

Bahrain Court Upholds Convictions of 9 Doctors
By Kareem Fahim
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CAIRO — An appeals court in Bahrain on Thursday upheld the convictions of nine doctors charged with crimes related to the popular uprising last year, in a case that drew international condemnation and was seen as a crucial test of the government's commitment to political reform.

The nine doctors, who did not appear in court when the verdicts were announced, were sentenced to between one month to five years in prison. Nine other doctors had their convictions overturned.

The doctors, all Shiites, were among thousands of people arrested during a government crackdown last year, after protesters demanding greater political freedoms occupied a central roundabout in the Bahraini capital of Manama.

The country's largest public hospital, the Salmaniya Medical Complex, where the doctors worked, was quickly swept up in the conflict. Protests were held at the hospital, and the security services raided its wards.

The hospital became a symbol of the state's repression and its widening sectarian rift, between the Sunni ruling monarchy and Bahrain's Shiite majority, which has long complained of a withering official discrimination.

The verdict on Thursday seemed likely to intensify those complaints. Though the court reduced sentences previously imposed by a military court, the doctors and human rights groups have dismissed the charges — including plotting to overthrow the monarchy and gathering illegally — as political and aimed at stifling dissent.

The court's decision, and its timing, also seemed likely to cause significant embarrassment for the United States, which has been harshly criticized by Bahraini antigovernment activists as maintaining its close alliance with the Persian Gulf nation despite the government's crackdown. In May, the United States resumed military sales to Bahrain, after a seven-month suspension.

The verdicts were announced during a visit to Bahrain by Michael H. Posner, the assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor. Several of the doctors said that Mr. Posner had met with them in the past, and told them he was advocating on their behalf with the Bahraini government.

At a news conference in Manama, Mr. Posner said, "We are deeply disappointed by these convictions, and that the Bahraini government did not use alternative means to address these cases."

"These convictions appear to be based, at least in part, on the defendants' criticisms of government actions and policies," he said.

Many doctors said they were arrested, harassed and then tortured in prison, simply for trying to treat people wounded in antigovernment protests, regardless of their political leanings.

Dr. Ghassan Dhaif, who was sentenced to one year on charges including taking hostages and participating in illegal gatherings, said the verdicts were "a joke."

"It's a cocktail of baseless sentences," Dr. Dhaif said in a telephone interview after the verdict. "They've reduced the sentences based on international pressure. We were arrested arbitrarily, and we were tortured. It's all politicized, and based on revenge." His wife, Dr. Zahra al-Samar, was acquitted.

On Thursday afternoon, Dr. Dhaif said he still had not been served with an arrest warrant.

In a statement, the government seemed to suggest that Thursday's decision, which dismissed more serious charges including weapons possession, was subject to further review. It noted that the four doctors who were likely to serve time in prison "still have their right of appeal" and that "legal recourses remain."

The government said five of the doctors had already served their sentences during previous detentions and would not have to return to prison.

The statement, from the International Affairs Authority, said the doctors were not convicted for treating patients, but "primarily for their involvement in politicizing their profession, breaching medical ethics," and "their call and involvement in the overthrow of the monarchy."

Physicians for Human Rights, which has followed the case closely, denounced the verdict, noting that 18 of the 20 doctors charged in the case said they were tortured after their arrests.

The group called on American officials to demand "measurable improvements in the human rights situation, including holding anyone who engaged in acts of torture or ill treatment accountable."

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