

Six monarchs, 140 dissidents, one rule: Keep your mouth shut

Nicholas McGeehan explores restrictions on free speech and protest in the Arab Gulf states and the foreign policy responsibilities of Western governments.



Bahraini human rights activist Zainab al-Khawaja, known to her 47, 900 Twitter followers as [@angryarabiya](#), faced trial in a courtroom in Manama in [October 2014](#). The charges related to an incident two years earlier when she had ripped up a photo of Bahrain's King Hamad in an act of protest. If the judge was expecting contrition, he was in for a shock. Al-Khawaja proceeded to pull out another photo of the king, ripped it up, and placed it in front of a bemused judge, who promptly adjourned the hearing and stomped off.

The al-Khawaja family's trials and tribulations give the lie to the notion that there's no activism in the Arab Gulf states, and [Zainab al-Khawaja](#) is just one of 140 people Human Rights Watch profiled in a report on the Gulf states' assault on free speech published in [late 2016](#). She now lives in exile in Denmark with her sister Maryam, who is no less fearsome or eloquent in her criticism of the Bahraini authorities. Their father, [Abdulhadi](#), is serving a life sentence on ridiculous terrorism charges after he led peaceful anti-government [protests in 2011](#) as the revolutionary spirit and ideas of the Arab Spring rippled onto the Gulf peninsula.

Social media, smartphones and internet technology provided the Gulf's dissidents and activist with a space to debate ideas and criticise their monarchical rulers, who were quick to respond to the challenge to their authority.

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Protestors at Pearl Roundabout on the 19th February 2011. (Creative Commons Attribution, Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported) Image link: <http://bit.ly/2fUc3Pt>. Licence link: <http://bit.ly/2fUc3Pt>. No changes made.

Saudi tanks and Emirati troops rolled into Bahrain in [March 2011](#), to put a blood-spattered end to the physical protests at Pearl Roundabout. Ideas are a lot harder to kill than people but the Gulf states have done their authoritarian best, passing repressive counterterrorism, cybercrime and emergency laws that limit free expression and other basic rights. As a result, hundreds of dissidents, including political activists, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and bloggers, have been imprisoned across the region, many after unfair trials and allegations of torture in pretrial detention.

Gulf Cooperation Council rulers' sweeping campaigns against activists and political dissidents have included threats, intimidation, investigations, prosecution, detention and torture. Bahrain, the UAE, and Kuwait have even withdrawn citizenship as a tool of repression. Cyberspace is now the preferred hunting ground of the Gulf states, and they have spared no expense in tracking their prey.

The Toronto-based research group Citizen Lab christened the award-winning Emirati activist

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Ahmed Mansoor "[the million dollar dissident](#)" after someone attempted to install extremely expensive and highly sophisticated spyware on his iPhone. Citizen Lab has also found evidence that the governments of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE used intrusion software, while Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE may have purchased other such software.



The March of Loyalty to Martyrs by over 100,000 people in Manama, February 22nd 2011. (Creative Commons Attribution, Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported). Image link: <http://bit.ly/2fQg5X8>.
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The 140 people we profiled in the report come from various sects and viewpoints. Some, like Zainab al-Khawaja or [lyad el-Baghadi](#), are in political exile in Europe, others like the human rights lawyers [Waleed abu al-Khair](#) and [Mohamed al-Roken](#) are serving prison sentences of 10 to 15 years, accused of “breaking alliances with the rule” or plotting to overthrow the government.

What most of these 140 people share is that they have been let down by the Western governments that champion free speech domestically, but for which foreign policy often amounts to little more than trade policy where the Gulf is concerned. This British government, for example, has been an ardent and vocal supporter of the Gulf states and has not called for the release of any of the imprisoned people included in the report.

The UK won't even call for the release of the Bahraini activist [Nabeel Rajab](#), who is facing 12 years in jail for tweeting criticism of the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen. Sadly he's not the only dissident living through distinctly Orwellian times in the Gulf states.

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