

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

8 September 2010

AI Index: MDE 11/006/2010

Bahrain: Government action against Bahrain Human Rights Society undermines basic freedoms

Amnesty International is greatly concerned by the Bahraini government's summary dismissal yesterday of the entire board of the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), an independent and legally registered non-governmental organization (NGO), and is calling on the government to immediately rescind this decision.

In a press statement yesterday, the Ministry of Social Development announced that all members of the the board of the BHRS had been dismissed by a ministerial order and that the Ministry had appointed one of its own officials as the "temporary administrator" of this independent NGO. The statement accused the BHRS of committing "legal and administrative irregularities" in breach of Law 21 of 1989, which regulates the work of NGOs in Bahrain, and of cooperating with "illegal organizations" and publishing information about this on the BHRS's website. As well, the Ministry accused the BHRS of focussing on "one category of Bahrainis" in its reporting rather than reporting impartially on all sections of Bahrain society, seemingly a clear reference to and indication of the government's displeasure at the BHRS's reporting on alleged violations committed by the authorities against opposition activists within Bahrain's Shi'a community.

The government's action, which appears to have intended effectively to close down the BHRS as an independent human rights NGO, follows a press conference which the BHRS held on 28 August to express concern about 21 prominent Shi'a political and human rights activists who were detained earlier in August and who now face terrorism-related charges, and call for their human rights to be respected. At the press conference, the BHRS also drew attention to allegations that at least some of the 21 were tortured or otherwise ill-treated after their arrest, called for an investigation and condemned some local media reporting denigrating the accused and portraying them as enemies of the state, while also condemned regular acts of vandalism and violence by Shi'a youth protesting against government policies, including what they perceive as discrimination against the Shi'a majority.

Another Bahraini human rights organization, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was banned by the government in 2004 and its director, Nabeel Rajab, has been subject to repeated harassment and media smear campaigns. Several Bahraini newspapers have published his photograph in recent days and accused him of connections with the 21 Shi'a who have been charged with terrorism-related offences, heightening fears for his safety and indicating that he too could be at risk of arrest.

Under Law 21 of 1989, independent human rights and other non-governmental organizations must obtain official recognition from the Bahraini authorities if they are to operate legally. However, this law provides the authorities with wide powers to ban or suspend organizations, or to interfere in their internal operations by appointing a government official to administer them, as has now been done in the case of the BHRS.

Bahrain is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights whose articles 19 and 22 set out the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association, which the government is bound to uphold,

Amnesty International has already urged the Bahraini government to set up set up a prompt, impartial and independent investigation into allegations that some of the 21 well-known members of the country's Shi'a Muslim community arrested in mid-August 2010 were tortured or otherwise ill-treated while being detained incommunicado and to guarantee in practice their rights to fair trial.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK

www.amnesty.org