

Saudi reformers call for free elections

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Saudi reform activists have called for free elections in an Internet petition, but two of the document's authors have been arrested on suspicion of funding terrorism.

So far, 114 people have signed the document, dated February 2, and made available on website www.dostor-islami.com last week for citizens to add their names by March 20. "After one month we will present it to the king, we will deliver it to the royal court," signatory Khaled Al Omair said.

The document accuses the government of preventing reformers from travelling abroad, closing some Internet sites, banning public demonstrations and threatening state employees with dismissal for expressing opinions contrary to government policy.

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy with an unelected quasi-parliament that advises on legislation. Elections were held in 2005 for half of the seats on municipal councils, but hopes that more would follow have so far come to nothing.

"Depriving citizens of their legitimate right to individual and group expression ... leads to more corruption, wasting of public money and rising unemployment and poverty," it said.

"The general interests of the people in any country can only be ensured via a parliament voted for by all adult men and women. This is the best way of protecting the country, its people, public money and taking correct decisions."

The petition resembles another issued in March 2004 which led to the trial of three of its authors and accusations from the Interior Ministry that the campaigners were exploiting Western pressure for reform.

The three activists were handed jail sentences but later pardoned when the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz was enthroned in 2005, in what some observers saw as a sign of differences within the royal family on how to deal with political reform.

STRONGER LANGUAGE

The new petition appears to use stronger language, attacking the Interior Ministry for using "absolute authority" to expand its influence into government functions beyond its remit. It calls for the ministry to be broken into two separate ministries, one for local government and another for security.

Three of its signatories, Sulaiman Rushoudy, Mousa Al Qarny and Fahd Al Qurashi, were among 10 men detained on February 2 in what the Interior Ministry said was an operation within the framework of operations against funding terrorism.

Omair said the petition was one reason behind the arrests. "It's one of the reasons. The three men wanted to encourage people to sign the petition," he said. The diplomat said it was "highly likely" the arrests were linked to the petition.

The Interior Ministry could not be reached for comment. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have expressed concern, asking authorities to explain charges against the men.

Swiss-based International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), an independent group of jurists and lawyers who monitor human rights issues, said yesterday that there was "sufficient evidence" to suggest they were arrested for their reform activities.

But a source familiar with the case has said three of the detainees were involved in collecting money for people who have been recruiting volunteers to fight in Iraq since 2003. It was not clear why they would have been arrested now.

The United States, a key Saudi ally, has urged Saudi Arabia to do more to stop Saudi support for insurgents in Iraq. Many Saudis have gone to Iraq to join Islamists fighting US forces there under the support of Al Qaeda.