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Kuwait: Authorities must stop targeting pro-Bidun protesters as elections loom

Kuwaiti authorities have arrested 18 people in Kuwait, including three candidates for upcoming parliamentary elections, for taking part in a peaceful demonstration the previous week in support of Kuwait's stateless Bidun community, Amnesty International said today.

On 31 August 2022, the Office of Public Prosecution summoned them for investigation on charges that could lead to up to nine months imprisonment and ordered their pre-trial detention pending further investigation.

“This is a blatant attempt by the Kuwaiti authorities to intimidate people who are exercising their rights to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly. Instead of listening to the demonstrators’ calls for the rights of stateless Bidun people to

nationality, education and healthcare, the authorities are seeking to silence and punish them,” said Amna Guellali, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The authorities must drop any and all legal action against these peaceful protesters. Ahead of parliamentary elections in September, the Kuwaiti authorities must respect the rights of everyone in Kuwait to participate freely and peacefully in public affairs, which includes the right to join peaceful demonstrations and to freely express their demand for basic rights.”

On 30 and 31 August, Kuwaiti officials from the Ministry of Interior **summoned** 18 people and brought them before the Office of Public Prosecution for interrogation in relation to their participation in a 26 August demonstration. Four were summoned on the night of 30–31 August and the other 14 were summoned the next day, 31 August. All remain in detention for further questioning by the Office of Public Prosecution.

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Amna Guellali, Amnesty International

The 18 individuals face prosecution under Kuwait’s Law on Public Meetings and Gatherings for participating in an unauthorized demonstration and failing to disperse from the gathering after being ordered to do so. Under Articles 16 and 20 of that law, together these two charges carry a sentence of up to nine months in prison.

In addition to the Bidun organizers of the demonstration on 26 August, six legally recognized Kuwaiti nationals took part and are among those brought before the Office of Public Prosecution. The demonstration in the Taima area of al-Jahra province, west of Kuwait City, was organized by Bidun activists calling for the dissolution of the government agency which regulates Bidun affairs, the Central System for the Remedy of the Situation of Illegal Residents, which Bidun activists accuse of perpetuating their statelessness and increasing restrictions on their access to education, healthcare and other services.

The Central System accuses the Bidun of being “non-natives” who entered the country “illegally”. ‘Bidun’ (also bedoon or bidoon) means ‘without’, short for ‘without nationality’. However, tens of thousands have been born in Kuwait, many have documents showing that their parents and grandparents were born in Kuwait, and under international law such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Kuwait is a party, all children have the right to a nationality. There are tens of thousands of stateless Bidun people in Kuwait, who lack access to the same level of services as recognized Kuwaiti nationals.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which Kuwait has acceded to, protects the right to freedom of expression (Article 19) and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly (Article 21). It also is a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which recognizes the rights of all to education and to the highest attainable standard of health.

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