

Saudi activists urge king to free jailed reformists

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Saudi activists sent a petition to King Abdullah on Thursday urging the release of nine advocates of an Islam-based constitutional monarchy held for more than seven months without trial.

The petition, timed to coincide with the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, was endorsed by 135 reformists including 49 women, Mohammad bin Hudeijan al-Harbi, one of the signatories, told AFP by telephone from Riyadh.

"We sent it by post. We did not request an audience because we have become used that such audiences are not possible," he said.

Harbi said copies were also sent to 14 princes from the ruling Al-Saud family, including Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz and Interior Minister Prince Nayef.

The petition comes amid an apparent crackdown on reformists in Saudi Arabia, which is ruled by an absolute monarchy, even though the activists seek changes in keeping with the Islamic tenets underpinning the political system of the Gulf oil powerhouse.

Prominent reformist Abdullah al-Hamed and a brother went on trial last week on charges of inciting a women's sit-in and obstructing security forces.

Another reformist, Mohammad Saleh al-Bijadi, has been behind bars for nine days in connection with a similar women's protest.

Activists appear to have been emboldened by a recent call by Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz, a maverick and reform-minded half-brother of the king, for the establishment of a political party that would be open to reformists.

A copy of the petition was sent to Prince Talal, whose remarks show that "there are some members of the ruling family who advocate reform," Harbi said.

According to the petition, the nine detainees, whose arrest in early February was attributed by authorities to alleged involvement in terror funding, had themselves been mulling the formation of an Islamic political party.

Political parties are banned in Saudi Arabia, which has no elected legislature -- only a consultative council appointed by the monarch.

The nine had been "examining ideas pertaining to civil society mechanisms, such as an 'Islamic national charter' or an 'Islamic constitution party' and a 'committee for freedoms and basic rights' that would be proposed to a number of reformists," the petition reads.

Its signatories accuse the interior ministry of seeking to discredit their fellow reformists by associating them with terrorism.

The real purpose of their detention is to "tarnish (the image of) proponents of a civil society,"

chiefly advocates of a political system in line with the Islamic principle that allegiance to the ruler must be based on the application of "justice and shura (consultation)," it says.

The document urges the king to free the nine activists or ensure that they get a public trial, noting that they have been detained for longer than the six-month period in which suspects can be held without trial under Saudi law.

The nine are lawyers Suleiman al-Rushoodi, Mussa al-Qarni and Issam Basrawi, and Abdul Rahman al-Shemairi, Abdul Aziz al-Kheraiji, Saifeddin Faisal al-Sharif, Fahd al-Qarshi, Saud al-Hashemi and Abdul Rahman Khan.