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**Bahrain ramps up assault on human rights by dissolving leading political group**

The Bahraini authorities' dissolution of the country's main opposition group weeks after its leader's prison sentence was [more than doubled](#) on appeal is a flagrant attack on freedom of expression and association aimed at silencing opponents and critics, Amnesty International said.

A Bahraini court on Sunday ruled to dissolve al-Wefaq, after the suspension of its activities, the closure of its offices and freezing of its assets on 14 June. Al-Wefaq has 45 days to appeal the verdict.

Amnesty International considers this decision an assault on freedom of expression and association. The Bahraini authorities presented no credible evidence to show that al-Wefaq is anything but a peaceful opposition movement.

Encouraging peaceful protests, peacefully criticizing the Bahraini authorities and laws, and calling on the international community to play an active role in support of genuine reform in Bahrain are not legitimate grounds for closing al-Wefaq or any other peaceful opposition group.

The accusations considered by the court included claims that al-Wefaq supported violence in a series of Twitter posts in 2015, encouraged mass marches and sit-ins to incite sectarian opposition and showed solidarity with a person convicted of incitement to hatred against the regime, referring to al-Wefaq Secretary General Sheikh 'Ali Salman.

Amnesty International considers Sheikh 'Ali Salman a prisoner of conscience who was unfairly jailed for charges of inciting hatred, promoting disobedience and criticism of public institutions. In May a court of appeal more than doubled his prison sentence to nine years.

The decision to dissolve al-Wefaq also said that it repeatedly challenged the country's constitution and the authorities, called the Bahraini parliament meaningless and illegitimate, used places of worship as political platforms and called for an economic boycott to coincide with Sheikh 'Ali Salman's trial.

Amnesty International believes that the court judgement has provided no clear reasoning to support the assertion that the Twitter posts in question "supported" or incited violence.

The verdict on dissolution was originally scheduled for October but Bahraini authorities fast-tracked the proceedings to start in June. During a court session on 28 June, al-Wefaq's lawyers withdrew from the case in protest against the court denying them access to al-Wefaq premises, which they said undermined their ability to prepare an effective defence. The request of another lawyer to represent al-Wefaq was rejected by the court on procedural grounds.

Al-Wefaq has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to non-violence, including during the 2011 uprising. Time and again the Bahraini authorities have trampled all over the human rights of peaceful political activists. The closure of al-Wefaq only provides more proof that peaceful dissent in Bahrain will not be tolerated.

In a related case, on 17 July, the public prosecution charged al-Wefaq's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Issa Qassem, with collecting funds illegally and money laundering. He was arbitrarily stripped of his Bahraini nationality on 20 June. His trial will commence in August.

The dissolution of Al-Wefaq follows two months of [heightened repression](#) in the country, which saw the arrest and trial of human rights defender [Nabeel Rajab](#), as well as travel bans imposed on human rights defenders, journalists and former prisoners of conscience and the forced expulsion of Taimoor Karimi, a Bahraini lawyer whose nationality was arbitrarily revoked in 2012.

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