



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 4

### Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

## Written statement\* submitted by The Next Century Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 August 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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## **The need for inclusive elections in Bahrain**

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy. The system of representation in Bahrain is bicameral and consists of the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, and the upper house, the Shura Council. The Chamber of Deputies has forty members elected in single-seat constituencies for a four-year term, whilst the Shura Council has forty members appointed by the King of Bahrain. The King also appoints the Prime Minister, a system that gives the monarchy full legislative control. Electoral district boundaries drawn by the government are crafted to advantage loyalist political groups, with the Shiite population being particularly underrepresented.

The last general elections to elect the forty members of the Chamber of Deputies were held in 2018 in two rounds. The first round occurred on 24 November and the second round was held in thirty-one constituencies on 1 December, where no candidate had received a majority vote in the first round. These elections followed a government crackdown prohibiting members of certain opposition groups from running. In particular, two main opposition groups, the Shiite Al-Wefaq and secular Wa'ad, were banned from fielding members in the 2018 elections following government allegations that they had included terrorists in their opposition demonstrations.

The Next Century Foundation sees a new power-sharing agreement in which the opposition gains half of the parliamentary seats as essential for Bahrain. By moving towards a reformed bicameral government system in which power is distributed more equally, the population of Bahrain as a whole will be better represented in their parliament. This transition is dependent on national dialogue between opposition political parties and the government in Bahrain.

Political parties, technically outlawed in Bahrain, operate under the appellation "Political Societies." Since 2002, a number of licensed pro-government and pro-opposition parties have been active in the country, representing Islamist, Liberal, Leftist and Youth factions. Prominent political groups in Bahrain include political societies such as Al-Menbar, a Sunni Islamist party representing Bahrain's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood; Al Salah, the chief Sunni Salafist party; the Al Mustaqbal group, a Sunni secular coalition.

Al-Wefaq is the largest Shia opposition party in the country and held the more seats than any other single political group in the legislature between 2006 and 2011. In 2014, Al-Wefaq boycotted the national elections and in 2016 the group was dissolved by a court in Bahrain in a bid to stamp out dissent. This verdict was upheld the next year and the group's assets were seized. In 2018, parliament approved a bill that banned dissolved opposition groups from running independently in elections.

Its leader Sheikh Ali Salman has been in prison since 2015, and received a life sentence on November 4, 2018. Along with three other opposition leaders, he was accused of spying for Qatar. The Next Century Foundation calls for the release of Ali Salman, leader of the Al-Wefaq party. This would ensure that a fair and open national dialogue leading to transparent elections could be established in the country.

Additionally, the government's decision to dissolve the secular left National Democratic Action Society, better known as Wa'ad, in 2017 on charges of incitement to violence represented a disturbing development in Bahrain's willingness to quell opposition in the country. We call for the government to reverse its decisions on the banning of Wefaq and Wa'ad, in order to facilitate a more democratic parliament.

The Next Century Foundation is also concerned about the suppression of the independent press in Bahrain, a freedom enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. No independent opposition media has been allowed to operate in Bahrain for over two years.

Al-Wasat, a prominent independent newspaper that had been active for 15 years, was indefinitely suspended in June 2017 by Bahrain's Information Ministry. This is the fourth time the paper has been shut down since 2011. Press freedom groups from around the world have since called for the lifting of Al-Wasat's suspension in order to allow for independent reporting in the country. Bahrain is currently ranked among the 20 most restrictive countries for press freedom, according to the World Press Freedom Index. The Next Century

foundation calls for an end to the indefinite suspension of Al-Wasat, the country's sole opposition newspaper, to allow the country to exhibit the basic press freedoms guaranteed by the United Nations.

In the aftermath of mass demonstrations that occurred in February of 2011, on July 2, 2011, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa launched The Bahrain National Dialogue, an initiative intended to promote reform and fuel discussions regarding the governing of Bahrain. It was based on consensus-building around the topics of political, social, economic, and human rights issues. It allowed for all views to be recorded in recommendations to King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. 300 organizations were invited to participate, 37% of which were political groups, 36% non-government organizations, 21% were opinion leaders and prominent figures of Bahrain, and 6% media. The 36% of the dialogue made of non-government organizations representation was broken down into 12% for professional societies, 9% social societies, 5% women societies, 5% youth societies, 3% labor unions, and 2% from the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The National Dialogue was chaired by the Crown Prince and was intended to not only reach common ground and understanding, but also to allow for more in depth exploration of different viewpoints expressed by those with a seat at the table. In 2011, just two weeks into the National Dialogue, Al-Wefaq, the main Shiite opposition, withdrew from the talks. In total, only 35 of the 300 participants were representative of opposition groups in Bahrain.

In 2013, after nearly two years of protests, the National Dialogue was relaunched. On February 10, 2013, talks resumed to continue the discussion of political issues. Again, it was difficult for the delegates to come to a consensus and challenging for all minority and opposition societies to agree on one platform. By September of 2013, the opposition once again felt underrepresented and pulled out and by January of 2014, Bahrain's government had officially suspended the talks. The government was hopeful that positive agreements could still be reached and that parties involved in the talks would leave channels of communication open among each other. These channels have failed to stay open.

The Next Century Foundation calls for the National Dialogue to be restructured and resumed to allow the diverse voices of Bahrain to all have seats at the talks around healing and reform. It is paramount that there is an agreed upon agenda for the talks with representation that reflects the views of and is proportionate to the people of Bahrain as a precursor to free and fair elections.

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