

Thousands demonstrate against naturalisation law in Bahrain

Thousands of demonstrators in Bahrain Friday demanded an end to the alleged politically-motivated naturalisation of Sunni Arabs and Asians on the island.

The demonstrators formed a three-km human chain in the capital Manama to protest what the opposition describes as an effort to change the demography of largely Shiite Bahrain and influence the outcome of elections.

The demonstration was organised by six opposition groups, including Islamist Shiites, just days after the government rejected a petition signed by more than 190 leading opposition figures and called for a halt to naturalisation until a national dialogue and a review of immigration laws could take place.

'We were expecting the petition to be rejected but its intended message had been delivered,' lawmaker Sheikh Ali Salman of the Shiite Al-Wefaq Islamic Society, told DPA.

He added that opposition groups would draw up another petition in January.

Bahrain's opposition leaders have for years been complaining that tens of thousands of Syrians, Jordanians, Pakistanis and Indians were illegally naturalised ahead of elections in 2004.

The issue topped the list of opposition grievances ahead of elections in 2006 and is at the heart of the opposition parties' platform in the run-up to next year's poll.

Interior Minister Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa earlier this month publicly described the allegations as baseless and misleading. Previously the government had confined its response to such criticism to parliament.

Al-Khalifa told the pro-government daily Al-Watan that there was no systematic discrimination against anyone and that the Shiites represented the overwhelming majority of those who had been naturalised in recent years.

'The King had ordered the naturalisation of 7,648 since the start of the decade, 95 percent of whom are Shiite,' he was quoted as saying.

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