



Bahrain's Formula 1 is an insult to country's democratic reformers

By Maran Turner

April 20, 2012

Editor's note: Maran Turner is Executive Director of Freedom Now. Freedom Now works to free prisoners of conscience detained all over the world. Some of Freedom Now's other clients include China's Liu Xiaobo, the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and previously Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi.

(CNN) -- "Unified: One nation in celebration" is the jubilant slogan of this year's Formula 1 Grand Prix in Bahrain. The irony could not be harsher: while sports fans look forward to this glamorous race, one of the country's most prominent human rights activists is close to death in protest of his ongoing unlawful detention.

Solidarity protests in the streets continue to be brutally suppressed. From the perspective of a majority of Bahrain's population, it is not one nation. And it is certainly not celebrating.

One day after the race, on April 23, the Bahrain government will announce a decision that may determine the island kingdom's fate.

This decision is whether to release Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a well-known and internationally respected human rights activist in Bahrain. While the watchful international community is hoping for release, it is entirely possible that the decision may only be a call for a new trial. Mr. al-Khawaja is unlikely to survive long enough to participate in a sham trial.

Since February 8, while most of us have enjoyed more than 200 meals including breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day, Mr. al-Khawaja has had zero. Not a morsel of food in over 70 days. He is on a hunger strike and his intentions have been clear from the beginning -- freedom or death.

When Bahrain erupted in protests last spring -- the Arab Spring -- Abdulhadi al-Khawaja emerged as a central figure in the peoples' (in particular the Shi'a minority's) struggle for democracy. This is not a surprise to people who are familiar with his more than 20 years of human rights advocacy. But after suffering greatly at the hands of authorities and being

convicted on bogus security charges by a military tribunal, the advocate has become a victim of Bahrain's abuse and a symbol of its intolerance.

Despite the international calls for his release, the government of Bahrain, which has been detaining Mr. al-Khawaja unlawfully for more than a year, has been obstinate; seemingly indifferent to whether one of its citizens lives or dies.

The stakes are high: the Bahraini government recognizes that if they free him, they risk setting a precedent that may compel other prisoners to follow suit with hunger strikes.

If they don't free him, he will surely die, setting off mass fury that could engulf the small Middle Eastern kingdom and smother hopes for reconciliation in the near future. Such a development might well cause explosive unrest.

The peoples' dissent, which coincided with the wider Arab Spring movements, has not abated and its impatience with the lack of reform by the Sunni royal family, led by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, is intensifying.

As Mr. al-Khawaja, who holds Bahraini and Danish citizenship, pursues his silent protest in prison, people continue to take to the streets in protests that have been ongoing since February 2011. The Bahraini government has been accused of brutal treatment in dealing with the protests, for which it has sought foreign assistance, bringing in troops from neighboring Saudi Arabia and police advisers from the U.S. and the UK. Together, they have helped the Bahrain government in keeping the protestors -- and reconciliation -- at bay.

The racing federation appears utterly removed from the fragile political balance and the outrageous human rights abuses that continue under the current regime. Its very slogan is insulting and condescending to the protests calling for democratic reform.

The race brings prestige and international media attention to the small kingdom. As Abdulhadi al-Khawaja's international counsel, it is my hope that this renewed international interest will shed some light on the continuing injustices perpetrated against my client and many like him.

It is time for the international community, sports fans or not, to call on the small kingdom to set things right, release peaceful human rights advocates like Mr. al-Khawaja and others, and start the reform process. The government should never have imprisoned Mr. al-Khawaja, who had only been exercising his internationally-protected rights of free expression; releasing him now is not only the humane thing to do -- it is a crucial step towards real unity and celebration.