

"KitSon" Debates Forbidden in Bahrain

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The local Gulf-Daily-News (GDN) newspaper reported today (Friday February 12, 2010) that a series of debates organized by the KitSon, a Paris-based non-governmental organisation, has been called off, as the Authorities have shown their disapproval of its contents, and were "deemed too sensitive"[1]. The KitSon was planning to hold a dinner-debate, scheduled on March 8, and meant to focus on "GCC counter-terrorism". The organisers were "unofficially" informed that such event is in violation of the local laws and hence could not be allowed to take place. KitSon lawyers were told that the only alternative was to either establish their organisation as a "friendly society" with the majority of members being Bahrainis, or register as a commercial company.

This is not the first case in Bahrain, where political debates, public seminars and any activity touching public issues have been cuffed by the local Authorities as they deemed "sensitive, subversive and unfavourable"[2]. Journalists, columnists and writers[3] have been prosecuted if covering issues including change of demography and politically motivated naturalization program, marginalization and disfranchising of the indigenous citizens, misappropriation of lands, corruption and confiscation of public properties, which are all managed and coordinated by the Royal court. Public figures, politicians and human rights defenders are prevented from expressing their views publicly by deploying Special Forces[4].

Moreover in late 2008, the Bahrain Minister of Interior called for the enforcement of Article of 134 of the Penal code of 1976 which punishes citizens when attending or participating in meetings, conferences or seminars abroad or meets with representatives of foreign countries, organizations or bodies to discuss the internal affairs of Bahrain, without government authorization.[5]

The KitSon, a Parisian debate club formed in April 2006, has been active in bringing together, in an off the record scenario, "journalists, writers, philosophers, business executives, diplomats and politicians to debate matters of current concern with their international counterparts, while at the same time creating an opportunity for dialogue on a wide range of topics that will both enrich and inform"[6].

As part of its interest, KitSon was planning to hold monthly debates in Bahrain to address a variety of topics of concerns. It was successful in launching its first debates in Geneva in January 2009, in Bahrain in February 2009, and at the World Investment Conference in La Baule in June 2009. The KitSon schedule for 2010 includes several debates[7] on "Economic Intelligence", "Arab Policy in France", "New Wave Security", "Europe from the Inside", "Europe and The Gulf: Together in a Changing World".

Elisa Kitson, The KitSon founder and former correspondent at The Daily Telegraph, Financial Times and The Independent, told the GDN:"We've received no explanation from the government or any ministry apart from our lawyers informing us that Bahrain's law does not allow us to hold political debates". "I feel like we've been led up the garden path and wasted a year".[8] "In my opinion, how can a country claim to want to embrace foreigners and attract more people when they are doing things like this?"It has totally put us off organising any event in Bahrain in the future, which is very sad as we've got an excellent reputation across Europe and most of the world", added Ms Kitson.

HAQ is aggravated about the attitude of the local Authorities towards the KitSon activities and would classify it as further clamping to the freedom of expression in Bahrain. Therefore, HAQ calls for the Authorities to:

- 1- Left the ban on the scheduled debates KitSon activities in Bahrain and show appreciation to their debates and closed forums concerning worrying issues in Bahrain and the region.
- 2- Modify the local legislations to ensure its conformity with the International human rights covenants and declarations. This includes the 1989 Civic Society and the 1976 Penal Codes which constraint and clamp individuals and organizations from association and freedom of expression.
- 3- Respect vows and commitments to human rights covenants and declarations and particularly those concerned with freedom of expression and rights to information.

[1] <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=270589>

[2] http://ifex.org/bahrain/2009/04/28/authorities_prevent_public_seminars/

http://ifex.org/bahrain/2009/05/26/public_seminar_prevented/

[3] http://ifex.org/bahrain/2009/07/16/sabt_defamation_charge/

http://ifex.org/bahrain/2009/05/08/journalist_summoned_for_allegedly/

http://ifex.org/bahrain/2009/04/15/authorities_question_critical_journalist/

[4] http://ifex.org/bahrain/2009/08/24/public_event_banned/

[5] <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/bahrain-calls-to-enforce-article-134-of-penal-code-prompts-fears-of-crackdown.pdf>

[6] <http://www.thekitson.net/>

[7] <http://www.thekitson.net/diners-débats/diners-débats-2010/>

[8] <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=270589>