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Carmelo Sanz de Barros,
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Urgent Human Rights Concerns and FIA's Free Speech Crackdown

9 April 2025

Dear Mr Villarreal and Mr Sanz de Barros,

Ahead of the Bahrain Grand Prix (11–13 April 2025), I am writing to raise concerns about serious human rights abuses in Bahrain linked to the event. It is deeply alarming that the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) — rather than challenge these abuses — continues to align with repressive regimes and is taking a page out of their autocratic playbook.

In this letter, I provide an overview of the human rights challenges in Bahrain, focusing on violations associated with Formula 1's presence in the country; I then raise urgent concerns about FIA's newly introduced [Stewards Penalty Guidelines](#), which harshly penalise F1 drivers for free speech and expression.

Human rights violations linked to Bahrain's races

Bahrain has systematically dismantled independent media, closed civic space, and severely curtailed freedoms of expression and assembly. It ranked among the ten worst countries globally for press freedom in Reporters Without Borders' [2024 World Press Freedom Index](#) and in the bottom 20 countries on the Economist's [Democracy Index 2024](#). According to the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), over 350 political prisoners remain behind bars, including arbitrarily detained political activists, human rights defenders and death row inmates at imminent risk of execution.

Most recently, during the final day of the 2025 pre-season F1 testing in Bahrain, authorities [summoned](#) and interrogated human rights defender Ali al-Hajee for nothing more than social media posts exposing abuses against political prisoners and advocating for human rights in Bahrain. He was



[detained](#) for 11 days under investigation on baseless charges of “misusing social media to spread false information” and remains at risk of further prosecution.

Last year, on 25 March 2024, prominent Bahraini activist Ebrahim Sharif was arbitrarily [arrested](#) solely for criticising Bahrain’s [full ownership](#) of the McLaren Group in a series of social media [posts](#) on X. The year before that, on 5 March 2023 – on the day of the Bahrain Grand Prix – four Bahraini activists were [arrested](#), threatened, verbally abused, and forced to sign a plea restricting their right to future protest, simply for peacefully protesting near the Formula 1 Grand Prix Circuit in Bahrain.

It is regrettable that the FIA has so far turned a blind eye and abdicated moral responsibility — failing even to acknowledge the concerns raised by [international rights groups](#) and [UK parliamentarians](#) about Bahrain’s use of the F1 Grand Prix to “sportswash” the country’s dire human rights record.

Expanded restrictions on drivers’ free speech

The FIA’s [2025 International Sporting Code \(ISC\)](#) continues to suppress the rights of drivers to speak freely, including on human rights issues. However, rather than address previous [concerns](#) about these rules, the FIA has aligned itself with repressive regimes and taken a page out of their autocratic playbook.

The new penalties, outlined in the [Stewards Penalty Guidelines](#), published on 22 January 2025, indicate FIA’s intention to double down against any criticism and severely punish drivers who speak out. According to the guidelines, a €40,000 fine would be imposed on F1 World Championship drivers for “political, religious and personal statements or comments in violation of the general principle of neutrality promoted by the FIA under its Statutes” and for “causing moral injury or loss to the FIA, its bodies, its members or its executive officers.” They would also face temporary suspension and deduction of Championship points for repeated violations.

It is our position that statements on human rights are apolitical and that freedoms of speech and expression are not fundamental rights entrenched in international law and essential to the respect for human dignity. If the penalties are imposed, they will have a chilling effect on those in a position to bring human rights issues in host countries to the forefront. For example, in 2021, Lewis Hamilton [stated](#) that “Formula One can no longer ignore human rights issues in the countries it visits.”

Finally, as the FIA increasingly restricts free speech and expression of its drivers, including on human rights issues, it fails to uphold the stated values to “promote the protection of human rights and human dignity” outlined in its [internal statutes](#).

Our requests

I respectfully ask you to clarify in a written response:



1. In light of the 2025 sporting code and penalty guidelines, how will the FIA guarantee that drivers and other stakeholders are not penalised for legitimate criticism — **and** that their rights to free speech and expression are protected in line with international law?
2. Has the FIA made any representations on behalf of Bahraini citizens who were threatened, harassed, interrogated, or arbitrarily arrested for exercising their rights during or around F1's presence in the country — **and** what steps will the FIA take to ensure they are – or others who dare to exercise their fundamental right to freedom of expression or assembly not subjected to reprisals during this weekend's race or at future events?

Kindly note that we intend to communicate this letter publicly and hope that you will share your response.

Yours sincerely,
Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei
Advocacy Director
Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)