

Opening remarks by Nicola Giovannini
No Peace Without Justice – Droit au Droit

First of all, I would like to thank Salam for having led this initiative which we have been pleased to support. I would also like to say welcome and thank to all our distinguished guests, the experts and human rights groups representatives who will contribute to this conference as well as those who have come to attend to its proceedings.

As some of you may know, our organisation, No Peace Without Justice, has been closely monitoring the human rights situation or rather crisis in Bahrain, since the popular revolts which took place in early 2011 and were brutally repressed. We have also been very committed to support all those (local human rights defenders and advocates as well as political leaders) who were working if not struggling to promote through nonviolent means meaningful political reforms aimed at anchoring the future of their country on democracy, the rule of law and respect of human rights.

We have done so by fostering advocacy and sensitization initiatives targeting the UNHRC in Geneva and the European institutions, or by mobilising public audience and political stakeholders when their situation was at risk.

Many of them if not most of them have and are still facing repressive and retaliatory practices (through judicial means) for simply having exercised their right to freedom of speech or peaceful assembly. They have been depicted by the Bahraini authorities as enemies of the country for instigating hatred against the regime and inciting to its overthrow.

This divide-and-rule strategy adopted by the regime to delegitimise genuine demands of reforms as driven by particular or sectarian interests (and thus negate their national scope) is not something new. Using and cultivating sectarianism as a political instrument has been a common trend in Bahrain. Critically, this has also been reflected or translated into discriminatory practices and policies targeting (and thus segregating) the Shia community in Bahrain which composes the majority of the population. I will not enter into the details of such system of iniquity (versus privileges) which covers both socio-economic and political sphere, as well as the religious domain. This will be the focus of other panellists during this conference who are much more expert than me on these issues.

What I would like to stress is that a State that wants to be considered as democratic cannot rely on such system which nurtures sectarian division.

While I recognise the relevance of the focus of this two-day meeting, my hope and I think our vision at long-term should be to promote meaningful reforms aimed at ensuring that sooner or later (and the soonest would be better) Bahrainis, independently of their religious belief or community, can be considered and consider themselves first and foremost as citizens of a country, of a state, equal in rights before the law and with an equal say in the matters related to the governance of public life.

I wish to everybody here a fruitful conference and I leave the floor to the first panellist of this opening session.