

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing
on
BAHRAIN: 2022 ELECTIONS

Tuesday, November 1, 2022 – 10:00 a.m.
Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Statement of Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei
Director of Advocacy
Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy

Thank you so much Elizabeth for your kind introduction and thanks a lot to the Tom Lantos commission for inviting us to speak.

My name is Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei and I am the Director of Advocacy at the London-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy. I am a former prisoner and torture survivor and a stateless individual because Bahrain decided to strip my citizenship in 2015, the consequences of which I'm still living with.

Over the past few weeks, I've been talking to Civil Society Actors and people on the ground in Bahrain to ask them some simple questions:

- What do these elections mean to you?
- What would encourage you to take part in these elections?
- Do you really see hope in this process? If not, what are your objections?

I have to say, despite following the issues relating to human rights closely for several years, I was shocked when carrying out these interviews to hear about the day to day repression people are going through. I also understood why people are calling for a boycott, and why people feel isolated from this election process, believing that it doesn't represent them.

The first key question was to ask whether these elections can really change the lives of Bahrainis? And can those elected legislate effectively?

The most striking answer was that even if the whole opposition said they wanted to run for election, and were successful, the parliament itself cannot legislate effectively.

The reason is you have 40 seats in the Nuwab council that are elected. Then you have 40 seats in the Shura council, they are appointed directly by the King. These two chambers have roughly equal power.

We know this from 2006 and 2010 when the opposition took part in the election. Al-Wefaq claims they received more than 60% of the votes but this resulted in only 18 seats out of 40. However, it was not only out of 40, as there are also 40 seats within the unelected chamber which shares almost equal power with the elected chamber.

So the experience of the opposition when they were taking part in the elections is that you really cannot change anything. The discussions were so embarrassing that the opposition even questioned if they could change the cost of a tomato on the street, let alone legislate? The parliament is a place where you can't even scrutinise a minister or get a response to letters from MPs to representatives of the government.

Bahrain also has the Political Isolation Law. This is a damning law imposed in 2018.

In summary, if you are a former prisoner, or if you are a former member of one of the dissolved opposition parties: Al-Wefaq, a political society dissolved in 2016. The secular party also dissolved in 2017, Wa'ad. If you were part of one of these societies, even when they were accepted as a legitimate part of political society, then you are not able to take part in the election, by running for office.

Speaking to representatives of Al-Wefaq and Wa'ad, I heard the shocking figure estimating that between 70,000 - 100,000 people are excluded from this process. We know that since 2011, the impact of the uprising, thousands of political prisoners have been thrown in jail. Anyone who spent more than 6 months in jail cannot take part in these elections.

The government is also attempting to offer a fake image about the true level of participation in these elections, and this is really tricky.

What the government has done is set up a committee which decides who has the right to elect. This committee decided that if you have not voted in the past two elections, in 2018 or in 2014, your name is automatically removed from the list. We know that in both of these elections, the opposition publicly called for the boycott of these elections, so many did not vote and will therefore be excluded by default from casting their votes.

The third point is that Civil Society is in one of its worst conditions, if you wanted to know how bad the situation is, look at the status of the leaders of the political parties:

- The leader of Al-Wefaq, Shaikh Ali Salman is serving life in prison.
- The head of the Haq Movement, Hassan Mushaima and its spokesperson Dr Abduljalil AlSingace are both serving life imprisonment.

Their situation is grim, and it's not just about their sentences, they are also facing serious medical negligence. Dr AlSingace has had to spend over 480 days without solid food just to demand the return of his confiscated manuscripts.

We talk about extremely serious challenges to ordinary Bahrainis. For some, it is their beloved being on death row, there are an estimated more than 1000 political prisoners in the country. This is how Bahrainis day to day life is affected.

This is by no means a free and fair election, this is a pseudo election, it is a parliament that is fake. It looks like a democracy but it is not functioning.

We call on the US government not to congratulate Bahrain on these elections because they will use it to say 'We are surrounded by dictatorships in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere' and suggest that in comparison they are making some progress. These are all lies. The parliament in Bahrain is a burden on the Bahraini people. It's a waste of their money because simply they have no say in it.