

43 jailed Bahraini protestors freed

Agence France-Presse - 23 September, 2006

Bahrain on Friday freed 43 nationals imprisoned after a demonstration in December last year against the arrest of a Shiite cleric.

The release, by royal decree, came after political association leaders met with the king, Sheikh Hamad ben Issa al-Khalifa, on Wednesday. Dozens of Bahrainis were arrested for demonstrating at Manama airport on December 25 over the arrest of a Shiite cleric on his returned from Iran, and some of them sentenced to up to two years in prison.

During the rally, some of the 200 protestors fought security forces and destroyed property. The cleric, Sheikh Mohammed Sanad, whose detention sparked the December melee, had angered the Bahraini authorities with his call for a referendum on the tiny kingdom's constitution passed in 2002. Sanad was later released. Bahrain's elected chamber, scrapped in 1975, was revived in 2002 as part of reforms spearheaded by King Hamad, which turned the Gulf state into a constitutional monarchy. All four opposition groups boycotted the 2002 parliamentary polls in protest over what they felt was a lack of power awarded to the island's elected legislative chamber.

Shiites make up a majority of the population in Sunni-ruled Bahrain, which is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet.