

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Bahrain: National human rights institution bolstered by appointment of prominent activists

The appointment of long-standing human rights activists to Bahrain's recently established National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) is a welcome move, but the authorities must lift continuing restrictions on the work of human rights defenders, Amnesty International said today.

On 25 April 2010 the King of Bahrain, Shaikh Hamad bin 'Isa Al Khalifa, issued Royal Order No. 16 for 2010 to appoint 22 members of the NHRI set up last year. A number of prominent human rights activists have been appointed, including Salman al-Sayyid 'Ali Kamal al-Din, the former deputy secretary-general of the independent Bahrain Human Rights Society, as President. The 22 include five women.

Amnesty International believes that the appointment of activists with a distinguished track record of human rights work should strengthen human rights protection and promotion in Bahrain as long as the Bahraini authorities allow them to work without hindrance.

The NHRI was established by the King on 11 November 2009 through Royal Order No. 46 for 2009. The creation of the new institution was one of the pledges made by Bahrain during the examination of its human rights record under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council in 2008.

Amnesty International welcomed the establishment of the institution, particularly since its assessment was that the provisions set out in Royal Order No. 46 were generally consistent with the Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (the Paris Principles), a set of principles adopted by the UN General Assembly which relate to the role, composition, status and functions of such institutions. However, in a letter sent in February 2009 to the Bahraini Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr Nizar al-Baharna, Amnesty International sought clarification as to whether the new institution would be competent to document and report allegations of human rights violations since the Order's provisions do

not specifically mention these. Amnesty International awaits a response to this communication.

The appointment of the 22 members of the NHRI comes at a time when Bahraini human rights defenders have been complaining about growing government restrictions on their activities. For example, on 19 April 2010 the Bahrain Human Rights Society received a letter from the Ministry of Social Development rejecting a request by the Society to organize a workshop for human rights defenders aimed at capacity building on a wide range of issues relating to the administration of justice, planned for 27 May 2010, on the grounds that it considered the workshop to have a political objective. In addition, a number of human rights organizations, including the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, have been officially banned since 2004.

Amnesty International urges the Bahraini government to lift all restrictions and obstacles imposed on the rights of human rights defenders to freedom of association and assembly.

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