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Bahrain: Release detained political activist Ebrahim Sharif

Amnesty International called today on the Bahraini authorities to release political activist Ebrahim Sharif and end his ongoing prosecution on charges brought solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression following a speech he gave last Friday.

Ebrahim Sharif, former Secretary General of the National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad), was arrested at 2.30am on 12 July at his home by security officers and remanded in custody for 48 hours for questioning at the Criminal Investigations Directorate of the Ministry of Interior in connection with statements he made in a speech at a public gathering on 10 July.

On 13 July, the Public Prosecution interrogated Ebrahim Sharif on charges of "incitement to hatred and contempt of the regime" and "incitement to overthrow the regime by force and illegal means", under Articles 165 and 160 of the Penal Code. He denied all the charges against him. The prosecution ordered his detention for 15 days pending further investigation.

In his speech of 10 July, Ebrahim Sharif spoke about the need for change in Bahrain, highlighted the commitment of the political opposition to non-violence and urged the government to introduce key economic reforms to avoid further bankruptcy.

Amnesty International considers the arrest and detention of Ebrahim Sharif to be in violation of his right to freedom of expression and urges the authorities to release him immediately and unconditionally.

Ebrahim Sharif's arrest came less than a month after his release on 19 June following a royal pardon. He was serving a five-year prison sentence imposed on him after an unfair trial that led to the conviction in 2011 of him and 12 other leading political opposition activists for their anti-government views and for having participated in peaceful protests. Amnesty International considered all 13 of them prisoners of conscience and called for their immediate and unconditional release.

The detention order against Ebrahim Sharif coincided with the release on medical grounds of prominent human rights defender Nabeel Rajab. The Ministry of Interior issued a statement on 13 July evening that Nabeel Rajab had received a royal pardon ordering his release for medical reasons. Following his release, Nabeel Rajab said that he would continue with his human rights work.

Ahead of Nabeel Rajab's release, on 9 July, the European Parliament passed a resolution on Bahrain focusing in particular on the case of Nabeel Rajab. It welcomed the release of Ebrahim Sharif and called for the release of Nabeel Rajab as well as that of others detained for peacefully exercising their rights such as the 12 political opposition leaders tried with Ebrahim Sharif and Sheikh 'Ali Salman, Secretary General of the main opposition political party, al-Wefaq National Islamic Society.

Amnesty International considers Nabeel Rajab's release to be a positive step and calls on the authorities to end his prosecution in a separate case that is still ongoing. Nabeel Rajab continues to be under investigation by the Public Prosecution over comments he posted on Twitter and retweeting comments on the ongoing conflict in Yemen and torture allegations in Jaw prison after a prison strike on 10 March.

The re-arrest of Ebrahim Sharif and the continuing imprisonment and prosecution of peaceful critics and leaders of the political opposition indicates that the Bahraini government intends to continue to silence dissident voices. The authorities must start by releasing all prisoners of conscience who have been imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to show they are serious about reform.