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Information received from Dr. Mansour Al-Jamri, member of the Executive Committee of Interfaith International and editor of Alwasat News, Manama, Bahrain

Human rights situation in Bahrain

The human rights situation in Bahrain witnessed a marked improvement in 2001 with the release of political detainees and allowing exiles to return home. Non-governmental organisations were also permitted after 2001 and the press gained a better margin for freedom of expression.

However, these improvement came to a halt at around 2004/2005 and several drawbacks can be registered since then. These relate to increased discrimination, and restrictions on freedom of speech and association.

Increased discrimination

One of the reasons for the political instability during the past decades had been the official, though unwritten, policy of discriminating against the Shi'a indigenous community in Bahrain. Shi'a Bahrainis are not traditionally allowed in the Defence and Security ministries. However, the Shi'a are now further disadvantaged in virtually all ministries and functions of the state. Shi'a are now driven out of most senior and important position in all areas, including in the Health Ministry.

Shi'a are denied their fair share in all educational scholarships awarded by the State, and in fact they represent now less than 10 percent in all important decision-making bodies.

The government has appointed its own (non-Shi'a) people in virtually all Human Resources departments as well as in public relations departments, of all the key functions and enterprises, and through these departments a systematic discrimination against the Shi'a population is carried on.

Historically, the Shia were allocated a quarter of the cabinet positions, but in October 2007 this share dropped to a lower level.

Bandargate

In September 2006 an ex-strategic consultant, Dr. Salah Al-Bandar, who worked for the Cabinet Affairs Ministry, exposed a secret plan to rig the elections and to change the demography of the country through accelerated naturalisation of Sunni Arabs from the Syrian desert, from Iraq, Jordan, Yemen and elsewhere. The aim of the plot was to reduce the Shi'a from being 65% of the population to becoming only 35% of the population.

In fact this is what was witnessed during the October 2006 election when 62% of the votes (that is, predominately Shi'a votes) managed to receive only 43% of the seats in the lower House of Parliament. This gerrymandering was explained by the ex-consultant (Dr. Al-Bandar) in a widely circulated document dubbed by Bahrainis as "Badargate".

The authorities refused to question those involved in the scandal, and instead issued a ban on the press so that the issue has not been reported. Dr. Al-Bandar was sentenced in absentia to several years of imprisonment on charges of "stealing government documents".

Restricting freedom of expression

More than 50 web sites are now banned by the Information Ministry. The banning is executed through administrative and unaccounted-for decisions taken by the ministry.

More than 10 books have been banned, including the collection of articles by the anthropologist Dr. Nader Kadhim, who was prevented from printing his book.

All books require prior written approval before being allowed in circulation and the department that censors the book is the same one which operated during the existence of emergency laws prior to 2001.