



Hunger Strike in Jau Prison: Response to Highly Misleading Ombudsman Statement

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)

On 12 August 2023, the Ombudsman issued a highly misleading [statement](#) that served to legitimise the degrading policies within Jau Prison while failing to address any of the real concerns raised by the striking inmates.

The Ombudsman must immediately correct the facts in line with the laws in place and address the issues underlying the demands rather than providing misleading legal cover and undermining the legitimate demands of the inmates.

As illustrated below, it is incorrect to conclude that the demands of the inmates are “in violation of Rehabilitation Institute Law No. 18 of 2014, Regulation No. 131 of 2015.”

Demand: Ending the isolation of prisoners

The Ombudsman claims that prisoners “are not subject to any kind of isolation.” However, this is demonstrated as false through both prisoner testimonies and statements by prison authorities.

In recent negotiations, authorities [promised](#) to return all “isolation prisoners” within two weeks, without exception. However, prison guards reportedly threatened inmates with “security isolation.”

Whether or not the prisoners are subject to isolation is not in dispute. Instead, the inmates’ demand is the return of a number of inmates who are subjected to security isolation, including 17 individuals who were transferred to Building Three over a year ago and are referred to as “isolation prisoners.”

The Ombudsman statement fails to acknowledge that these individuals currently held in security isolation continue to endure the following because of their classification:

- Both hands and feet shackled during the one hour they are permitted to use the outside area.
- Intensely monitored telephone calls that are disconnected by authorities as soon as they attempt to discuss any abuse.

Demand: Time allowed outside their cells

One of the key demands of the prisoners is to increase the time they are allowed outside their cells by ending the daily 23-hour lockdowns—a demand that the Ombudsman overlooked entirely.

Political prisoners between buildings 7-10 are given **only 1 hour** outside their cells a day, which includes the time for sunbathing. This is also the only time they have to communicate with their family and do any other activities outside their cells. As they remain on 23-hour lockdown in their cells, most prisoners have no access to the prison library and mosque, unlike other prisoners.

This demand is in line with existing prison regulations implemented in other buildings, such as Building 12, where prisoners' cells are open daily from 7 am until 8 pm, and the prisoners are entitled to 3 hours of sunbathing every day. The mosque and the library also remain open during this period.

It is unclear why the Ombudsman is defending degrading measures against prisoners instead of advocating for fair and humane treatment for the striking prisoners, especially when it is in line with the policy in place within other buildings in the prison.

❖ **Demand: Access to mosque and congregation prayers**

The Ombudsman deliberately misrepresented the demands of the prisoner, stating that religious rights are guaranteed in Jau Prison, as evidenced by “recent events in the Ashura season.”

Mosques were open during Ashura. However, in recent weeks, prisoners have been denied entry into their designated mosques, which is a clear violation of their right to religious freedom.

The prisoners' demands are for the mosques to be open and accessible throughout the year and not just during periods of increased scrutiny. This would enable prisoners to carry out their religious duties, such as daily prayers.

Demand: Family visitation rights

The striking prisoners demand authorities stop the arbitrary and punitive rules regarding family visitations as well as allow them access to their full visitation rights as inscribed in the law. Their demands are so far not being met on three fronts:

1. Allowing second-degree relatives during visits

Since 2022, family members, including nieces and nephews, as well as uncles and aunts, have not been permitted during visits. They have thus been arbitrarily excluded from the list of second-degree relatives, in violation of Article 15 of the [Bahraini Civil law](#) and scientifically agreed upon [definition](#) of

second-degree relatives.¹ The authorities have provided no notice or explanation as to why they banned these visits. This can be easily re-instated, as per the prisoners' demands.

2. Allowing one-hour visits

Despite laws ([article 17 of Regulation No. 131 of 2015](#)) guaranteeing every inmate two visits per month, with each visit not exceeding one hour, visits for many political prisoners have been limited to only 30 minutes. It must be ensured that prisoners receive the full one hour of visitation twice a month as permitted through the regulation cited above.

3. Removing glass barriers during visits

Since February 2017, authorities have imposed the glass barrier during visitations, which the response has failed to mention and is central to the demands of the protesting prisoners. This degrading measure has been subjected to protests and boycotts since it was enforced, with some prisoners refusing to take up their visits since this was enforced.

❖ ***Demand: Medical care and education***

The issue of systematic denial of medical treatment is one of the biggest problems in Bahrain's prison, and for the ombudsman to deny this by citing a law which is not put into practice exposes their lack of credibility.

Concerning access to education, there is no clear process for prisoners to pursue university education, and political prisoners are being denied university education.

The prisoners demand that the authorities provide them with the rights to healthcare and education that are guaranteed under the law but are currently being denied in practice.

Conclusion

In its statement, the Ombudsman failed to recognise or engage with the prisoner's demands. Instead of addressing the prisoners' concerns, the statement offers a misleading representation of prison conditions and provides legal cover for the repeated failures of prison authorities.

¹ According to Article 15 of Legislative Decree No. 19 of 2011 with Respect to Promulgating the Civil Code,

“The degree of relationship will be calculated, as regards direct lineal relationship, by ascending to the common ancestor and counting each relative excluding the common ancestor.”