

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Bahrain: Release leading opposition figure

Amnesty International today called on the Bahraini authorities to drop the charges against a leading opposition figure and to release him without delay after his detention was renewed for 15 days.

Sheikh 'Ali Salman, Secretary General of the main opposition group al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, was arrested on 28 December following interrogation at the Ministry of Interior's Criminal Investigations Directorate in connection with statements made in his speeches in 2012 and 2014, including most recently at the party's General Assembly meeting on 26 December.

Sheikh 'Ali Salman was charged with "incitement to promote the change of the political system by force, threats and other illegal means"; "public incitement to loathing and contempt of a sect of people which will result in disrupting public disorder"; "publicly inciting others to disobey the law" and "publicly insulting the Interior Ministry".

The Public Prosecution yesterday renewed Sheikh 'Ali Salman's detention for 15 days, pending further investigation. It issued a statement saying that he confirmed he was in contact with a number of overseas governments and political organizations to discuss Bahrain's internal affairs with the aim of achieving active interference in Bahrain and that he did not inform the authorities of these communications.

Sheikh 'Ali Salman's defence team issued a statement saying the Public Prosecution is putting statements out of context with a view to defaming their client. They added that the communications with diplomatic missions and political organizations are part of his work as a political leader and that they were known to the authorities in Bahrain.

Amnesty International wrote to the Public Prosecution Office seeking further clarifications on the charges but received no answer.

The organization considers the detention and prosecution of Sheikh 'Ali Salman a flagrant violation of his right to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and urges the Bahraini authorities to release him immediately and unconditionally. If convicted, the organization would consider him a prisoner of conscience.

The action against Sheikh 'Ali Salman and the trial of other outspoken activists for the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression highlight the Bahraini authorities' increasing intolerance to criticism and seek to silence legitimate demands for reform and respect of human rights.

Some of the charges against Sheikh 'Ali Salman seem to stem from statements he made during his speech on 26 December when he referred to calls made to the opposition in Bahrain to follow the approach of the Syrian opposition and turn the country into a military battleground, but they refused. In the same speech, he spoke about the opposition's continuing determination to reach power in Bahrain to achieve the demands of the 2011 uprising through peaceful means and to hold those responsible for abuses to account. He also highlighted the need for equality for all Bahrainis, including with the ruling family.

Following Sheikh 'Ali Salman's arrest, a number of demonstrations took place in a number of towns and villages in protest and have continued since. In a familiar pattern, security forces used tear gas and shotgun to disperse the crowds. The authorities have also reportedly refused to grant permission for people to demonstrate, denying them the rights to peaceful assembly.

'Ali Salman's arrest came a few days after he was re-elected for a fourth term as Secretary General of al-Wefaq. In October 2014, a court ordered the party to suspend all activities for three months, but the Minister of Justice, who filed the case on the basis of alleged irregularities, ordered a delay in the implementation of the court decision until after the party's general assembly meeting. Al-Wefaq boycotted the parliamentary elections held in November 2014, together with other opposition political parties.

In July 2014, the Public Prosecution charged Sheikh 'Ali Salman and his Assistant Secretary General, Khalil al-Marzooq, with "meeting foreign government officials without notifying the Bahraini government and without the presence of a Bahraini official". These charges were in connection with the meetings they had with the US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Tom Malinowski, on 6 July 2014 at al-Wefaq's headquarters in Manama and on 7 July 2014 at the US embassy.