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Co-Chair



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One Hundred and Fifteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

October 29, 2018

His Majesty
Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa King of Bahrain
P.O. Box 555
Rifa'a Palace
Manama, Bahrain

Via the Embassy of The Kingdom of Bahrain in Washington DC.

Your Majesty,

As Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, an official bipartisan body of the United States House of Representatives, we write regarding the upcoming elections for the Council of Representatives of Bahrain's National Assembly. The elections are important because the Council is the only elected governing body in Bahrain. However, we are concerned that the conditions necessary to ensure that Bahrain's elections meet widely accepted international standards are not in place and in consequence the results may be considered illegitimate by many. In light of Bahrain's strong bilateral alliance with the United States, we respectfully urge you to take all necessary steps to ensure the credibility of the elections.

In order for elections to meet international standards, citizens must be able to organize politically and support candidates. Your government's decisions to dissolve the Al Wafaq and Wa'ad political societies, both of which participated in most prior elections, and to imprison many key leaders have deprived large sectors of the population of their preferred political options. The May 2018 amendment to the Law on the Exercise of Political Rights that bars anyone who has ever belonged to one of the dissolved political societies, or anyone who has been sentenced to more than six months in prison for an "intentional offense," from running for political office on an individual basis further exacerbates the problem of political representation.

In addition, Bahrain's electoral infrastructure inherently disadvantages the political opposition. Voting districts have been drawn in such a way as to significantly overrepresent the minority Sunni population. Polling stations are not tied to specific constituencies and so are vulnerable to abuse. There is no independent electoral commission and to date there has been no commitment by your government to permit either domestic or international election observation

as described and encouraged by the U.N. affirmed "Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation" which has now been endorsed by 55 countries and international organizations.

Furthermore, elections can only be fair when citizens are free to express and debate their views on matters of public concern. But Al Wasat, Bahrain's only independent news outlet, was forced to close last year, and writers and bloggers are among those unjustly imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Under these conditions it will be difficult for the international community to recognize the upcoming elections as legitimate. We thus strongly encourage you to undertake the following:

- Repeal the May 2018 amendment to the Law on the Exercise of Political Rights.
- Redraw electoral districts and establish polling stations linked to each district.
- Guarantee the presence of international media and elections observers before and throughout the electoral process.
- Release imprisoned opposition leaders, writers and civil society leaders, including Sheikh Ali Salman, Hassan Mushaima, Abduljalil Al-Singace, Ahmed Humaidan, Naji Fateel, Nabeel Rajab and Abdulhadi al-Khawaja.

As Members of Congress, we recognize that Bahrain, the host of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, has been an important ally for American security interests. At the same time, support for democracy and human rights is a pillar of American foreign policy, and we are concerned that Bahrain's current political path will lead to increased instability over time. Ensuring that the upcoming National Assembly elections are credible and legitimate would be an important corrective. The failure to do so could reinforce the willingness of Members of Congress to take more coercive measures like the recent joint resolution introduced by Senator Rand Paul to block arms sales to the Kingdom.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress
Co-Chair, TLHRC



Randy Hultgren
Member of Congress
Co-Chair, TLHRC