



RULE 135, HUMAN RIGHTS IN BAHRAIN AND THE CASE OF NABEEL RAJAB

By Mitchell Belfer

The European Parliament — particularly the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Greens-European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) — has been attempting to add Bahrain to the resolution list (Rule 135 Urgency) at a Strasbourg plenary session since January 2018. The focus on Bahrain is collateral for pressures that mount against Iran since the same political groups have glossed-over the rampant human rights abuses at the hands of the Islamic Republic to push forward the nuclear deal—a deal which reinforces the Revolutionary Guard control of Iran’s economy, state and populace. In a tit-for-tat scenario, some MEPs decide to punish Bahrain in an act of swaggering against their MEP colleagues who uncover and publicly present Iran’s violations of human rights.

Of course, there is more to the story. Resolutions and attempted resolutions against Bahrain have been normalised during the 2014-2019 mandate. The country is disproportionately targeted by some MEPs on issues related exclusively to its domestic affairs. Since Bahrain is a small and open state which seeks good relations with Europe — it is neither aggressive nor involved (unilaterally) in regional or international conflicts — it has also been easier to offload regional tensions on. From accusing Bahrain of sectarianism to condemning it for executing (two in the past decade) confessed terrorists, whose bombs murdered and maimed, resolutions against Manama intend to isolate it from its closest European allies. With Qatar spending millions on ‘relationship development’ with pockets of MEPs (from across the groups) to keep Doha far away from resolutions, coupled with a kernel of hardline pro-Iranian MEPs pushing through a Tehran-friendly agenda, Bahrain often finds itself submerged in a tsunami of pressure from its European allies.

Now, in the June 2018 plenary, resolutions are being prepared to condemn Bahrain — for the third time this mandate — for issues related to the court case and conviction of Nabeel Rajab. Since Rajab is being used by a small group of MEPs to tout false narratives of Bahrain, it is essential to detail the case so that those who are unfamiliar can make informed decisions.

Despite the accusation that Nabeel Rajab's imprisonment is in relation to his political activism — or a 'Tweet' — he was charged and convicted for crimes of propaganda and disseminating fabricated images. These were based on events in Syria and Palestine and Bahrain's military role in restoring the legitimate government in Yemen. Rajab sought to polarise Bahraini society. At the same time, Rajab attempted to generate outrage and violence by disseminating fake news accusing the Ministry of the Interior and security services of torture, humiliation and degradation. He had no evidence to support his accusations.

Rajab's disinformation campaigns are the most recent in a long string of anti-social behaviour. For instance, in 2012, Rajab led a riot through the Bab al Bahrain (Manama's outdoor marketplace) and attacked Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian shopkeepers. The rioters deployed a hateful language — 'mercs,' re: mercenaries — to intimidate expats, and violence to subdue them and destroy their merchandise (the author was present, photographs are available on request).

Nabeel Rajab is a serial-agitator. That is who he is. And, Bahrain is a country governed by the rule of law—its judicial mechanisms are in place to prevent societal erosion and to reinforce public safety. Rajab broke the law—knowingly. He can, and will, appeal the decision of the court. That is his right. Whatever the outcome of this lengthy court battle, however, Bahrain's internal affairs are internal and the European Parliament has no role to play. The country should not be treated instrumentally, and neither as collateral. European Parliamentarians have a responsibility that matches their power to generate European legislation. They are not mandated to ostracise allies or intimidate partners. Bahrain's relationship to Europe is exceptional. It is time for that relationship to be reflected in the European Parliament's engagement to the country as well.