, according to Human Rights Watch. An April 2011 report by Physicians for Human Rights documents an all-out assault on healthcare workers and serious abuses against patients and detainees, including torture, beatings, and threats of rape and execution. The government of Bahrain seems to use attacks on the medical profession as a way to intensify its pressure against the protest movement by raising the risks to those injured and to shield evidence of government attacks from public view.

On April 28, a special military court established after Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa declared martial law, sentenced four civilians to death and three others to life in prison after a trial that did not meet international fair trial standards. On May 8, the special court charged 14 activists and 7 more in absentia, with seeking to "topple the regime forcibly in collaboration with a terrorist organization working for a foreign country." According to Human Rights Watch, at least one of the defendants, a prominent human rights and political activist, appeared to have been badly beaten and possibly tortured while in detention. Bahraini officials say that over 400 people currently face trial in military courts. Meanwhile their whereabouts and well-being remain unknown to their families and they have had no access to lawyers, in some cases more than six weeks after their arrest.

Authorities have begun to televise "confessions" that appear to have been coerced by torture. On the basis of one such "confession," the authorities recently arrested two former parliamentarians. The government has dissolved the one secular opposition party that brought together Sunni and Shia -- the National Democratic Action Society -- and forced out the editor of the one independent newspaper in the country.

You have notably stated that "violence is not and cannot be the answer" to popular demands for democracy and dignity in Bahrain and Yemen. US leadership on these country situations at the HRC will make sure that this message is heard by the Bahraini and Yemeni governments. We believe a failure to lead will badly undermine the hard-fought efforts of the United States to make the HRC an effective international body for securing better human rights protections for people around the world.

Decisive action by the Human Rights Council will reinforce this vital message and make clear that it is the view of the international community as a whole. Such action will also further US efforts to demonstrate that the HRC can be an effective forum for addressing serious human rights abuses in real time.

We strongly urge the US government to signal its clear support for efforts at the Human Rights Council to convene special sessions on Bahrain and Yemen and to establish mechanisms to investigate human rights violations in those countries, and hold perpetrators of serious abuses to account.

Sincerely,

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