



## Bahrain: Reinstate Ousted Students, Faculty <sup>[1]</sup>

### Hundreds Dismissed for Peaceful Dissent

September 24, 2011

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(New York) – Universities in [Bahrain](#) <sup>[4]</sup> should immediately reinstate all students, faculty, and staff who were dismissed solely for expressing opinions critical of the government and ruling family or attending overwhelmingly peaceful anti-government demonstrations in February and March of this year, Human Rights Watch said today. Human Rights Watch also called on the University of Bahrain to stop requiring students to sign oaths of loyalty to the ruling Al Khalifa family and the government as a condition for enrollment.

The University of Bahrain, the country's largest higher education institution, dismissed at least 100 faculty and staff between April and August, in most cases for attending anti-government demonstrations or posting links on social media, Human Rights Watch said. Since May, university staff and, in some cases, Education Ministry officials or police have interrogated hundreds of students, and more than 500 were suspended for a semester or expelled. The new semester begins September 25, 2011.

"Bahraini authorities have punished students and professors – along with thousands of other Bahrainis – simply for exercising their right to criticize the government," said [Joe Stork](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Attacking students and professors who dare to dissent flagrantly violates their right to freedom of opinion and expression."

In mid-May, masked security forces conducted pre-dawn arrest raids on the homes of a number of university faculty, holding them for several hours before releasing them without charge. Detained faculty members told Human Rights Watch that Interior Ministry interrogators appeared to have transcripts of their earlier interrogations by a university disciplinary committee. In all, security forces detained and questioned at least 15 professors from three universities, and held one in custody for more than four months.

One professor, who does not consider himself politically active, said, "One day, the Crown Prince appeared on TV and seemed to welcome the opposition marches. It was like the green light to silent people, like me, to participate without any expected punishment from the government. As a result, I took part in a march at the university organized by some students. Unfortunately I was wrong and the whole story was like a trap." University administrators accused him of participating in an illegal march inside the university campus, chanting anti-government slogans, abusing the symbols of the Kingdom of Bahrain, and breaching his duties. They fired him in August.

On August 27, government and university officials announced that 470 expelled students would be allowed to return, but would have to retake the spring semester. At least 60 students at the University of Bahrain and Bahrain Polytechnic remain expelled and the permanent records of hundreds of others are marred by their suspension for unspecified "disciplinary" reasons. Both universities are public institutions.

More than 30 students and 20 professors who spoke with Human Rights Watch said that university students, faculty, and staff continue to face harassment, intimidation, and dismissal or loss of scholarships in retaliation for their support of pro-democracy public demonstrations.

Beginning in May, the University of Bahrain required all students to sign loyalty oaths to the government and ruling family as a condition of their continued enrollment. The pledge states that the signer will extend “complete loyalty to the leadership of the Kingdom of Bahrain, represented by His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa” and obliges students “not to organize or participate in any activity within the campus or outside that is irrelevant to student and academic affairs and authorized research.”

University of Bahrain students who have now been reinstated told Human Rights Watch that they fear they will be required to sign a similar pledge before resuming their studies on September 25.

Punishment of students and professors for exercising their right to free expression and assembly violates international and Bahraini law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Bahrain ratified in 2006, guarantees freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Bahrain’s Law No. 27 of 2005 on education calls for “developing awareness of principles of human rights” and “the right of free expression” in education, acknowledging the importance of free expression standards to academic freedom.

“Punishing dissenting comments and ideas badly undermines academic freedom, which is all about the right to free expression and freedom of opinion,” Stork said. “Bahraini universities should reinstate all professors and students dismissed for so-called crimes of expression immediately, and rescind all use of political loyalty oaths.”

Dismissed students and professors told Human Rights Watch that they had informed the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which is investigating human rights violations in connection with the political unrest in the country, about their cases. One former architecture student at the University of Bahrain said, “We have the right to education and the right to express our opinion and the freedom of speech. We will not give up either of these rights for the other. We want both.”

### **Professors Arrested, Beaten, Dismissed**

Nineteen professors at the University of Bahrain told Human Rights Watch that they were fired solely for exercising their right to peaceful expression. The university began investigating the professors in April and May, first suspending them with reduced pay and then dismissing them permanently in August. In June, they said, they received letters or phone calls from the university president, Ibrahim Janahi, summoning them to hearings before a university investigative or disciplinary committee for offenses such as “forwarding emails defaming Bahrain and its system to a third party,” visiting the demonstration at the Pearl Roundabout, and “criticizing the government in front of non-Bahraini professors.” Some professors were also accused of missing lectures during the demonstrations, an allegation they contested.

Police interrogated at least some University of Bahrain professors using information gained from the university. One professor described how police seized him from his home in a series of pre-dawn raids in May in which they also detained seven of his university colleagues. Masked men with shotguns showed up at his house in the middle of the night, blindfolded and handcuffed him, and took him away in a van. After riding around for several hours, he said, he was taken to a small room at the Interior Ministry and interrogated

but not physically mistreated, though interrogators slapped two of his colleagues. His questioners had notes from his earlier interrogation at the university, he said, repeating the same questions about attending opposition demonstrations and visiting the Pearl Roundabout. The professors were released after the police interrogation without being charged.

A professor at another university told Human Rights Watch that security officers detained him and 10 colleagues on suspicion that they attended the protest at the Pearl Roundabout, and beat them in custody. On May 17, Interior Ministry officials went to the university and demanded that the 11 professors report to a police station, where they were blindfolded and interrogated. "After each question and answer we [would] get a slap on the face or a punch in the back or stomach along with the insults," the professor said. Police released the group after four hours saying they "had nothing" to charge the professors with.

Police burst into the house of Dr. Masaud Jahroomi, chair of the engineering department at Ahlia University, in the middle of the night on April 14, and arrested him. Authorities held Jahroomi incommunicado for a month before he was able to contact his family, according to his wife. He was released on bail four months later, on September 12, and faces a criminal court trial on September 27 for "attending an illegal gathering."

Tony Mitchell, an Australian who taught at Bahrain Polytechnic, told Human Rights Watch that the university dismissed him after he posted photographs of the Pearl Roundabout demonstrations and critical comments on Facebook and YouTube. He told Human Rights Watch that after an April 6 decree placed the Polytechnic directly under the Education Ministry instead of the Economic Development Board, the head of the university informed the faculty that Bahrain Polytechnic would have to be seen as supporting the government. Shortly afterward, an investigative committee of university and government officials began interrogating students and professors.

While many of the dismissed students have reportedly been readmitted, none of the 20 dismissed professors have been offered their jobs back.

### **Students Suspended, Expelled for Pro-Democracy Expression**

Since April, university authorities have suspended or expelled at least 500 students for allegedly taking part in or voicing support for anti-government protests in February and March. Of the students subjected to disciplinary action, more than 400 were enrolled in the University of Bahrain and more than 60 in Bahrain Polytechnic.

Twenty-nine students at three universities told Human Rights Watch that they were suspended or expelled simply for attending demonstrations at the Pearl Roundabout or posting statements critical of the government on Facebook or Twitter. The students told Human Rights Watch that university officials used photos and remarks from Facebook pages to identify those who participated in protests. Investigative committees questioned them for between 20 minutes and an hour, they said, and did not give them a meaningful opportunity to challenge the expulsion or suspension decisions.

University of Bahrain officials announced on April 19 that they had expelled 120 students for allegedly participating in a March 13 demonstration at the university, though later announcements indicated that many more students were expelled. That demonstration degenerated into clashes between pro- and anti-government demonstrators that caused [injuries](#) [6] and some destruction of university property. Janahi, the university president, said that all students involved in "sabotage, intimidation, and attacks" would be "held

accountable.” As far as Human Rights Watch is aware, no pro-government demonstrators were penalized for involvement in the incident.

Statements by university officials indicated that students would be punished for involvement in violent activities, but the students who spoke with Human Rights Watch said that they were expelled for non-violent offenses. An official expulsion letter from the university reviewed by Human Rights Watch said that the student was expelled for “the planned abstention from attending lectures,” interfering with the ability to study, and participating in demonstrations “without obtaining prior authorization from the competent authorities at the university.” Some students who were arrested said that charges against them were dropped or they were released on bail but that they were threatened with re-arrest if they continued their opposition activities. Of the more than 400 expelled students, only five remain in detention on charges of committing violent acts.

The University of Bahrain withheld students’ transcripts for months, releasing them only in August, students told Human Rights Watch. Human Rights Watch has seen a memo from university administrators instructing professors not to write letters of recommendation for suspended students, effectively preventing them from applying to other universities. When university officials finally released academic transcripts to students who had been expelled, they were marked “disciplinary dismissal.”

Bahrain Polytechnic students told Human Rights Watch that university administrators had expelled or suspended 63 students as of mid-June for “participating in unlicensed gatherings and marches, carrying slogans offensive to political leaders, [and] urging the downfall of the regime,” according to the expulsion letter many of the students received.

At Bahrain Polytechnic, an investigative panel including two university administrators and two Education Ministry officials summoned dozens of students for questioning and interrogated them about their statements on social media websites. Several students told Human Rights Watch that the investigators printed out screen shots from their Facebook pages as evidence that the students had attended anti-government rallies. These students also said they had no meaningful opportunity to challenge the allegations.

Throughout the week of June 12, Polytechnic officials called many of the students who had been questioned into the administration building, handed them expulsion letters, and directed security to escort them from campus. The letter cited Law No. 27 of 2005, which calls on educational institutions to “instill the spirit of citizenship and loyalty to the homeland and the king,” as a basis for the expulsions. According to the same law, however, universities should develop “the individual’s ability to think critically [and] the right of free expression.”

Following an official announcement that 31 of the expelled students would be reinstated, at least 27 Polytechnic students received text messages from the registrar, Catherine Walker, on September 17 replacing their expulsions with one-semester suspensions “following an external review of [their] dismissal from Bahrain Polytechnic.” In subsequent meetings, Walker informed the students that they will be required to repeat the spring 2011 semester.

Five Polytechnic students who did not receive this text message were instead called into al-Hurra police station on September 12, where they faced another round of interrogation. The Bahrain Center for Human Rights said their lawyers were not permitted to accompany them.

Some students who played no role in the demonstrations nevertheless suffered repercussions. One 19-year-old journalism student told Human Rights Watch that she withdrew from the University of Bahrain because she felt unsafe on campus amid the frequent personal inspections and heavy police presence. Security “treat[ed] students badly, yelling at them,” she said, and female guards physically searched female students in front of male security guards. Another student described threatening posters on campus with statements such as, “God will not forgive what happened.”

### **Students Arrested, Mistreated, Tried in Special Military Courts**

At least six University of Bahrain students arrested in March and April remain in detention facing charges in a special military court, the Court of National Safety. Ali al-Mowlani was sentenced on May 12 to three years in prison for “attending an illegal gathering,” while five others await trial for charges relating to the clashes at the University of Bahrain. According to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, the families of the students alleged that they were beaten and mistreated in custody.

Other students were arrested and released, sometimes after providing testimony to school officials. One Polytechnic student told Human Rights Watch that university officials directed him and 13 other students to the office of the military prosecutor for further interrogation about possible criminal charges. After an interview with a prosecutor, the student said he was blindfolded and transferred to the West Riffa detention center, where security officers bound him, beat him with a rubber hose until he could not stand, and threatened to rape him and his female relatives.

Officials held this student for 40 days on charges of “gathering in the Pearl Roundabout” and “inciting hatred against the regime.” He was held with approximately 75 other prisoners in a space built for 30, he said, so many slept on the floor. He was released on July 1.

A 21-year-old mass communications student at the University of Bahrain told Human Rights Watch that she was arrested shortly after officials expelled her for participating in demonstrations at the university and the Pearl Roundabout. University authorities summoned her before an investigative panel on May 5 and questioned her about her participation in the protests. The panel used pictures from her friends’ Facebook accounts that officials claimed incriminated her as participating in the protests. They expelled her three days later, though her expulsion was later commuted to a one-semester suspension. The day after she was expelled, masked security officers came to her home in the middle of the night and took her to a government office. Security officials interrogated her, then released her several hours later without charge.

### **Loyalty Pledges**

Five students told Human Rights Watch that the University of Bahrain required all students to sign a loyalty oath before they were allowed to re-enroll in classes after the university re-opened its doors on May 15. The pledge, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, stated that the signer pledged his or her “complete loyalty to the leadership of the Kingdom of Bahrain, represented by His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.”

The pledge also binds students “not to organize or participate in any activity within the campus or outside that is irrelevant to student and academic affairs and authorized research.”

The document, which students were not permitted to keep but which Human Rights Watch has seen, stated that failure to sign was

tantamount to withdrawing from the university. Students had to acknowledge that “any act” contrary to “complete loyalty” could result in expulsion. Human Rights Watch does not know whether any enrolled students refused to sign the pledge.

### **Scholarships Revoked**

Human Rights Watch spoke with three students who lost government-funded scholarships to attend universities outside of Bahrain after they posted pro-democracy or anti-government statements and links on social media accounts. They said they lost their scholarships solely because of anti-government statements they made online, and prior to attending any demonstrations.

One student, who had posted statements critical of the government on Facebook and Twitter, told Human Rights Watch that she found out her scholarship had been revoked when her bank informed her that her home university in Bahrain had attempted to remove money from her account. Several days later, she received an email from her university in Bahrain cancelling her scholarship. University officials did not respond to her requests for more information, she said. The student said the university did not inform her of any allegations against her, give her a chance to respond, or provide any procedure for appealing the decision.

Several students told Human Rights Watch that university officials demanded that they return from abroad and contacted their families in Bahrain to ask about their whereabouts. “I am more worried about my family, that they may get hurt because of me,” one student said.

**Source URL:** <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/24/bahrain-reinstate-ousted-students-faculty>

### **Links:**

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[2] <http://twitter.com/share?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrw.org%2Fnews%2F2011%2F09%2F24%2Fbahrain-reinstate-ousted-students-faculty&count=horizontal&via=&text=Bahrain%3A%20Reinstate%20Ousted%20Students%2C%20Faculty&counturl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrw.org%2Fnews%2F2011%2F09%2F24%2Fbahrain-reinstate-ousted-students-faculty>

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[4] <http://www.hrw.org/middle-eastn-africa/bahrain>

[5] <http://www.hrw.org/bios/joe-stork>

[6] <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/17/bahrain-injured-people-denied-medical-care>

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