

BAHRAIN

A monthly newsletter issued by the Bahrain Freedom Movement

Time To Stop Despotism in the Gulf

Constitutional Government is the Shortest Way to Stability

Last month's summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) offered very little to improve the chances of a serious improvement in the internal situation of the six member states. Apart from the external threats which have plagued the earlier summits, the threats from within are proving an untractable problem, from the view point of the Gulf regimes. Here there are two major problems which will dictate the agenda of the future summits, if there is going to be any. Firstly, the bilateral relations between the little Sheikdoms have become a source of increasing instability in the region. Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was not the first, and would not be the last. The borders disputes are becoming the new enemy of the Gulf grouping known as the GCC. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the stagnation of the internal political situation is causing social and political unrest and could lead to major upheavals in the region.

On the frist count, the bitter experience of the Saudi-Qatari dispute left no room for optimism even among the six leaders who had to shy away from any public debate on the issue. The Qataris appear to have fully understood the implication of succumbing to the Saudi bullying and, accordingly, decided to take up the issue to the limit, even if that limit meant leaving the GCC. The steadfastness of the Qataris took the Saudis by surprise and are unlikely to forgive them on the long term. On the short term, however, the Saudis thought it was better this time to back down lest the whole GCC enterprise collapses sooner than expected. By withdrawing their forces from the Al Khofous border post barely two weeks before the 13th GCC summit in Abu Dhabi, the Saudis were rewarded by the fully-attended meeting. Perhaps that was the only tangible outcome of the lavishly convened summit.

The hastily-arranged border agreement was not the end of the border disputes among the tribal regimes of the Gulf, but the beginning of a long and painful process of undoing decades of border tensions and claims. The Saudis have to take up the task of dis-entangling the messy border disputes with Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain. This is not to say that the dispute with Qatar is over. Infact what the two sides have achieved is an agreement to go back to the 1965 agreement which in effect means, restarting the whole process again from where they had reached almost thirty years ago. The Saudi apparent willingness to compromise could not be a good news to Riyadh which is locked up in a border dispute with its southernmost neighbour, Yemen. The Saudis,

according to the 1972 agreement, are required to hand over three major towns on the border with Yemen, namely; Aseer, Nejran and Jeezan. So far, the Saudis have resisted doing so through a policy of bullying and coercion. Yemen feels time has eventually come to claim their territory back at any cost.

The second problem on the internal front is the political change in the Gulf region which is long overdue. The rulers know they are under a close observation not only by their enemies, but also by their own allies in Europe and the United States. The most recent bilateral talks between the GCC and ECC countries in Qatar three months ago, the Europe and parliamentarians stated clearly their displeasure at the continuation of human rights violations, lack of political freedoms and the subhuman treatment of women. On the three accounts, the GCC officials took a defensive stand which could not impress their European counterparts. The Gulf rulers debated the victory of Bill Clinton in the US presidential elections, and were clearly worried by this advent especially if the new American administration took the issue of human rights seriously. Warren Christopher, the new Secretary of State, knows that his credibility, as an anti-Vietnam and human rights campaigner, will be compromised if he fails to raise the issue of freedom and human rights with the allies of the United States, especially the GCC countries.

The issue of political change is perhaps the most sensitive side of any future relations between the Gulf states and the outside world, especially the West. The credibility of the present regimes in the Gulf has eroded because of their failure to implement a serious programme of political reforms. Their reaction to any popular demand for freedom, openness, respect of human rights and political participation has always been hostile, and has often assumed harsh dimensions including arrests of opponenets, torture, exile, or other forms of social punishment including banning people from work, travel or appearance in public. This is certainly the case in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent in Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman. Kuwait has improved her records in these areas, thanks to the madness of Saddam Hussain. It is now almost a year since King Fahd of Saudi Arabia announced his intention to form a symbolic consultative council with no legislative or leagl powers. He has, so far, failed to make good his promise despite the diluted nature of the proposed form of "democracy".

Bahrain is perhaps the most notorious among

the Gulf states for its lack of any form of political openness. Infact, as time passes and political and economic problems accumulate, the Al Khalifa ruling tribe becomes even more aggressive and less tolerant. The Amir scrapped the democratic process in 1975, suspended the constitution and dissolved the parliament and declared emergency laws. For seventeen years, the country has been living in a state of terror, and people have since lived in continuous fear for their own lives. Last month, the Amir took the most serious step to date in his campaign to abolish anything constitutional in the country. On the national Day (or more accurately, the day of his succession to the throne in 1961) on 16th December, he announced the formation of a "consultative council" of 30 members all of whom were nominated by himself. The council has no legislative or legal status and is nothing but a tool to diffuse outside criticism.

The Amiri order has no constitutional base and is unprecedented. In reality, the Amir of Bahrain who is supposed to be the guardian of the constitution has chosen to adopt dictatorship to replace constitutional relationship with the people. Unilaterally, Sheikh Essa Bin Salman Al Khalifa has declared to the people he is no longer abiding by the constution, a step which has serious implications. People have, hitherto, clinged to the hope that constitutional rule will one day prevail in the country, and that once the political tensions which were mostly linked to regional problems, cease to exist, there will be no reason for the government to scrap the constitution. The alternativ to this is dictatorship, emergency laws, totalitarianism, and despotism. It now seems the Al Khalifa ruling tribe of Bahrain has chosen the path of conflict instead of integrartion. By this they are sewing the seeds of discontent and confrontation. If this behaviour is to be taken as an indications of the things to come, then there will only be bad news for everyone, especially the Gulf people.

It is thus incumbent on everyone with interest in the Gulf to come forward with suggestions, and if necessary, political pressure, to effect a serious change in the status quo to remove tendency towards tension and confrontation. The years of the eighties and their terrible memories must be avoided at all costs, if problems and instability is to be avoided. The alternative to this is chaos, anarchy and perhaps bloodshed. The Gulf region has been exploited mercilessly not least by the tribal regimes. It is time to redraw the jigsaw of political events in a more proper and humanely spiritum and suppress the tendency towards depostism, dictatorship and unconstitutional form of government.

Unconstitutional, Secretive Council With a Dubious Mission

The Amir's (ruler) message on his enthronement day of 16 December 1992 contained no surprise revelation. "The Shura (consultative) council shall be established" declared the Amir. The matter has been known for some months and was preempted by all sides of opposition and active sections (Both Sunni and Shiite, national and Islamic) of the society as was evident in the petition of mid-November 1992 submitted to the Amir by some 150-200 distinguished personalities.

On 21 December 1992 Al-Ayyam daily published the Amir Order No. 9 containing 32 articles outlining the structure, responsibilities and authority of the appointed Shura council. Article 2 states that "the council function is to express opinions and provide suggestions on the following: bills drafted by the Council of Ministers before ratification by the Amir, State policies on politics, economy, culture, social affairs & administration, affairs relating to public services and ways of developing them, means of developing the omy and treatment of obstacles, in addition to any other matter as may be decided by the Council of Ministers".

This article declares that the appointed council is sandwiched between the cabinet and the Amir. It does not initiate legislation nor does it control the agenda on any issue not permitted by the cabinet. This contravenes Article 22 of the Constitution which states "The government system is based on the principle of separation of legislature, executive and judiciary" and that the "legislative powers shall be shared by the Amir and the national (elected) assembly". The mere fact of appointing members is rejected by the Constitution in Article 43 which clearly prescribes the establishment of an elected body, which is not the case for this Shura council. Article 5 of the Amir Order 9/92 dictates that the Amir appoints all 30 members of Shura Council and Article 8 of the same order authorizes the Amir to dissolve it without any condition. Article 65 of the Constitution imposes conditions on the dissolution of the elected council by requiring new elections within 2 months or the dissolved assembly would re-assume all its powers. The latter was not abided by when the Amir dissolved the elected body on 26 August 1995.

On the presidency of the council, Article 6 of Order 9/92 reserves this right to the Amir and denies the appointed members from sorting it between themselves. This contrast what the Constitution originally granted the elected body in Article 54 which clearly states that the president shall be elected by the MPs.

More interesting is the difference between the member's oath of the newly appointed council. Article 21 of order 9/92 goes like this: "I swear by God the Almighty to be loyal to the Fatherland and the Amir and to respect the Law and to perform my duties with integrity and honesty". Note the difference now with the oath of the elected body stated in Article 53 of the Constitution: "I swear by God the Almighty to be loyal to the Fatherland and the Amir and to respect the Constitution and State Laws, and to

defend the freedom and interests of the People and to perform my duties with integrity and honesty". Two things were removed from the oath: the respect of Constitution (since the whole issue is unconstitutional) and the defence of People's freedom and interests (since the council is not accountable to the people).

More restrictions on this appointed body were revealed by the order issued also by the Amir regarding the Framework of the Shura Council. Article 25 of the Framework states "The sessions of the council shall be held in camera, and that non-members are not allowed to attend any session except ministers and other officials and experts permitted by the council". Article 56 of the Constitution states the opposite for the elected body "All session of the National Assembly shall be held in public".

Article 59 of the Framework specifies that voting "shall be by show of hands only". Should these appointed members think of angering the Council of Ministers on any issue the "show of hands" procedure enables the signalling out of rebels for punishment. The Constitution never prescribed any method for voting and left the matter open for normal procedures of running a debate in an assembly, as is clearly said in Article 59 of the Constitution "... and the decisions shall be passed by absolute majority of those attending..".

More important is the fact that the appointed council has no right to deliberate on "vote of confidence" on ministers as was the case with the elected body, nor does it have any power on setting the agenda. Still with all these provisions in place the Amir had no confidence in appointing a president for the appointed council from outside the government. The choice of relegation fell on the Minister of Transport (now ex-Minister) Ibrahim Mohammed Hassan Humaidan.

The appointed members were 15 Shia and 15 Sunni, mainly wealthy businessmen who already pay weekly visits to the Amir, the Prime Minister and the Heir Apparent, in addition to one Shia and one Sunni clergies. They will meet on 16 January 1993 for the first time and shall hold weekly meetings (maximum of 32 meeting per year!). Their names are as follows (the first 15 being Shia followed by the 15 Sunni):

Ibrahim Mohammed Hassan Humaidan, Ahmed Mansoor Al-Aali, Taqi Mohammed Al-Bahamah, Jasim Mohammed Ibrahim Al-Saffar, Hamid Al-Urrajyadh, Shaikh Abdul-Husain Al-Asfoor, Abdul-Nabi Al-Shuala, Dr. Faisal Al-Zeerah, Mohammed Hasan Kamal-u-Din, Mohammed Hasan Dawani, Dr. Tawfeeq Al-Dallal, Ali Saleh, Abdul-Ghaffar Abdul-Husain, Alawi Al-Sharakhat, Mohammed Abdulla Al-Mutawa, Ahmed Salman Kamal, Shaikh Ibrahim Al-Mahmood, Jasim Fakhroo, Jalal Mihammed Jalal, Jamal Fakhroo, Khalifa Al-Binali, Khalifa Al-Dhahrani, Rashid Al-Zayyani, Abdulla bin Hindii, Ali Al-Massallam, Farooq Al-Moayyad, Fawzi Kanoo, Dr. Ali Mattar, Mhammed Al-Mannai, Mohammed Mulla Hurmes.

Article 19 : This is What Bahrain's Government Should Do

The human rights group ARTICLE 19 submitted a letter on 16 December 1992, to the Amir (ruler) in his capacity as head of State of Bahrain, urging him to respond to international and national calls for democratisation. Francis D'Souza wrote as follows:

Your Excellency

ARTICLE 19, the International Centre Against Censorship is concerned about the Government's lack of response to the increasing international and national demands for the implementation of urgently needed civil and political rights, including the right to political expression and participation.

ARTICLE 19 understands that the State of Bahrain has not held any local or national elections since the dissolution of the National Assembly and the suspension of several key provisions of the Constitution in 1975. The Bahraini authorities have denied people of Bahrain their fundamental rights to freedom of association, including the right to form political organizations and trade unions, to freedom of expression and access to information. Individuals who detained, tortured, held for long periods of time incommunicado, often without charge or trial, and even killed.

On the occasion of the National Day on 16 December 1992, ARTICLE 19 calls again on your government to:

1. Release all prisoners detained for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association or assembly and, in particular, release all those who have been held, many for several years, without charge or trial.
2. Declare a firm policy that torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment will not be tolerated; investigate claims of torture and other cruel, inhuman degrading treatment, especially those cases which have resulted in death in detention; and prosecute those against whom evidence of responsibility for such ill-treatment is found.
3. Repeal the 1974 State of Security Law which, among other things, authorizes the Minister of the Interior to order the arrest, imprisonment, and search the seizure of the homes and work places of people suspected of acts or words against the security or religious, economic or social foundations of the State; and authorizes the detention without charge or trial of suspects for up to three years, and longer at the direction of the Minister of the Interior.
4. Hold free and democratic elections to local councils and national legislative assembly. As a first step, restore suspended articles of the Constitution, in particular, concerning the powers of the National Assembly and the organization of legislative functions.
5. Recognise the right to freedom of association and assembly, including the right to establish and join political parties and trade unions. In particular, repeal the 1989 Law of Association which severely restricts this right.
6. Ratify the International Government on Civil and Political Right, ARTICLE 19 of which

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New Campaign Of Oppression

After a lull in arresting political activists, the British-officered security forces launched a new campaign of terror against the innocent people of Bahrain. On 15 December four people from Saar village were arrested for one day, beaten-up and released. The four, sayid Yonis, Sayid Jafer, Sayid Hamid and Sayid Ibrahim, were among 11 young men acquitted by State Security Court on 7 December 1992. The Court, however, passed sentences on Sadeq Jafer (3 years imprisonment), Sayed Jafer of Saar (one year imprisonment) and Ali Hasan (one year imprisonment). Five other people from Al-Nuaim district (of Manama) were arrested and three of them were released after one day in detention. The remaining two face an unknown destiny.

● On 19 December Mr. Abdul-Nabi Ahmed Al-Turraifi from Bani Jamra village was arrested and severely tortured. He is still in detention. His employer (Ministry of Agriculture) were contacted by the SIS (Security and Intelligence Service) and were ordered to sack Mr. Al-Turraifi. Four other people from Bani Jamra were arrested on 26 December: Hassan Mohammed Habib Jafer Mohammed Habib Marzooq, Sayid Adnan Sayid Redha and Abdul-Ameer Abdul-Wahhab. All four were tortured for one day and forced to sign on papers with confessions and were released.

● A journalist who signed the petition submitted by some 150-200 personalities to the Amir in mid November demanding the return of the constitutional elected national assembly was arrested in mid December. Mr. Khalifa Abdulla Khalifa was intimidated and tortured for one day and threatened of further retaliations.

● Sayid Husain Al-Ghuraifi, an elderly person from al-Nuaim, who runs a Ma'tam (a religious place) was arrested in mid December and ordered not to hold any religious celebration or programme without prior knowledge and permission by the SIS.

● A Tunisian citizen, Mr. Farahat bin Wadday, who had been living and working in Bahrain for the past eight months was arrested and ordered out of the country on charges of participating in local religious activities.

● On 29 December a religious scholar who signed the petition in mid November demanding the restoration of elected national assembly, Shaikh Ali Jasim (of Bani Jamra village) was summoned for a one-day interrogation. Another person from Manama, Mr. Raed Salman Al-Khawajah was also interrogated for one day on 29 December.

BBC 2: Salah Al-Khawaja "A prisoner of conscience from Bahrain"

Every year starting on 10 December BBC2 broadcast a TV series on prisoners of conscience sponsored by human rights organisation. This year Salah Al-Khawaja of Bahrain was sponsored. The TV programme provided the following information:

AGE: 29
 STATUS: Married
 PROFESSION: Businessman
 SENTENCE: 7 years
 PRISON: Jaw 2 Prison, Jaw

Home Thought The Consultative Council : A Tragic Farce

The Amir of Bahrain has defied all expectations. He made him critics look fool. For sometime now, his opponents have been up and down the country telling people that Sheikh Isa is going to announce a consultative Council. They said it would be an appointed one, instead of an elected parliament like the one he dissolved in August 1975. They said he was going to make look like a real one, disguise it by entrusting it with legislative powers, and provide it with legal immunity. The kept on accusing him of being shrewd and clever, that he would make representative of all walks of life and include in its membership some credible faces in order to give it respectability.

However, Sheikh Isa, as usual, disappointed them. They have underestimated him. When he gave his orders to form the council, he was honest with himself. It is to have no legislative power (or any power). Its role is to give its opinion on what has been done, to stick to the Prime Minister agenda, and only hold meeting in the time and place agreed by the government. Its members are either ex-government employees, or the Sheikh's own entourage. They are not bad people. But, they certainly do not represent opposing views. The Amir orders were stark in their clarity. Members can be appointed and sacked anytime by the Sheikh. The council itself can be dissolved as and when his highness claims it necessary. The pledge their service to him, not to the people and so on. How much honesty one expects from the Amir. No ambiguities what so ever, and even the Bahraini people, used to his bluntness, were a bit surprised to see the Amir and his family so determined to deny any form of opposition. Never mind the cheers from the government-controlled media. It would be naive to expect a protest from the local newspapers. But, it was astonishing to read one editorial in Al Ayam daily, saying that the Amir's latest move is the accumulation of the national experience. In other words, the paper says that having this government in the early 1990s is a step forward from the time we had an elected assembly in the early 70s. It is like saying the British democratic process can leap forward by denying women from voting by the time the next election is called.

Whatever the paper says, the fact remains that the government has failed even to cover itself with a fig leaf. The Amir orders to form the consultative council look like an ideal script for a farce. Alas, the laughter is heavily drowned in pain and sadness.

The G.C.C Summit: Name One Achievement!!

Well done. The 13th summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council has, despite the odds against it, taken place in Abu Dhabi. A great achievement. Another significant outcome was replacing the old secretary Abdulla Beshara, with a new one, Sheikh Fahim Al Qosimi (a member of one of the Gulf's royal families). Apart from these two gigantic results, nothing has come out of the summit. OK, there were condemnations of Iraq, Serbia and Israel and an invitation for Iran to behave like a good neighbour. Also, there was the now familiar request for the economic committee to suggest, yet another plan to coordinate custom and excise policies. What a waste. What can anyone living in our countries gain from condemnations and recommendations. For eleven years now, the G.C.C has been a mere talking shop. All its committees, ministerial and summit meetings have been occasions to spend lavishly on parties, gifts and razzmatazz. The money spent could have been better given to the poor Somalis who are dying of hunger, and only the west is feeding them, sometimes by force.

There were strong signs that Qatar would boycott the summit after its dispute with Saudi Arabia. But a good patch-up operation was conducted by Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. He conferred with the rulers of the two countries and eventually brought them together. We don't know how much he is going to be paid, but it is an Arabia-style agreement. It would soon crumble like a sand castle. In any case Qatar came. So what? The leaders in Abu Dhabi totally ignored the way for freedom and constitutional life, which must have been heard in the conference rooms. They ignored the criticism from inside and outside the country for their autocratic rule and violation of basic human rights. They seem to have abandoned the idea of economic and social cooperation, which the G.C.C was supposed to have been formed to do. They can't perceive any form of security other than repression.

However, everybody left smiling, congratulating one another for making it to Abu Dhabi. But, it is doubtful that it would continue as it is, without any real progress on the real issues that concern the Gulf people. Even the artificial appearance of unity amongst the rulers has been damaged. Meanwhile, the citizens of the region where left with a big question: What are our achievements?

HEALTH: Fair

Salah al-Khawaja comes from a well connected and pious Shia family in Bahrain, a group of small islands off the coast of Saudi Arabia. While studying in India, Salah became involved with a society of Bahraini students who criticised the lack of political and social freedoms in Bahrain. He was arrested while on a pilgrimage to Mecca and handed over to the Bahraini authorities by the Saudi Arabian police.

The Bahrainis accused him of belonging to an illegal organisation. Salah was denied ac-

cess to the court appointed defense counsel until just before his hearing. His family also learnt that he was tortured to make a confession.

At Jaw 2 Prison, where Salah is being held, he has become a vigorous campaigner for prisoners' rights.

Greeting Card Address : Salah al-Khawaja, Jaw 2 Prison, c/o PO Box 13, Ministry of the Interior, Jaw Bahrain.

Appeals Address: Sheikh Essa Al Khalifa Amir of the State of Bahrain, Rifaa Palace Rifaa, Bahrain.

Budaiya: A Village which the Dowasir Occupied And where Oklahoma Jones' Career Was Ended

"This is Bahrain & What's On" is a seasonal magazine specialising in promoting the tourist attractions in the country. It is mainly edited by Western reporters who endeavour to reflect an open Western-style coverage of events. Poor Oklahoma Jones, who unknowingly exposed very sensitive issues about the relationship between Al Dawasir Tribe and the ruling one. Al Dawasir were the backbone of the Al Khalifa invasion of Bahrain in 1782 and continued to play an important role in propping-up the ruling tribe up until 1924 when Britain imposed administrative reforms. Then Al dawasir resisted what they so as removal of their prerogatives and many of them had to return to the mainland Arabia. Oklahoma Jones reported on Budaiya, the small village at the north-western tip of Bahrain where Al Dawasir have settled for the past two centuries. More important the fact that Oklahoma reported that the exclusive majority of Al Dawasir youth now work for the defence and security, i.e. as spies, interrogators, officers, etc.. As a result of this Article which appeared in "This is Bahrain & What's On" Volume 16, Number 3, Autumn 1992, the magazine has been banned and unknown action has been taken against Oklahoma Jones, who wrote the following:

((At an open-air majlis built of weathered boat spas on pontoons above the water sits an old fisherman in prayer cap and thobe. He stares ruminatively across the sea, turned silver by the hazy afternoon sun. The air is still, the Gulf like a mirror, broken only by the ripple of a single boat as it heads beyond the island of Mohammedia towards the distant mainland. Other boats lie at anchor, waiting for the men to make the evening trawl. Soon the silver backs of rabbit fish will be stirring in the shallows and the traps will start to fill. The old man watches the first boat disappear in the direction of Al Khobar, towards the ancestral home.

It is not surprising to find that this headland in the far north-west of Bahrain has close links with nearby Saudi Arabia. On a clear day you can make out the landmarks on the other side - the blocks in Dammam, the power and water plant at Al Khobar. Budaiya has long been known as 'Bilad al Dowasira', 'land of the Dosaries'. To this day, most of the people you will meet there are of the Al Dosary tribe, which is also one of the larger families in the Eastern Province.

There is a tendency by many in Bahrain to call anything west of Burgerland along the Budaiya Highway 'Budaiya'. This is, of course, a severe misnomer which would be resented by any of the many villages from Karranah to Bani Jamra which flank that stretch of road. Budaiya itself is not a particularly large village, and you reach it only once you pass the junction with the Janabiya Highway, just a few hundred metres short of the sea.

"The Al Dosary came to Bahrain two hundred years ago in the retinue of the Al Khalifa family. They are one of the great Bedouin tribes of Arabia," says Mohammed Al Dosary, sitting in his traditional Bedouin tent on Budaiya beach. "Still we have good connections with our relatives across the water".

"They come to visit us at weekends and Eids, and we go over there. Now of course it is easy, thanks to the King Fahad Causeway. But in the old days we would pay a boat captain two, or three or five dinars to take us across".

Mohammed and his friend are typical of the young men of Budaiya, Al Dosary tribesmen of the modern age. In the mornings they have their jobs, almost exclusively in the defence or public security services. In the evenings they fish, an activity on which the village prides itself. The remaining leisure hours of the afternoon are spent in the tent drinking sweet red tea and playing Carom.

On every corner in Budaiya, at every doorstep or improvised majlis, you will find a Carom table in action. The game is rather like billiard, the object being to use one missile to knock another into a pocket; but instead of hitting balls with a cue, flattened discs or checkers are flicked with the fingers. The square wooden tables, home-made, can be elaborately patterned with decorative scrollwork.

The Al Dosary themselves are distinguishable by their dark complexions, curly hair and lithe physique, and it is no coincidence that most of them are military men. Their ancestors were the Arab world equivalent of North America's 'Buffalo Soldiers' - men of African blood whose prowess as warriors was used in the service of the state. Their forefathers would have been the shock troops of the conquering Al Khalifa dynasty, then as now. Their roots would have been in the Arab world's Indian Ocean trade, when the intermingling of stock from the mysterious shores of Zanzibar strengthened the gene pool with fresh physical attributes.

Their loyalty over the centuries has been repaid. Budaiya is a light, airy village with good housing and excellent amenities; a health centre, schools, a large police headquarters, a bustling commercial centre. The new central mosque, donated by His Highness the Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, is an architectural tour de force with its shell-like interlocking cupolas of dazzling white. And the land area has grown considerably due to substantial reclamation, most of which still lies fallow, adding to the sense of spaciousness and offering ample scope for future growth.

The village divides itself into two districts, South and North, although no division, and certainly no enmity, is apparent. The fulcrum point is the roundabout at the end of the Budaiya Highway, by night a blaze of light and activity, the nerve centre of the village. Outside a line of fast food outlets, the plump naked bodies of chickens turn on spits, and chefs slice sizzling piles of kebab meat for shawarma. At the coffee house the Carom tables and 'nargila' pipes are out in force as the villagers watch the world go by.

Budaiya is relaxed and tolerant place, as I found on meeting the Al Thawadi family - who are half Al Dosary! - in North Budaiya. The three teenaged daughters, Fajar, Nada and Latifa, posed happily for photographs with their little brother Nawaf. They wore pretty print frocks, or fashionable T-shirts and skirts. "Our father doesn't like us to cover our faces" they said.

"We like western fashion and music!"

Their brothers were playing football on an improvised pitch, under the supervision of Salah the first team goalkeeper. Budaiya are riding high, having recently beaten a Saudi team to win a GCC minor leagues trophy. "Number one in Budaiya Road," smiles Salah enigmatically.

But more than anywhere else in Bahrain, with its wonderful beach and everywhere the signs of maritime activity, Budaiya has a powerful 'seaside' atmosphere, and that is the impression which lingers most.

Old men sit at the weatherboard majlis, mending nets or simply watching currents for the incoming shoals.

Along the shore are hundreds of small fishing boats moored in the shallows, so many that it seems every resident owns one, or every family at least.

The sea is broken up by a latticework of fish traps, suggesting a fishing operation industrial in scale. Remote figures wade through the shallows, bending to their catches, and the air is pungent with the smell of fish. Budaiya Sha'ri and Safi are recognised as among Bahrain's finest.

Then there are the offshore islands, which are an important part of the Budaiya seascapes. From the beach Mohammedia seems literally 'at the end of the pier', a paddle or at most a short swim away.

This palm-fringed island is a seabird sanctuary and private resort. Further out is Jidda, once Bahrain's principal stone quarry, and then later a penal colony.

Above all there is the beach. For the time being the reclaimed land is simply a huge sweep of gravely sand around the top left hand corner of the island, ankle deep, several kilometres long and hundreds of metres wide. And it is clean.

I stand beside the bleached timbers of a small dhow, on the tideline. The ripples of the last boat have faded, and the empty traps have been submerged by the incoming tide. The dark, dilating sun is sinking, and the rising mist around Jidda has swallowed the far-off land of the Dowasira.

Meanwhile the Carom tables of the coffee house are waiting, and so the old Haji leaves his watchtower and his nets for another day)).

Article 19

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guarantees freedom of expression, and the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant, which provides a procedure by which individuals may challenge violations of rights protected by the Covenant.

ARTICLE 19 believes that the 16 December National Day present opportunity for the Government to declare its firm attachment to internationally recognized and guaranteed civil and political rights and to announce its intention to implement reforms which respect and protect these rights.

ARTICLE 19 would welcome your comments.

Frances D'Souza, Director