

Bahraini Human Rights Activist at Risk

Disheartening news from Bahrain: while the renowned human rights activist Maryam al-Khawaja has been released from custody, she is forbidden from leaving the country in the run up to her trial. The first hearings are scheduled to take place on 1 October before the High Criminal Court – a bad sign, since this court is generally where the most serious criminal allegations are handled. The accused, a Danish citizen of Bahraini background, was arrested on 30th August as she entered the country to visit her father Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, who is also a human rights activist and who has been on hunger strike since August. There are reasons to fear that at the hands of the state Maryam will be subject to the same harsh treatment as her father. One of the key organizers of the 2011 Bahrain spring, he was sentenced to life imprisonment on purported terrorism grounds. When will this catch-all charge, hauled out by states all around the world to criminalize unwanted protest movements, finally be abolished? Every criminal code in the world already has provisions on bodily harm and murder that can be used in cases of real criminal activity.

Anyone who meets Maryam cannot help but be impressed by her. She is one these young, global activists, ever online, ever tweeting, ever ready to take action and therefore ever dependable. This was clear when we met to discuss our legal action against the export of surveillance software from Germany and Britain to Bahrain and held a joint press conference in Berlin in January 2013. As we spoke over lunch of her latest visit to Bahrain, I admired her courage. Though it was obvious that her movements were being monitored, the people on the street recognized her and greeted her warmly. But I worried for her then – and now even more so, given her impending trial.

Western states move cautiously, unwilling to jeopardize relations with Bahrain, one of Saudi Arabia's closest allies. Oil wealth and the state's geostrategic location in the Middle East, even before the advance of ISIS, are constant considerations. The Danish state practices "quiet diplomacy", an all too common synonym for protest done for the sake of appearances but which is designed to be essentially toothless. True, Denmark is a small country and might not be able to exert much pressure on the oil giant states. But what about the Nobel Peace Prize winning European Union? EU officials and EU governments are constantly telling us that the EU is working to protect human rights and human rights defenders around the world. In January 2012 a German-Danish initiative prompted the European Council to reaffirm its commitment to work in this area, promising to throw its full weight behind activists working for freedom and democracy. Its full weight? A young Danish woman, internationally recognized as a human rights defender, is detained for almost three weeks and now faces an unjust trial and draconian punishment in a prison cell not far from the one where her father languishes. It would be nice if the diplomats – practicing a diplomacy either quiet or loud – could for once put geographic and economic interests to one side and ensure that Maryam does not meet this fate.