

BAHRAIN

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Constitutionalism or Despotism

Why the Token Gestures by Certain Gulf Regimes Are Futile

The appointment of Dr. Abdulla Omar Naseef by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, as the deputy president of the Consultative (Shura) Council was hailed as a step forward on the path of "democracy" in the Kingdom. The new appointment is the second in a year following that of Mr. Mohammed Ibrahim bin Jbair for the top office. It is now twenty months since the Saudi monarch gave his latest promise to his people to offer them a taste of the Saudi-style democratic process. The set-up so far is far from complete. To fill the Council with its sixty members may, if the current rate of appointments is to go by, take up to thirty years. The seriousness of the whole process is therefore open to doubt. At the moment the functions of the Council are being conducted by the hitherto lonely president who had been accommodated in a huge building which is supposedly the headquarters of the proposed Council. With the appointment of Dr. Naseef, the two gentlemen may now "consult" with each other on how to spend their time.

Mr. Jbair has been operating in his capacity as the president of the Consultative Council, meeting foreign dignitaries, especially heads of parliaments. The two members must be wondering how to face people in their own constituencies who see little movement towards the fulfilment of the King's promises. But they take their solitude from the fact that they had not been among those who have been recently damned by the latest Amnesty International's report published last month. The report, with the headline; Saudi Arabia, An Upsurge in Public Executions, contained details of the way people are sent to the gallows or, more frequently, beheaded. A total of 105 people were executed last year alone, the report said. Apart from the arbitrary nature of the executions, the report emphasised the lack of proper defence system to safeguard the interests of the accused. Moreover, that number is the highest number of executions, an indication of the extent of cruelty being practiced in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The proposed Shura Council will have the responsibility of accounting of the procedures being adopted in these cases and the two gentlemen who are at the moment the sole members of that body will not have an easy time. It is thought the late appointment came to pre-empt further accusations of lack of progress in the political participation and to divert the attention of people away from the report. It also came to show that the issue is not yet dead and that further steps may be taken in due course to fend off systematic criticism of the regime. Two

months ago, an attempt by some individuals to set up a human rights committee in Saudi Arabia was aborted by the harsh intervention of the authorities which resulted in the sacking of all members with employment and closing down the offices of those who run their own businesses. The message was; no political, cultural or humanitarian activity outside the official framework is tolerated.

Reports on human rights abuses in the Gulf countries are abundant. The backward nature of the political system is obvious, and the resistance to any attempt to modernise it is so great that only few individuals will ever attempt to go against the wishes of the ruling family. The lack of any form of debate on national issues has led to many crises. The border disputes among the countries of the Gulf forming the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are attributed to the tribal nature of the regimes. These disputes are largely inherited from old times and the nature of the tribal dealings prevents any form of permanent solutions. The relations among the ruling tribes are often coloured by old tribal vengeance and historical differences rather than actual ones. If these disputes had contributed directly to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, they had almost caused real wars between Qatar and Bahrain in 1986 and between Saudi Arabia and Qatar last year.

Similar disputes are currently shadowing the relations between Saudi Arabia and its southernmost neighbour, Yemen. Last month's visit to Saudi Arabia by Yemen's Foreign Minister, Mohammed Salem BaSandowa, was a positive sign that the two neighbouring states have started their way out of the consequences of the Kuwait's crisis, but the bilateral relations between the two countries are not expected to improve as long as the border dispute between them is not solved. Saudi Arabia is supposed to hand to Yemen the sovereignty over three cities, Aseer, Jizan and Najran. Riyadh is reluctant to do so and has created many obstacles to justify holding these areas. Yemen has gone a long way to appease the Saudis and other Gulf states, and her relations with Oman are good. However, there is still a wrangling in Kuwait with regards to the states which are described by the Kuwaiti press as the "Anti" countries, in reference to their stands during the crisis.

Kuwait, at the moment, is the only Gulf country where national issues are being discussed openly, and where the parliament has a say in these matters. However, this is not without problems. The wrangling about the foreign relations is going on, and the National Assem-

bly is pioneering in this discussion. Each issue is being dealt with by every citizen, and the government finds it difficult sometimes to make a decision on major issues. But the fact remains that the democratic environment in Kuwait is proving a point of political strength to the nation. The resources of the country are not directed to combat "enemies within" as is the case in almost all other GCC states. Citizens are not considered a threat to the security of the country, as is the case in the neighbouring countries. In Bahrain, for example, the State Security Law of 1974 implies that every citizen is a criminal unless proved otherwise. That notorious Law which led to the dissolution of the National Assembly in 1975 gives the Ministry of Interior the power to detain anyone on suspicion of planning against the state.

The mentality of conspiracy is ruling the region. Consequently, ordinary citizens are always suspected especially when they start asking questions or get involved in politics. In such a situation, peace and tranquillity are most remote conditions, and the main concern of the regime is to remain in office as long as possible, often at the cost of its own people. Three years ago, Saddam Hussain took advantage of the anarchy in Kuwait which followed the dissolution of the National Assembly four years earlier and sent his troops to Kuwait. The government of Al Sabah tried to fiddle with the Constitution and formed an alternative council with little powers and with one third of its members appointed by the ruling family. The allied forces managed to salvage the country after a bloody war that left Iraq in ruins. Kuwait itself evolved from the crisis with her sovereignty greatly compromised and with a huge financial crisis.

It may be the case that short term gains are gained by resorting to dictatorship and tyranny. But on the long run this situation cannot be sustained except by the use of force and repression. The Kuwaitis have learnt this the hard way. The Saudis are trying to evade the lesson, and pretend that nothing had happened. The Al Khalifa are even more stubborn in their resistance to change. They are relying on the finances of the Saudis to sustain a situation where demands of the people at the political front cannot be met except with the use of repression on one hand and money on the other. The Baharaini people have all along refused to be bought off and insisted on getting the least of their political demands; i.e., the implementation of the constitution. It is up to the ruling tribes to decide between a constitutional government or a despotic regime.

Death or Suicide ? The Mystery of Labour Minister's Demise Deepens

On 10 July the death of the member of the ruling family and Labour & Social Affairs Minister, Khalifa bin Salman bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa (in his forties) was announced. No mention of the cause of death was announced. However, the news were so important and difficult to hide. Soon it became clear that the minister actually had died from a bullet in the head. He committed suicide after medical examination had revealed he contracted the AIDS virus. The minister is well-known for his frequent visits to Bangkok and witty parties. His wife was so angry with him that family quarrels were no secrets. He decided to end his misery with a bullet in the head. It is interesting to note that the media were not allowed to elaborate on the death other than receiving condolences from trade firms and others addressed to the Amir. Even the Amir of Qatar ventured a telegram of condolences to his foe Shaikh Isa Al-Khalifa.

Hawar Islands Case in the Hague

It was announced that the Hague-based International Court of Justice will start looking into the dispute between Qatar and Bahrain on 28 February 1994. This follows Qatar's submission of the case to the International Court, which Bahrain protested as inappropriate. The Bahraini Islands of Hawar have been at the centre of dispute over the past few decades. Qatar's Foreign Minister has been touring the region and visited Yemen, Iran and Kuwait. The Qataris have also made a public show of possible relation-improvement with the Iraqi regime by sending congratulating messages on 17 July. The latter is in commemoration of the Ba'athist quop in 1968 which brought Saddam-led Ba'ath Party to power. In turn, the Bahrain Foreign Minister visited the United States and held discussions in the State Department and the Pentagon. General Colin Powell's visit to Bahrain and other Gulf states was given a high profile. Several US strategy-planning and other military personnel appeared in the local media meeting with senior ruling family members. The Al-Khalifa were responding to Qatari moves by showing their closeness to the US. Each time the dispute temperature rises, the Al-Khalifa become nervous and act haphazardly. On 18 July, the Information Minister banned the semi-official daily newspaper "Akhhbar Al-Khaleej" for allegedly publishing a map showing the borders between Qatar and Bahrain with signs indicating the energy resources (Oil & Gas) and including within Qatari borders. In a statement issued by the Information Ministry, it was claimed that "Akhhbar Al-Khaleej didn't verify the facts before publishing them". Qatar is busy these days tendering for second phase engineering, procurement and construction of the North Field natural gas project.

The borders are highly critical from both political (hatred between Al-Khalifa and Al-Thani ruling families in Bahrain and Qatar consequently) and economical due to the possible existence of large deposits of energy resources.

More Glasnost from Security Forces

The security forces is opening-up. News about them are published in the Arabic media for the first time. The people are now mad accustomed to seeing the photograph of the hated Interior Minister with one person on the right-hand (Ibrahim bin Muhammed Al-Khalifa) and bold Scottish (Ian Henderson) wearing black glasses standing on the left-hand. The Ministry of Information also publishes names of the senior civil servants. Ian Henderson is on of the most senior official bearing the title of "Director-General of State Security Investigations", which incorporates the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS). Mr. Henderson now shares (with Ibrahim Al-Khalifa) a more high profile title "Acting Director-General of Public Security".

On 15 July, Al-Ayyam published the name of another senior person: Mr. Fuad Isa Al-Mahmeed, Director of Special Security Task Force, based at Safrah. The paper said he is spending one month of his holiday in Cairo, Egypt. It is worth noting that the Public Security is the largest employer of full-time staff and part-time spies and informers. The informers networks are linked to several departments within the structure. The overriding power resides with the General Directorate for State Security Investigation, exclusively staffed by Britons.

Reading the Constitution is a Crime

During last month thousands of copies of the Constitution of the State of Bahrain were distributed in public places and mosques. For the majority of people, it was the first time to be able to read the Constitution. Since its first release of 1973 ran out, the government didn't allow any one to publish a second release. This is because the prime violator of the Constitution is the ruling family itself. The Constitution clearly specifies sharing the legislative power between the Amir (ruler) and the National Assembly. No decree can become a law unless it is agreed on by parliament. Furthermore, the Constitution insists that at no time the country shall be without a parliament for longer than two months. And whenever the parliament starts its sessions, all decrees must be brought before the parliament for voting. Moreover, the members of parliament have the power to question the government and act as a watchdog. For this and other reasons, the government has banned the circulation of the Constitution, not even in the main university. This has now been challenged and people started copying the Constitution and distributing it on a massive scale. The British-officered security forces retaliated. On 5 July the crackdown started by interrogating the staff and workers at a suspect press company. The owner of Al-Reef Bookshop was questioned. On 8 July Mr. Majeed Milad, Mr. Abdul-Hadi Al-Nasser and Nasser Ali Nasser were arrested and severely tortured for three days before being released. On 13 July Mr. Yaseen Swar was arrested and tortured. His passport was confiscated.

The Gulf Alliance Crumbles 3 Years After Iraq's Invasion

Three years after the occupation of Kuwait by Iraqi forces, the Gulf alliance is beginning to falter. Serious cracks have appeared in its midst and the whole joint Gulf operation is being threatened. Distention is rife at almost all levels, with the most visible differences centring around the relations with both Iraq and the countries which has supported her during the crisis. For example, whilst three member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are enjoying good relations with Iraq, Kuwait is struggling to maintain the bare minimum of a common stand against Iraq. Oman, Qatar and Bahrain are not very sensitive to Iraq's Saddam Hussain and their relations with Iraq have warmed up in the last year. On the National Day of Iraq (17th July), messages of congratulations were exchanged between Sultan Qaboos and Saddam Hussain to the anguish of the Kuwaitis. Bahrain's premier had sent similar messages to Saddam, and the Qataris did similarly.

The most recent point of disagreement between Kuwait and Qatar came when the Qataris arranged football matches with the Iraqis in Doha. Moreover, the Qataris have signed contract with the Iraqis to buy two football players for the Al Wakrah team. The head of Qatar's National football League was in a visit to Baghdad at the same time when Qatar's foreign minister was on a state visit to Kuwait. Despite Kuwait's protestations, the Qataris are going ahead with their Iraqi links.

It seems the government of Al Thani of Qatar was driven to take the pro-Iraqi line following her bloody encounter with Saudi Arabia last year. The Saudis occupied a Qatari border post known as Al Khofoos, killing two Qatari soldiers. The GCC failed to take action to restore the border post to Qatar and the relations remained tense between the two countries throughout the year. "If the Saudis can be allowed to use force to occupy our land, then the Iraqis must be forgiven for what they had done in Kuwait", a Qatari diplomat indicated. Although the situation is now calm, the relations remained tense. The Qataris tried to get out of line with the Saudis by forging links to both Iran and Iraq. Last year, Doha sent her ambassador to Baghdad to the dismay of both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The dissension among the GCC states is also deep on the issue of the relations with the countries which had sided with Iraq during the conflict. There is now a tendency to restore relations with Yemen, Jordan and Sudan. The Yemeni foreign minister, Mohammed Salem Ba-Sandawa had restored links with some Gulf states having restored full relations with Oman. The Kuwaitis are engaged in serious debate on the relations with those countries, and the National Assembly is taking keen interest in the issue.

It is a sign of a new age that the GCC is passing through a time of internal dissention and political fragmentation. The Kuwaitis are the biggest losers in the game since they are reluctant to address the political issues with a spirit that is both flexible and realistic.

Evading The Real Issue Is it Cultural or Tribal Specificity ?

Political change in the Gulf is resisted by ruling families using many pretexts. "Our tradition is different" is a common statement in the official media. Government officials are passing the message to whom it may concern: forget it, there is going to be no change in the political system. It is implied that tribally-controlled government is the fate of the people, regardless of what the outside world may advance in politics. But the question raised by opposition in the Gulf is: what is really specific?

During the UN International Conference on Human Rights held in Geneva last June, the banner of "cultural specificity" was raised to resist calls for recognising the universality and indivisibility of human rights. Resistance to such calls was to make it clear that the Gulf rulers don't believe that basic rights relate to everybody. The Gulf rulers are unhappy about the Universal Declaration and the two protocols. The latter recognise the rights of human being in such things as: liberty, individual security, equality, banning of arbitrary arrests, right to nationality, freedom of thought and opinion, freedom of assembly, the right to participate in cultural and political life of the community, and so on.

In 1948, the UN called for the dissemination and teaching of these principle in schools and in public. This is impossible in a country like Bahrain. The mere mentioning of the word "right" is considered as an unforgivable offense. People end up in jail for up to three years without trial for saying labour have rights or citizens have rights. The tribally-controlled government doesn't believe there is something called right. It is only the "gratitude" of His Highness. Who gets what and does what is nothing to do with anybody but His Highness.

An Economist Intelligence Unit report stated "Gulf rulers surround themselves with a circle of advisers composed almost exclusively of family members. Each also has a cabinet where the major ministers - defence, interior, foreign affairs, sometimes finance sometimes oil - will be held by the ruling family. Some family members may be extremely able but the system does not insist on merit. The family often provides its head with his only links to his people, through the majlis, an informal gathering at home of men who drop in, usually in the evening, with a comment, a complaint or a request." (see John Townsend in the Global Interests in the Arab Gulf, ISBN 0 85989 378 2, page 372).

Fuad I. Khuri, in his book "Tribe and State in Bahrain", points out some of the characteristics of the Al-Khalifa regime. The State of Bahrain is a private affair. "To professionalize the military and the bureaucracy necessitates national as opposed to tribal recruitment, thus altering tribal authority and the exclusive character of group". He further points out that the Al-Khalifa are in dilemma with regard to long-term oil investment policy as this is viewed from tribal self-interest. "If oil capital is invested in long-range development, it will eventually create new political formulation altering the authority-power system to the disadvantage of

the ruling families. If the capital is not so invested, the oil rush may have the same outcome as the gold rush; the civilisation built upon it will sink into oblivion once the black gold has vanished. In which direction Bahrain and the Gulf will move is not entirely a local or regional issue. The future of oil, and with it the authority system, is tied economically and politically to the larger industrial world as well"... concludes Dr. Khuri.

Emile A. Nakhleh, in his book "Bahrain" page 169, arrives at similar conclusions about the nature of tribally-controlled government. Commenting on the dissolution of the popularly-elected parliament in August 1975, he stated the following: "The National Assembly had afforded the first public forum in the country's history for popularly elected representatives to criticize economic, political, and social policies. Although these criticisms were protected by the new constitution, individual rights outside the Assembly, as regards the freedoms of press, speech, organization, and assembly, were still governed by restrictive preconstitution laws. Indeed, it was the government's proposed public security law that eventually polarized the conflict. When the Khalifa government realised that it could not muster enough votes to pass the proposed bill in the Assembly, the government block boycotted the sessions, thereby depriving the Assembly of a quorum and leading to its ultimate dissolution. Since the spring of 1975 the Assembly has been dissolved, and a quasi state of emergency has been imposed on the country".

These are important remarks by distinguished researchers. The Gulf has specificity in the way it is governed not because of the traditions of the people, but rather as a result of the tribally-imposed way of governing. This way can't survive on its own. It has always been propped-up by global powers with interests in the Gulf region. Certainly there is nothing specific which legitimises dictatorship, denial of basic rights to freedom of expression and popular participation. Indeed Bahrain has been marching backward under the leadership of Al-Khalifa. In the fifties, Bahrainis were allowed to vote for education and health councils. Before then they were able to vote for municipalities. In early seventies, two elections were allowed. In the nineties, there is no election for anything. Municipalities are appointed by the tribally-controlled government and a new Consultative Council was appointed by the head of the tribe (known as the Amir). As for the future, the prime minister stated to the Financial Times that the Al-Khalifa are not going to be Samaritans and will venture in uncharted waters again, that is they will not allow any democratic form of accountability.

The pretext of cultural specificity to ban democracy can not stand the acid test. The very constitution under which the tribal authority is claimed, specifies establishment of popularly elected parliament and nullifies any decree not agreed on by the parliament. So what is really specific about the nature of the Gulf?

The Golden Days Have Gone

In a significant development, the Gold merchants in Bahrain handed a petition to the Minister of Trade and Agriculture demanding an immediate action to curtail the activities of some "businessmen" which are threatening the trade. The petition, signed by 73 of leading businessmen stressed the bad situation of the trade due to the recession on one side and the malpractice by opportunist businessmen on the other. Trade registers were obtained by certain people enabling them to start their gold businesses, but the trading permits were later transferred to foreigner. Although the petition did not point directly to those responsible for this malpractice, it was understood that emotions were rising high against the exploitation of the economic system by some members of the ruling Al Khalifa family. The petition demanded the following:

1. To hold a meeting to be attended by Bahraini gold merchants to discuss and study the problem and reach certain solutions.
2. The Minister of Labour should issue instructions to tighten the conditions necessary to obtain trading permits and to confine these permits to Bahraini tradesmen.
3. To issue instructions to close down all workshops which are operating illegally in the manner mentioned above.

It is worth mentioning that there have been a deep recession in most trading sectors especially the gold trade.

Amnesty International Condemns Bahrain

In its 1992 report the human rights organization, Amnesty International deplored the practices adopted by Bahrain's secret service against political prisoners. The report referred to the deportation of tens of citizens on the arrival at the airport

It added that many Shiite citizens were arrested according to the 1974 State Security Law. Unlike in previous years, the detentions lasted only for few days. It also confirmed that about 70 political prisoners remained in jails, many of whom are considered prisoners of conscience. The report is yet another document damning the practices of the Al Khalifa ruling family.

Detentions and Torture

More detentions were reported last month in continuation of the oppressive policy. Mr. Mohammed Jawad Al Shehabi was detained and intimidated by the notorious intelligence officer Adel Flaifel who confiscated Mr. Al Shehabi's passport and interrogated him about his activities in two religious teaching circles. Mr. Abdul Nabi Majeed Al Nashabah was detained after returning from Iran and was questioned about his relationship with Shaikh Isa Qassim. Mr. Jamil Al-Rayyash was detained for few days and intimidated for a known reasons. Mr. Mohammed Abdul Karim Al Shabib, together with his wife and four children were detained after returning from Syria. All were deported back to Syria.

Drugs, Thefts ...etc. are Common Place How Bad Economic Policies Led to Moral Problems

The last fifteen years have witnessed a sharp increase in drug addiction in Gulf region in general and Bahrain in particular. Although this phenomenon is a universal one, there are specific reasons for its spread in Bahrain. There is an economic dimension to it. What about the increase in the number of thefts throughout the country? Furthermore, why are Bahraini businessmen disenchantment with the regime? And is the country's income as bad as the government likes to project?

The agony of the families of drug addicts is on the increase. Many young men lost their lives, many are on their way. The social fabrics are threatened and stories of broken hearts and minds are countless. The government is doing nothing and is not expected to counter the crisis in a serious manner. It is well aware that the spread of this phenomena is a direct consequence of its policies. In a country where 30 percent of the workforce is unemployed, tendencies towards crime and drug addiction are inevitable. Young men who have lost all hope in life find a way out of their misery by embarking on this road, not realizing the tragic consequences. The Al Khalifa ruling family is known for its policy on this matter. Trading in drugs is forbidden, but using it is not a crime. This may sound innocent, but the reality is that dealing in drugs is a big business and is confined to the circles of the Al Khalifa. No one else is allowed a share in this trade, and it is not in their interest to prevent it spreading among more customers. This policy has another advantage. The use of drugs by young men is an insurance against political awareness. The government is very sensitive to the politicization of the Bahraini society and anything that could contribute to keep the people politically passive is welcome. Drug addiction is surely one of the avenues towards this end.

The social problems of the bad economic policies are not confined in drug addiction. The last few years have seen a sharp increase in thefts throughout the country. Bahrainis have never been known for this before. But when poverty strikes a nation crime thrives. This is not an exaggeration. A veteran politician has recently told "the Voice of Bahrain" that the next eruption of political violence will come from the deprived, the hungry and the dispossessed. It will not come from the political parties and movements as has long been expected. People are finding it extremely difficult to cope with the difficulties of today's life in a country where there is no social security, a well-defined poverty line and minimum wage scheme, or an equal opportunity-based economic structure. Instead, there is a monopoly on trade especially where governmental contracts are to be contested. It is not the quality of contractors that matters but their loyalties and political tendencies. It is this policy that is making leading businessmen lose their faith in the regime. They know they are not competing for contracts and trade on equal terms and that the economic policy is too politicized. The talk among themselves is usually centred on issues relating to the

way the Al Khalifa are trying to grasp every business opportunity. Even among small market retailers and fruit sellers, members of the Al Khalifa have a place.

The unemployment, on the other hand, is a direct result of the policy of the government which is based on the fear of political strikes. In 1938 the first organized strike was launched by the oil workers in protest against the bad working conditions and low wages. They demanded better opportunities for local workforce and gradual reduction of foreign workers. In October 1954, a one-week general strike was ordered by the High Executive Committee which had just been formed to demand a constitutional democracy in the country. That strike was a landmark in the workers movement that led the government to order a review of its whole policy. In 1965, oil workers went on strikes throughout the spring and bloody clashes took place in the ensuing encounters with the police. Fourteen people were killed in these clashes between March and June 1965. Only the intervention of the British troops salvaged the Al Khalifa rulers. The strikes were repeated in 1974 when the workers at the Aluminum plant interrupted their work demanding improved working conditions.



Khalifa bin Salman: foregin workforce to prevent strikes

These strikes were effective in bringing home to the Al Khalifa the fact that things could not continue unless constitutional rule is implemented. A decision was subsequently taken by the government to bring down the ratio of native employees to the total workforce. At the moment Bahraini workers will find it extremely difficult to stage a successful strike because of the large number of foreign workers who could continue working if local employees go on strike. With this policy, the Al Khalifa believe they have won the day. It is proving effective but at a high cost socially and economically. Foreign workers are not hard workers compared with Bahrainis. The economy of the country is not being pushed ahead since the absence of dominance of local workforce has the negative effect of low quality and less motivation. Furthermore, the rising unemployment is causing hardship both financially and morally to the families have resorted to drug addiction and may be stealing and other corrupt behaviour.

As for the country's revenues, it is fair to say that oil production from Bahrain's field has dwindled in the last two decades, and the average daily production is now in the region of 40,000 barrels per day (compare it with the Kuwaiti production of around 2 million barrels per day). Since the bulk of the country's revenue comes from oil, this low production is a source of financial hardship. However, there is another face to the argument. The shared ownership of Abu Sa'afa offshore oil field between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia would have tilted the financial balance if the revenue from that field was added to the country's income. It appears that Bahrain's share of Abu Sa'afa's oil revenue goes directly to the Al Khalifa. Until recently the daily production of that field totaling 150,000 barrels per day was shared equally by the two governments. However, the Saudis have rewarded the Al Khalifa for their refusal to adopt the constitution, and agreed to raise the share of Bahrain from Abu Sa'afa to 100,000 barrels per day. The revenue from that (totaling more than US\$ 500 million per year) goes directly to the Al Khalifa. Moreover, the income from the lease of the Essa Airfield in the south of Bahrain (estimated at around US\$ 100 million annually) also goes to the ruling tribe. This sum is more than the total income of the country.

In these circumstances it is not surprising to see the financial and social crisis engulfing the country. It is clear, most of the financial problems come from the continuous usury of the country by those who are supposed to be trustees. This is one of the problems that makes the Al Khalifa's resolve to resist any movement towards change stronger day by day. In a situation where accountability becomes a constitutional right, the Al Khalifa will be exposed to their own people as well as to the outside world. They do not want to lose their privileges which has ensured them uninterrupted reign of corruption and mismanagement. They are ready to go to any extent to resist any movement towards serious political change. It is in this context that politicians, businessmen and intellectual feel obliged to take serious steps to stamp out this unlimited corruption. The western support enjoyed by the Al Khalifa, both political and military, is instrumental in the propping up of the regime. The Saudis also benefit from the Al Khalifa's policies and are unlikely to condone any attempt to effect a political change. What is at issue here is the fact that people want to live decently sharing with each other the bounties of their country. This is the very notion that despotic regimes such as that of the Al Khalifa do not want to happen. They prefer a situation where public accountability does not exist. To what extent the government will remain successful in deceiving the outside world about the roots of the problems in the tiny island of Bahrain is open to debate. What is certain here is that unless the Al Khalifa open up to the public and allow a process to scrutinize the behaviour and policies of the government, things are not expected to get any better.