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Bahrain must lift ban on all protests

The Bahrain government's ban on all rallies and gatherings in the country violates the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and must be lifted immediately, said Amnesty International.

The Interior Minister announced the ban on Tuesday saying that rallies and gatherings were associated with violence, rioting and attacks on public and private property. He said that the ban would continue until "security is maintained" and has suggested that one of his main concerns is the fact the rallies express opposition to the government and ruling family.

Police have also been attacked during recent gatherings. On 19 October the authorities reported that a policeman had died and another had been seriously injured by an explosion in al-Eker village when their patrol was attacked by rioters. A week later, a second policeman died in hospital after having been injured in protests earlier in the year.

"Even in the event of sporadic or isolated violence once an assembly is underway, the authorities cannot simply declare a blanket prohibition on all protests. Such a sweeping measure amounts to nothing less than nullifying the rights to freedom of association, expression and assembly," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Programme Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"Law enforcement officials must act to protect peaceful protesters rather than using the violent acts of a few as a pretext to restrict or impede the rights of all."

Before the current ban, organizers of demonstrations and gatherings in Bahrain had to apply for permission from the authorities before going ahead, according to the code on Public Meetings, Processions and Gatherings.

The code imposes significant restrictions and is in breach of Bahrain's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. At least three organizers with a clean police record have to apply for permission and specify the type of activity, as well as its subject, venue and timing. The organizers have to fulfil requirements including being a resident of the area where the meeting will take place.

If permission was not granted by the authorities the rallies were considered illegal. Several rallies have already been banned this year on the grounds that the location and timings of the rallies could have disturbed traffic.

In recent months, scores of people have reportedly been arrested after participating in an "illegal gathering" and Amnesty International has adopted as prisoners of conscience Bahrainis jailed solely for exercising their right to peaceful assembly. Some rallies and gatherings have been met with unnecessary and excessive force by the security forces.

"The tedious procedures for seeking permission to hold a rally allow the government to ban demonstrations for reasons beyond what would be permissible under international law," said Hadj

Sahraoui.

“Officials have an obligation not to interfere unduly with the right to peaceful assembly, and the exercise of this right should be limited to a mere notification procedure.”

Background

On 28 October three members of the al-Wefaq Islamic Society and organizers of a rally were reportedly detained after the rally that had been banned by the authorities went ahead without permission. They were released hours after without charges.

The Ministry of Interior announced on the same day that legal action would be taken against the rally’s organizers.