

Bahrain: Canadian Government Silence Over Torture Reeks of Hypocrisy

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A chronically ill Canadian man who has endured torture at the hands of the Western-backed Bahraini regime is facing a five-year jail sentence that could put his life at risk.

For the past eight months, Naser Al Raas (28), from Ottawa, has been subjected to a nightmarish ordeal: illegally detained for weeks, tortured, prosecuted by a military court, charged with offences on the basis of forced confession, denied legal counsel, and finally sentenced to five years' imprisonment for offences he says he did not commit. On Monday, 21 November, he will hear the verdict of his appeal for release.

Al Raas suffers from a chronic heart and lung condition known as pulmonary embolism for which he underwent surgery in Ottawa when he was a teenager. Because of his detention in Bahrain, he has not been able to receive the medication that he relies on to stabilise his condition. Family and friends fear that if he is imprisoned his life will be put at serious risk.

Ottawa Heart Institute Professor Fraser Rubens, who treated Al Raas in 2002, has given his support to those calling for clemency. Prof Rubens has written publicly to say that incarceration will place Al Raas' life in jeopardy. "I am also concerned that he will be inordinately at risk of hemorrhage should he suffer any injury," added the surgeon.

What makes the case all the more harrowing is that the Canadian government has maintained a public silence throughout. The Ottawa government is fully aware of Al Raas' predicament. Its consul in Saudi Arabia, Michael Erdman, has traveled to the Persian Gulf kingdom to meet privately with family relatives. Members of the public from all over the world have responded to the plight of Al Raas, highlighted by Amnesty International, among others, with letters to Canadian foreign minister Diane Oblonczy urging her government to intervene.

Yet in the face of gross violations of Al Raas' human rights, the Canadian government has so far remained remarkably muted. A spokesman for the foreign ministry in Ottawa claimed that the government was constrained from intervening in the legal affairs of another state. Meanwhile, the office of Diane Oblonczy claims that it has been advised that the best approach is "quiet diplomacy".

Such a stance reeks of hypocrisy. The Canadian government emerged as a vehement and active supporter of NATO military intervention in Libya supposedly in support of human rights. It is also prominent among the Western powers slapping sanctions on Syria – again supposedly out of concern for human rights.

But in the case of Naser Al Raas, the otherwise muscular Harper government appears to have turned into a cowering pedant of jurisprudence.

A mere glance at Al Raas' case beckons immediate government assistance. The IT specialist was first detained on 20 March as he was leaving Bahrain following a visit to his family and fiancée in the Gulf state. Al Raas happened to travel to the country just when a pro-democracy uprising against the Western-backed Al Khalifa Sunni monarchy sparked off in February. On 15 March, a Saudi-led invasion force began a sweeping crackdown against the mainly Shia protests. Dozens of unarmed protesters were killed by state forces, and hundreds have been detained and systematically tortured.

Al Raas, who was traveling on a Canadian passport, was hauled into prison by Bahraini police just as he was about to board his flight at Bahrain International Airport. For one month, his family did not know of his whereabouts during which time he was severely tortured. He says he was deprived of sleep, subjected to mock executions, electrocuted and whipped all over his body with rubber hoses.

Finally, he was forced to sign a written confession to a range of alleged crimes, including attempted kidnap of a police officer. He was cleared of that felony in October, but convicted on lesser charges of attending illegal political rallies and spreading false information about the government, and sentenced to five years in jail.

Speaking just hours before his forthcoming appeal, Al Raas told Gobal Research: "I feel abandoned by my government. I have done nothing wrong yet I have been tortured and now face prison. I am terrified that I will be tortured again."

Al Raas said he wrote recently to Diane Ablonczy, Canada's foreign minister, pleading for last-minute intervention on his behalf. In the letter, he writes: "My situation is very grave and I need the Canadian government, my government, to stand up for my rights and make it clear to the government of Bahrain that the violations must come to an end... I need help. I need political action. I need the [Canadian] government to be an advocate for my rights. And I need that now. I need to know that my government is on my side, not just some neutral observer on the sidelines... Speak up before I am once again tortured."

To date, the Canadian government remains silent [1].

The seeming contradiction in Canadian foreign policy – strident intervention in Libya/Syria while meek non-intervention in Bahrain – can be easily explained. The former represent regimes that Canada and its Western allies want to crush for geopolitical reasons; whereas Bahrain's regime is a loyal Western ally. Along with other Gulf dictatorships Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain has turned out to lend important Arab support, and thus political cover, for Western intervention in the region. The rhetorical concern from Western powers for human rights and international law in one case but not in another equally deserving case can therefore be seen for what it is: a cynical, disingenuous pretext for self-serving intervention that has got nothing to do with human rights.

Another possible factor previously reported by Global Research is the recent conclusion of a three-year bilateral trade deal between Canada and Bahrain [2].

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Notes

[1] Members of the public are urged by Amnesty International and family supporters of Naser Al Raas to write to Canada's foreign minister Diane Ablonczy calling on the Canadian government to demand his immediate release by the Bahraini regime. Write to diane.ablonczy@parl.gc.ca

[2] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=25666>

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