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European Union (EU) - Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leaders must ensure transparency in people's participation in public affairs

On the occasion of the first summit between leaders of the European Union (EU) and the six Arab states on and adjacent to the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf Cooperation Council, which takes place on 16 October 2024 in Brussels, Belgium, Salam for Democracy and Human Rights (SALAM DHR) and Rights Realization Centre (RRC) urge EU leaders to call openly on their counterparts to ensure that GCC governments promote and protect their peoples' right to participate in public affairs.

In 2024, three GCC states have enacted measures that have or can reduce the transparent participation by the people in the conduct of public affairs. In May 2024, the [Government of Kuwait suspended](#) its National Assembly for a period for up to four years. On 15 October 2024, the Government of Qatar announced that it would hold a referendum on [constitutional amendments that would suppress elections](#): two thirds of the members of Qatar's Shura Council, which has limited, advisory powers, are elected. On 16 October the [Government of Bahrain announced that it would halt](#) the live broadcast of its House of Representatives (Majlis al-Shura, or HoR) but show it two hours after its broadcast. They likewise limited the presence of photographers to the starting 10 minutes of each HoR session.

Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) each have appointed - or, in effect, appointed - assemblies with symbolic powers, which provide a limited and restricted space through which people may take part in public affairs. Governments in these states restrict election processes so that they are highly regulated. The government's involvement in each process is inconsistent with recognisably democratic processes, as this term is widely and generally understood.

Nevertheless, three GCC states - Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar are state parties to the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR). Article 25 of the treaty states that:

*"Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity [...] (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; [and] (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors [...]."*¹

¹ Article 25 also guarantees that *"Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity [...] (c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country."*

Article 21 of the 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR), to which Saudi Arabia abstained upon its proclamation, states that “*Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.*”²

Articles 2 and 21 of [The Consolidated Version of the Treaty European Union](#) place consultative democracy at the heart of the European project and in relation to its international relations³: Citing Article 2, Article 21 of the Treaty states that the EU’s:

“[...] action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.”

European and Gulf history and experience has repeatedly shown that involving people in a transparent manner in the conduct of public affairs can and does reduce the incidence of human rights violations; that enabling people to express their opinions, including online and through an independent media, and gather peacefully often leads to a reduction in arbitrary arrest and unfair trial; wrongful imprisonment and torture or ill-treatment in custody. On the contrary, the express and transparent involvement of people in public affairs can and does increase public security and further the rule of law. It can also increase support for the inclusion of gender-inclusive policies and ending the death penalty.

Our organisations call on EU leaders to press their counterparts to halt the slide towards authoritarian rule, however benign it may be portrayed by GCC leaders, and ensure the transparent involvement of people in public affairs. We likewise call on EU leaders to ensure that member states adhere to the same principles, with a view to reducing and ending human rights violations in the GCC but also the EU.

We call on GCC states to implement, immediately, practical measures that advance the people’s participation in public affairs, including by:

- Restoring and empowering freely elected national, regional and urban assemblies;
- Releasing long term political prisoners such as Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and [Sheikh Ali Salman](#) in Bahrain; Rashed al-Marri in Qatar; prisoners [highlighted by the Saudi Arabia-focused ALOST](#), including Manahel al-Otaibi and human rights defender (HRD), Waleed Abu al-Khair; and 84 detainees arbitrarily tried and imprisoned by the UAE, as described by the [Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre \(EDAC\)](#), including HRD, Ahmed Mansoor, lawyer Dr Mohamed al-Roken and economist Nasser bin Ghaith, amongst others; and
- Taking concrete steps to ensure transparency in the administration of justice, notably in cases relating to national security and the death penalty.

Further information and recommended actions:

² Article 21 of the UDHR goes on to say that “*[...]Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.*”

³ Concluded on 7 February, 1992 in Maastricht and found in the 26 October 2012 edition of the Official Journal of the European Union, reference C 326/15, the Treaty on the European Union states, in Article 2, that the EU is “*founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.*”

The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the current, rotating President of the GCC, will chair proceedings.

Please post on social media, including X (formerly Twitter):

EU Special Representative for the Gulf, Luigi Di Maio, @EUSR_Gulf: Call on #GCC states to restore & empower elected assemblies since people's engagement in public affairs can reduce human rights violations - @SALAM_DHR @EDAC_Rights @ALQST_En @ochromanorg @amnestygulf 

.@EUintheUAE @EUinKuwait: Call on #GCC states to restore & empower elected assemblies since people's engagement in public affairs can reduce human rights violations - @SALAM_DHR @EDAC_Rights @ALQST_En @ochromanorg @amnestygulf 

.@eeas @JosepBorrellF @CharlesMichel : Call on #GCC states to restore & empower elected assemblies since people's engagement in public affairs can reduce human rights violations - @SALAM_DHR @EDAC_Rights @ALQST_En @ochromanorg @amnestygulf 

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