Opposition leader arrested as social tensions rise in Bahrain

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Khalil al-Marzouq, Assistant Secretary General of Bahrain's main Shia opposition association al-Wefaq, was taken into custody on September 17. The opposition leader was first summoned to a police station, where he was allegedly interrogated for seven hours in the presence of his lawyer.

According to Public Prosecutor Nayef Yousfi, after the interrogation, Marzouq was "charged under the Law for Protecting the Community from Terrorist Acts, with inciting and advocating terrorism, and using his leadership position in a legally organized political society to incite crimes." The Public Prosecutor's office ordered Marzouq's detention for 30 days, pending an investigation. If convicted, he will face a lengthy jail sentence, and his citizenship may be revoked.

The Public Prosecutor's statement accuses Marzouq of being "affiliated with the terrorist organization" and contends that he had been "speaking at many forums, inciting and promoting terrorist acts, advocating principles which incite such acts, supporting violence committed by the terrorist coalition, and legally justifying criminal activities."

Marzouq and the al-Wefaq organization has repeatedly signaled that they posed no threat to Bahrain's reactionary monarchy. In February, during a visit to Washington to discuss his party's position, Marzouq said that al-Wefaq has banned slogans calling for the overthrow of the regime and the prosecution of the ruling al-Khalifa family from its own demonstrations. He said that al-Wefaq sought to share power with the ruling family in a constitutional monarchy.

Al-Wefaq had also participated in the official National Dialogue talks, set up by the monarchy this July, that include government representatives.

In a September 6 speech in the Saar district west of the capital, Manama, Marzouq warned the regime that the people would only continue to resist if it kept using force to impose its political and religious views. He said that attempts to force an end to the crisis would fail the test of time, as new generations would "ultimately come to rise against the tyrants and oppression, just as relentlessly as waves are coming to crash on shore."

In the course of Marzouq's speech, a masked man handed him a white flag, associated with the February 14 Movement—a coalition of organizations that took part in the Pearl Square demonstrations in early 2011, shortly after the Egyptian revolution began.

After his arrest, Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director, demanded Marzouq's immediate and unconditional release, calling him "a prisoner of conscience." She insisted that he has come under attack solely because of his "vehement criticism of the government."

Al-Wefaq has called Marzouq's interrogation and arrest "reckless" and "a clear targeting of political action in Bahrain." It believes Marzouq's detention is partly a reaction to a European Parliament resolution passed last week, calling on the monarchy to stop attacks on peaceful protesters and to allow an independent human rights investigation.

The UN Human Rights Council recently published a joint statement of 47 governments condemning Bahrain's human rights record. In addition, the government has received rebukes from the UK and US ambassadors to Geneva.

The United States and its European allies are intervening in an attempt to shore up the regime in Bahrain, forcing it to make certain cosmetic concessions to limit popular opposition. (See also: "Bahrain gripped by renewed protests") They view this as all the more pressing due to the country's unstable sectarian balance. The majority of Bahrain's population is Shiite, but the country is ruled by the Sunni al-Khalifa royal family.

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Washington considers the stability of the regime to be critical, as Bahrain houses the US Fifth Fleet's main base in the Persian Gulf. The US government backed the bloody crushing of the Pearl Square protests by the al-Khalifa monarchy, supported by Saudi forces.

The ongoing, US-instigated sectarian war in Syria and the threats of US wars with Syria and Iran, two Shia-led countries in the region, have set the entire region on edge. The Bahraini king's uncle, Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Sulman al-Khalifa, is the object of deep popular hatred, and the royal family fears that if it allows opposition Shia groups any leeway, this might open the door to further incursions on its power.

On Wednesday, the day after Marzouq was detained, political opposition associations, including al-Wefaq, announced their decision to suspend their participation in National Dialogue talks.

On Thursday, the day after withdrawing from the National Dialogue, Al Wefaq Secretary General Sheik Ali Salman met Norwegian political affairs envoy Hakon Smedsvig in Manama.

The meeting took place in defiance of a decree issued by the Minister of Justice earlier this month. Political groups are only authorized to meet with foreign diplomats after notifying the Ministry of Justice three days in advance, and meetings are required to take place in the presence of an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Western governments, including the US, have sharply criticized the decree, which interferes with their efforts to negotiate with opposition groups to help provide the regime a bogus "democratic" facelift. In a statement issued after the decrees, State Department spokesperson Marie Harf expressed regret about the deteriorating state of US-brokered talks between the regime and opposition groups, and the restrictions on "communications with foreign governments and international organizations."

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