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Bahrain: Authorities must halt repression after week of intensified clampdown on human rights

Amnesty International has today called on the Bahrain authorities to halt its intensified crackdown on the rights to freedom of expression, association and movement after a week which has seen the suspension of the country's main opposition group Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society and the stripping of the nationality of its spiritual leader, and the arrest of prominent human rights defender and prisoner of conscience Nabeel Rajab.

The past week has also seen a group of five activists, including human rights defenders, prevented from travelling to Geneva to take part in the United Nations Human Rights Council session and Jalila al-Salman, vice-president of the Bahrain Teacher's Association, prevented from travelling to Oslo to take part in the Arthur Svensson award ceremony. On Saturday, another human rights defender, Abdulnabi al-Ekri, was also prevented from travelling to Geneva.

Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society was suspended by the High Administrative Court on 14 June, two hours after the Minister of Justice had filed an urgent/expedited request to dissolve the society for violating the Law on Political Associations. Al-Wefaq was notified of the Minister of Justice's lawsuit only one hour before the hearing of the case. The society's lawyer was able to attend the court hearing but his requests for adjournment to allow him adequate time and facilities to read the court documents and prepare his defence were rejected. The court ordered the suspension of al-Wefaq's activities, the closure of its offices and headquarters and the seizure of its accounts and assets. It also appointed the Ministry of Justice's Office of Political Associations as the official receiver of the association until the court delivers a ruling, scheduled to take place on 6 October. On 21 June, Al-Wefaq's lawyer was notified that this court session had been sped up to take place on 23 June.

The court ruling, seen by Amnesty International, states that Al-Wefaq "has deviated in its political activity to the extent that it incited violence and encouraged mass marches and sit-ins that would create sectarian sedition in the country. It has also criticized the three branches of government."

The court cited as evidence that Al-Wefaq "challeng(ed) the legitimacy of the constitution of Bahrain", "supported violence by posting pictures of terrorists holding sharp objects to depict them as peaceful protestors" and expressed its "solidarity with a person convicted on accounts of inciting hatred against the regime, calling for toppling it, and insulting the judiciary and executive branch of the government" – apparently referring to Sheikh 'Ali Salman, the Secretary General of Al-Wefaq whose jail sentence was in May [increased from four to nine years](#). The court also stated that Al-Wefaq called "for foreign intervention", "challenged the legitimacy of the legislative authority", "turned places of worship into political forums" and also referred to Al-Wefaq's call for a general boycott in January 2015 in protest at the opening of Sheikh 'Ali Salman's trial. It concluded that allowing Al-Wefaq to continue its activities "would incur serious irreversible damages to society as a

whole”.

After the court ruling, the Minister of Justice published a [statement](#) in the Bahrain news agency in which he said that al-Wefaq has “worked for decades on diverting from the concept of the state, secure(d) legal cover for acts associated with extremism and terrorism, and work(ed) to create a new generation that carries the spirit of hatred, weakening the concept of convergence between the sects and creating conflicts for attempts to strengthen and consolidate national co-existence and pluralism”.

According to Ali al-Aswad, a former MP for Al-Wefaq, who spoke to Amnesty International, armed security officers surrounded its headquarters that afternoon, went inside and ordered those inside to leave and took down its flags and banners. It did the same to its two other offices. The society’s website was also blocked but was later the same day back online.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the Bahrain authorities’ move to suspend Al-Wefaq. Encouraging peaceful protests and boycotts, expressing solidarity with its Secretary General, a prisoner of conscience, peacefully criticising the Bahraini authorities and its constitutional legitimacy, calling for the intervention of the international community and using religious forums to give political messages are all legitimate forms of freedom of association and expression. The court judgement ordering the suspension of Al-Wefaq provides no clear reasoning to support the assertion that the Twitter postings in question, made on 12 and 14 February 2015, one of which was subsequently deleted, “supported” or incited to violence.

Al-Wefaq’s leadership has repeatedly stated the society’s opposition to violence, including in speeches by its Secretary General, Sheikh ‘Ali Salman and by signing the [National Declaration of Non-Violence Principles](#) in 2012, alongside five other political societies. The move to suspend Al-Wefaq comes three weeks after a court of appeal [more than doubled](#) the prison sentence against Sheikh ‘Ali Salman for speeches in which he criticised the government. Amnesty International considers Sheikh ‘Ali Salman to be a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for peacefully expressing his views and reiterates its call for his immediate and unconditional release.

On 20 June, the Ministry of Interior [announced](#) that it has revoked the nationality of Ayatollah Isa Qassem, the spiritual leader of Al-Wefaq, effectively rendering him stateless as he has no other nationality. He has become the 280th person to have his nationality arbitrarily revoked in Bahrain since 2012, including those who had their nationality revoked by the Ministry of Interior in November 2012 and January 2015 including human rights defenders, lawyers and former MPs. Stripping citizens of their nationality without due process protections is arbitrary and in violation of Bahrain’s international human rights obligations. The right to a nationality, which must not be deprived arbitrarily, is enshrined in Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 24 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Bahrain is a state party. Article 7 of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness also prohibits, with only a very few very tightly drawn exceptions, any loss of nationality which results in statelessness. Subsequently, the obligation to avoid statelessness has been recognized as a norm of customary international law.

Following the Ministry’s announcement, hundreds of protesters took to the streets and the Minister of Interior issued a [statement](#) warning that “legal action would be taken against violators”.

CLAMPDOWN ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND ACTIVISTS

Nabeel Rajab, the prominent human rights defender and president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights was arrested on 13 June and transferred to East Rifa' police station. He was brought before the Public Prosecution office the following day, where he was charged with "spreading false information and rumours with the aim of discrediting the State". The prosecution ordered his detention for seven days pending investigation, which was extended a further eight days on 22 June. Nabeel Rajab is also facing separate charges for comments and retweets posted on Twitter related to the war in Yemen and also to allegations of torture in Jaw prison after a prison riot in March 2015. If this case goes to trial and he is convicted, he could face up to 10 years in prison. Nabeel Rajab has been in and out of prison since 2012 for his human rights work and has been under a travel ban since November 2014. Amnesty International considers Nabeel Rajab to be a prisoner of conscience and calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

A group of five activists including human rights defenders and a former prisoner of conscience, were prevented from leaving Bahrain on 12 June to attend the UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva. Two of the activists were told by immigration officials that a travel ban had been imposed on them by the Public Prosecution on 9 June. On 18 June, human rights defender Abdulnabi al-Ekri was also prevented from travelling to Geneva and told that a travel ban had been imposed on him by the Public Prosecution on 9 June.

On 13 June, former prisoner of conscience Jalila al-Salman was prevented from leaving Bahrain. She was planning to attend the Arthur Svensson award ceremony in Oslo and was notified that a travel ban was also imposed on her by the Public Prosecution on 9 June.

Background

This is not the first time a court has ordered the suspension of Al Wefaq. On 28 October 2014, the High Administrative Court ordered the suspension of Al-Wefaq for three months for violating the Law on Political Associations, after the Minister of Justice had filed a lawsuit against the society in July as he considered its last four General Assembly Meetings null and void because they had failed to meet the required quorum and their results were not made public. Al-Wefaq activists said that the society only learnt of the Ministry's lawsuit against it from reading the press and via social media sites, not through a court summons. The Minister of Justice deferred the implementation of the court verdict until after Al-Wefaq's General Assembly Meeting in December. Al-Wefaq appealed against the verdict, submitting a report on the process and results of its General Assembly Meeting. On 20 September 2015, the court reversed the decision to suspend Al-Wefaq.

On 11 June 2016, the King issued an amendment to the Law on Political Associations (Law 26 of 2005), which prohibits members of a political society from engaging in religious preaching. It also prohibits leaders of a political society from giving religious speeches, sermons or guidance. These amendments were in addition to amendments to the law made in 2014 which prohibit political associations from "using a religious platform to spread their principles, objectives and programmes or use religion as a reference" and from "directing [their] activities and programmes for sectarian goals or to damage national economy or the public interests of the state". Such restrictions violate the right to freedom of association, and are in breach of Bahrain's international obligations under Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees to everyone the right to freedom of association, and provides that the enjoyment of the right must be considered the rule and any restrictions to them, the exception.