

Mohammed Ben Sulayem, President  
Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA)  
8, Place de la Concorde  
75008 Paris  
France

28/02/2023

Dear Mohammed Ben Sulayem,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to draw your attention to the case of detained Bahraini-Danish, [award-winning](#), human rights defender **Abdulahdi al-Khawaja**. In light of the approaching date of the Formula 1 (F1) Grand Prix in Bahrain, we deem it necessary to inform you about the country's inhumane treatment of human rights defenders and the worrying situation of Mr. Al-Khawaja.

Since the violent crackdown on the peaceful pro-democracy protests in 2011, the Kingdom of Bahrain has increasingly [turned](#) into a police state where activists and civil society actors can no longer freely voice their opinions. It is in the wake of these protests that Mr. Al-Khawaja was [arrested](#) and sentenced to life in prison on baseless terrorism-related charges and for allegedly receiving funding from foreign terrorist groups. These charges were proven to be unfounded, since the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) [ruled out](#) in 2011 any foreign involvement in the pro-democracy protests. Similarly, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, [concluded](#) in 2012 that Mr. Al-Khawaja's arrest was arbitrary, as it resulted from him exercising his rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

Since 2011, Mr. Al-Khawaja [remains imprisoned](#) at Jau Prison. Throughout his incarceration, he has been subjected to various forms of abuse. These include torture, beatings, verbal abuse, threats of sexual assault and long periods of solitary confinement. The severe physical torture he suffered forced him to undergo medical surgery multiple times and to experience acute chronic pain, especially in his back and head. He has protested his arbitrary detention conditions and other forms of reprisals by conducting six [hunger strikes](#), which have taken a serious toll on his health. Mr. Al-Khawaja is currently being [denied](#) adequate medical attention, which causes him to [suffer](#) from severe medical complications caused by the mistreatment in detention. Mr. Al-Khawaja is also [banned](#) from receiving in-person visits from his family.

Mr. Al-Khawaja is just one among the many detained [political prisoners](#) in Bahrain. In this context, we consider the hosting of such a prestigious international competition like the F1 Grand Prix in a country where individuals are jailed for expressing their opinions to be highly controversial.

The Bahraini Government continues to attach great importance to the Bahrain Grand Prix and to link it with its progressive discourse and façade reforms. In this regard, the government has [proved](#) it will resort to any measures, including crackdowns on freedom of expression through [arbitrary arrests](#), torture and violence that amounts to [murder](#) against critics, to maintain its international prestige. We underline the fact that [‘sports washing’](#) has been one of the Bahraini government’s most significant tool used in an almost two-decade strategy to cover up the political and human rights situation in the country, and Formula 1 Grand Prix has been an immense help for them in improving their tarnished image by gaining more positive attention, especially in the West.

It is with profound disappointment that we realize the FIA only accepts the portrayal of the political situation in the country provided by Bahraini authorities, fending off the countless [independent evaluations](#) presenting the actual political realities of Bahrain. Moreover, the ‘no politics’ policy introduced by the revisions made to the International Sporting Code, is nothing but a clampdown on the freedom of expression of drivers. Such a decision equals turning a blind eye on the [dire situation](#) of human rights in Bahrain.

While the FIA was swift in condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, resulting in Russia’s contract with F1 being withdrawn, it is rather startling to witness FIA’s failure to condemn human rights violations in Bahrain and the maintaining of the long-lasting contract between F1 and the country.

We finally want to emphasize the fact that business relationships, especially in countries with poor human rights records, should be conducted following the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and [OECD Due Diligence Guidelines](#). This is also reinforced by the [2016 UN Human Rights Council Resolution](#), calling upon businesses to be aware of the important role they play in protecting civic freedoms and to act accordingly.

As the 2023 Bahrain Grand Prix will take place shortly, we suggest F1 and the FIA to take immediate action to address the degrading human rights situation in Bahrain and Mr. Al-Khawaja’s case by:

- Use your leverage to conditionalize existing and future business relations with Bahrain’s companies and institutions upon the immediate and unconditional release of Abdulhadi al-Khawaja;
- Develop and implement a human rights due diligence policy in relation to the events and commercial activities with hosting countries, taking into consideration independent evaluations of the situation in the country;



- Respect the freedom of expression of drivers in the case they publicly address the issue of Al-Khawaja, other imprisoned human rights defenders or the overall human rights situation in Bahrain.

Sincerely,

- 1) European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)
- 2) *Avocats Sans Frontières France* (ASF France)
- 3) Protection International
- 4) FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), within the framework of the *Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders*
- 5) World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the *Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders*
- 6) LDH (*Ligue des droits de l'Homme*)
- 7) The Center for Advocacy and Human Rights (CADO)
- 8) Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders