

BAHRAIN

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The Sham of Democracies

What should the response of a democratic country be when it is called upon to support a democratic movement in a third world country? Why is it that we are witnessing a selective approach to the "democratisation" process? Should democratic values be advocated worldwide? The people of Bahrain know better than many other people how partisan is the western approach to the democratic movements in the world. For they have become the victim of their trust in the democratic powers, especially the United States and Britain. They are now reviewing the case of the Iraqi people four years ago when they were suppressed without mercy by Saddam Hussain's forces while the forces of the allies kept a close watch on the slaughter. Despite the UN ban on the Iraqi warplanes following Iraq's defeat in Kuwait, helicopter gunships were allowed to take action against the people's uprising in southern Iraq, wiping out whole areas inhabited by powerless people. Many excuses were given by the Americans, but none is strong enough to withstand the criticism or the feeling of betrayal of the Iraqi people.

Today, a similar episode is unfolding in Bahrain, a long-standing friend of Britain and the home of US military bases. For twenty years, the people have been struggling to achieve the reinstatement of the 1973 Constitution. Thousands of Bahrainis were either jailed or banished and scores were killed under torture. The clampdown on every popular movement in the country has always been supervised and often ordered by British officers, stationed in the country when Bahrain was under British protection. The most notorious among the

pseudo-colonial figures is Ian Henderson whose record on human rights abuses is manifested in the numerous reports by international human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Article 19, Third World Review, and the Arab Organisation of Human Rights. He still enjoys the protection of the British government while he orders the killing of young men in the streets of Bahrain. Women have been detained and subjected to various forms of torture under the orders of Ian Henderson. He is the General Director of Public Security and is enjoying unlimited freedom in the actions he takes.

Why the British and American governments are encouraging repression in Bahrain is not clear. All the indications are that the Al Khalifa tribal regime could not undertake the massive campaign of repression in the country without the prior approval of US government. For example, when the riot police took the decision to attack the students at the University of Bahrain on 1st April, the US and British embassies had been informed in advance, according to informed sources. They were given similar notification when one of the most prominent leaders of the Constitutional movement, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al Jamri was first put under house arrest together with his family on 1st April, and when he was arrested two weeks later. Not a single protest has been given to the Bahraini authorities for ordering the unprecedented crackdown against the constitutionalists. The people of Bahrain have refrained from declaring controversial aims such as the overthrow of the tribal regime which is both despotic and outdated, and have limited their

aims to the reinstatement of the constitution suspended two decades ago. They thought this humble demand would be favoured by the democratic powers in the west which wield great influence on the Al Khalifa ruling family. They have been compelled to conclude that both Washington and London have instead given assurances to the Bahraini authorities that they would get their full support in the measures they were adopting to suppress the constitutional movement. Infact, the British Foreign Secretary said at the Banqueting House in London on 5th April that his government offered its full support to their old friends, the government of Bahrain. The statement was outrageous, and looked upon as a license to Ian Henderson to pursue his hostile policies towards the people.

The United States has not taken any action in support of the popular demands in Bahrain. Instead, several officials visited Bahrain lately and conveyed assurances from the White House that the US administration supported the actions undertaken by the Bahraini government to quell the popular dissent. It is therefore understandable why the Al Khalifa regime of Bahrain has taken every possible repressive measure against unarmed and peaceful demonstrators calling for nothing more the restoration of the Constitution. In plain language, this demand should have been received with satisfaction and gratitude by western governments since the constitution endorses the rule of the Al Khalifa and offers them the legal and popular legitimacy in a similar way to the Al Sabah family in Kuwait. The government of Bahrain has gone out of its way to punish the people for that very demand and considered any popular participation in the political process as demanded by the Constitution a threat to their monopoly of power. Is it not a moral failure of the west?

Unrestrained Terror by Henderson's Men

The situation in Bahrain is now degenerating to a virtual standstill as the government intensifies its suppression campaigns against the pro-democracy movement. The problems started when the government of Bahrain attempted to preempt the sponsors of a pro-democracy petition calling for the restoration of the constitution and the parliament, both suspended in 1975. In 1992, the internal opposition unified their positions within the framework of the constitution and called for the return of parliamentary and constitutional political set-up similar to that existed between 1973 and 1975. In 1975 the Amir of Bahrain dissolved the parliament and suspended the constitution when the parliament refused to pass a bill for state security measures that empowered the interior minister to detain any political suspect for three years without trial, renewable.

The security forces were angered in October 1994 when the opposition submitted the second petition to the public for endorsement. To abort the submission of the petition with 25,000 signatures, the security forces attacked many of the activists, imprisoned them and declared an iron-fist policy to "confirm the supremacy of the State authority". The latter was stated by the interior minister in a meeting

with a group of dignitaries who met him in December requesting the security forces to calm down tensions by releasing the arrested people, primarily Sheikh Ali Salman, who was later forcibly exiled together with two other leaders including the person who headed the delegation to the interior minister, Sheikh Hamza Al-Deiri.

In mid March, the security forces arrested one of the main sponsors of the petition, Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain. The situation erupted in protest, but the security forces adopted a collective punishment policy. The whole community of Nuweidrat (the home village of Mr Abdul Wahab Hussain) was punished and all its youth were arrested during a siege that lasted for three days.

Then on 1 April, in a major escalation by the security forces, the leading opposition figure, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri and his family were put under house arrest. Two of the nearby neighbours were killed, dozens were injured (some crippled for life) many were forcibly evicted from their houses and hundreds were arrested. On 4 April, the information ministry published an order banning citizens from speaking to international news organisations to control the spread of news to the outside world.

Since then, a merciless suppression campaign has resulted in the surging of those detained to 5000, and the killing of yet more people, now reaching a total of at least thirteen people. The village of Ma'ameer was ransacked on 20 April. It was besieged and every house was entered by the security forces. Youth were taken away, elderly and children were beaten in front of their families, valuables stolen, contents were damaged and even food stuff such as rice and sugar were mixed with cleaning powder to further punish and intimidate the community.

Since the disappearance of Sheikh Al-Jamri (ex-judge and former MP) on 15 April (the day House Arrest ended), the situation has continued to suffer further setbacks. Clashes, columns of fire and smoke, gas cylinders bursting noises and house-to-house arrests are common features of every day life. The schools are also collectively punished. When the students of Jeddahs demonstrated last week, they were forced to stand-up in the sun and were beaten by electronic batons. The next day 300 students and parents were summoned for interrogation and punishment. The security forces have gone thus far and is threatening to massacre Bahrainis if they continue to demand the return of constitution and parliament.

Pro-Democracy Uprising: Government's Actions Stifle Peaceful Solutions

You Want Ballots, You Get Bullets

Bahraini government is not converging towards a settlement with its citizens, this is the message received by attendants of the international economic conference that was convened on Monday 10 April. The conference hosted key speakers such as Lady Thatcher and Mr. F. W. de Klerk in a major financial event for examining the economic and fiscal strategies of the Gulf States for the closing years of the twentieth century. Bahrain is the microcosm and the test place for linking political reforms to economic development. The government of Bahrain is not prepared for political reforms and instead has deployed jet fighters, helicopters, armoured vehicles and armed security forces to shoot Bahrainis demanding their basic rights.

Protests continued in Duraz, Aali, Bori, Daih, Karzakkan, Demistan, and several other places. Road blocks were created and columns of fire and smoke lasted until the early hours of Sunday morning. In Manama, the district of Ras Romman was the scene of an attack by the security forces on the grand mosque. All books and contents were removed and the person in charge was arrested. For example: Mr. Ali bin Jasim Al-Haddad, a 72 years old, was arrested in a dawn raid in the early hours of Sunday together with several other young people: Esam Hubail, 24 years old, Ali Hassan Al-Jadd, 25 years, Nasser Ali Nasser, 23 years, and Basit Al-Bostah, 28 years. Mr. Yasir Mohammed Hassan, 25 years old, from Mani was arrested at the airport upon his return from Dubai. He went to Dubai for treating his eye which was hit by a bullet's particle last December. No citizen is safe from atrocities in Bahrain. At 1.00 am (6 April), the security forces arrested an elderly lady, Fatima Ashoor Khalil, 60 years old, and her daughter Malkah Sengais, 27 years old. One member of the family is already in jail, Abd Ali Sengais, and another one, Adil Sengais, has disappeared without information about his fate. It is not known why a mother aged 60 would be arrested together with her daughter, while two of her sons are already suffering. She is also the mother of Dr. Abdul Jalil Sengais, a university lecturer.

The security forces of Bahrain started its latest offensive against the Bahraini pro-democracy movement on 1 April by imposing a house arrest, the first of its kind in the history of Bahrain, on Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, the leading opposition figure who sponsored the two petitions in 1992 and 1994 calling for the restoration of the constitution. The neighbours of Sheikh Al-Jamri were evicted, two of them were killed (Mohammed Jafer Yousif Attैया Twaig and Mohammed Ali Abdul Razzaq), and more than fifty were injured by gun fire. Bani Jamra, Jedhafs, Sanabis, Bilad-al-Qadeem and Nuwidrat have been put under curfew since then, and a sweeping arrest operation being implemented. The number of people arrested is now about 5000. The number of prisoners resulted in the conversion of the old football stadium in Isa Town to a mass concentration camp. Some fifty Saudi officers have been imported to interrogate and torture detainees.

The government is spreading threats via its

intelligence network, that the massacre they will commit is still to come. Moreover, the security forces are distributing leaflets to incite sectarian hatred, but has failed to do so. All these leaflets carry terminology and phrases that are not used by either the Shias or the Sunnis. One leaflet threatened the foreigners with killing and kidnap if they go out after 6.00 pm. Again, the leaflet carried wrong terminology that are not used by Shias. Many are wondering how ignorant the security forces are, as they continue to phrase sentences that are never used by Bahraini Shias or Sunnis. The government strategy is to paint the uprising with sectarian image but is failing drastically. This is why the group of leading personalities who met in Mr. Jasim Murad's house (a leading Sunni) were not allowed to meet the Amir alongside the 20 people summoned last Sunday 2 April.

Demonstrations continued on a daily basis. On 19 April, the students of Nuaim Secondary and Jidhafs Secondary schools took to the streets. Riot police used tear gas and electronic batons to suppress the protestors. In Jidhafs, police forced students and teachers to stand in the sun for hours. Those who did not obey were beaten in front of the rest. Later, some 300 students and their parents were summoned to the interior ministry. Armed forces also raided the offices of the rector of Bahrain University, Dr. Ibrahim Al-Hashimi and his deputy, Dr. Nazar Al-Bahamah. The two were angry that the security forces stormed the campuses of the university on 1 April and injured many student. There was an unconfirmed report that a Yemeni student by

the name Ahmad Al-Saad was killed in the University on 1 April. The University was shut down for three weeks up to 21 April.

On 19 April, a young person 16 years old, died in his village of Dair, Muharraq, after a week of suffering caused by bullets sprayed on his body by the security forces. This has brought the number of martyrs to thirteen as follows:

(1) Hani Abbas Khamis, 24 years old, Sanbis, killed on 17/12/94; (2) Hani Ahmed Al-Wasti, 22 years, Jidhafs, killed on 17/12/94; (3) Haji Mirza Ali Abdul Redha, 65 years, Qadam, suffered severe police beating and died on 20/12/94; (4) Hussain Qambar, 18 years, Hoorra, died under torture on 4/1/95; (5) Abdul Qader Al-Fatlawi, 18 years, Duraz, killed on 12/1/95; (6) Mohammed Redha Mansoor Al-Hejji, 34 years, Bani Jamra, died suffering from bullets wound on 25/1/95; (7) Hussain Ali Al-Safi, 26 years, Sitra, killed on 26/1/95; (8) Aqeel Salman Al-Safar, 1 year (infant), Bilad-al-Qadeem, smothered by tear gas on 8/2/95; (9) Hussain Al-Maatooq, 12 years (handicapped), Daih, died from helicopter hovering effect on 8/3/95; (10) Abdul-Hameed Yousif Qassim, 17 years, Duraz, died from rubber bullets and torture on 26/3/95 (his fingers and various parts of the body were severed completely by police as evidenced by photographs); (11) Mohammed Jafer Yousif Twaig, 28 years, Bani Jamra, shot dead after imposing the house arrest on Sheikh Al-Jamri on 1/4/95; (12) Mohammed Ali Abdul Razzaq, 48 years, Bani Jamra, shot dead same as No. 11, on 1/4/95; (13) Hussain Abdulla Al-Asheeri, 16 years, Dair, died on 19/4/95.

Al: Arbitrary Arrests and Unlawful Killing

Amnesty International issued an urgent action on 6 April 1995 regarding arbitrary arrests, fear of torture and unlawful killings in Bahrain:

As the human rights situation in Bahrain continues to deteriorate, Amnesty International fears for the safety of the many people who have been arrested, and also for the safety of demonstrators following reports of more killings by security forces using live ammunition against unarmed civilians. On 1 April 1995, security forces surrounded the home of shaikh 'Abd al-Amir Mansur al-Jamri, a prominent Shi'a Muslim religious scholar and member of the former National Assembly, in the village of Bani Jamra.

The residential area in the vicinity of his home was cordoned off and the nearby houses forcibly vacated. Shaikh 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri and 18 other members of his family were reportedly placed under house arrest, among them his wife Zahra Yusuf, three sons and three daughters and several young children. All have since been denied access to the outside world, and their telephone and fax lines have been disconnected. Protests against these measures in Bani Jamra resulted in the security forces shooting at unarmed civilians using live ammunition, including from rooftops. Two men, Muhammed Ja'far Yusuf 'Atiyya and

Muhammad 'Ali 'Abd al-Razzaqm were killed and others seriously wounded. The authorities reportedly prevented their families from holding public mourning.

In a separate incident, live ammunition is said to have been used to quell protests on the campus of the University of Bahrain, where one student is reported to have been killed. Incidents were also reported in a number of other districts, including in the capital, al-Manama, and al-Sannabis, Jidd Hafs, and Bilad-al-Qadim.

Widespread arrests have been carried out during the past week, and reports indicate that a disused sports stadium in Madinat 'Issa has been converted into a makeshift detention centre as the official prisons are said to be severely overcrowded. Among those arrested are two prominent figures, Shaikh Khalil Sultan and Shaikh Hassan Sultan, whose exact whereabouts remain unknown. There are fears that they may be tortured during interrogation. One woman, Zahra Salman Hilal, and a 12-year-old girl, Ayat Abd al-Jabbar Salman, were also arrested and are believed to be held at the Juveniles Prison in Madinat 'Issa. On 6 April, Fatima 'Ashur Sengais and her daughter Malaka were arrested in a dawn raid on their homes in al-Sannabis. Their current whereabouts are unknown.

The Arrest of Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri

Two Weeks' House Arrest Imposed after Killing and Evicting Innocent Neighbours

On Saturday 1 April 1995 at 3.00 am, the village of Bani Jamra (where Sheikh Al-Jamri resides) was encircled by thousands of paramilitary forces. The neighbours of Sheikh Al-Jamri (around six to eight of them) were ordered to evacuate their houses within minutes or be sprayed with gunfire. The next neighbour (Mr Omran Hussain Omran) has had his two daughters injured, one of them in critical condition as a result of a bullet in the head. The husband of the latter, Mohammed Jafer Yousif Atteya Twaig, 30 years old, was shot dead by a machine-gun. Later, the neighbours demonstrated, more were shot and up to fifty were injured. One of them already passed away, Mr. Mohammed Ali Abdul Razzaq, a 50 years old carpenter, who rushed to save his injured son, Asaad, but found himself the target of machine guns. The funeral of the two was prevented and only a handful of relatives were allowed in the cemetery for the last farewell. Following, these clashes, the family of Sheikh Al-Jamri was isolated inside their house and the first House Arrest in the history of Bahrain has begun. Together with Sheikh Al-Jamri, eighteen members of his family suffered two weeks of house arrest. On 15 April, the security forces changed tactics. Sheikh Al-Jamri was taken away to an unknown detention centre.

Profile of Sheikh Al-Jamri:

Sheikh Al-Jamri was born in 1937 in the village of Bani Jamra. A son of a teacher of Quran, he learned his basic education from his father and state schools.

1962-1973: Studied Islamic theology and law at Al-Najaf Religious Institute. Authored several books which included: Islamic Duties, Islamic Teachings, Women in Islam, Poetry among others.

1973-1975: Was elected by the 14th regional constituency for the National Assembly. As an active opposition member, he lobbied vigorously against the imposition of the State Security Law which was issued by the Amir (ruler) in October 1974. The constitution specifies sharing the legislative power between the Amir and the National Assembly. Both branches of the legislature must mutually agree on any bill before it can become a statutory law. The Amir disregarded this, dissolved the elected parliament and suspended the important articles of the constitution in August 1975. The State Security Law empowers the Interior Minister to order the administrative detention of opponents for up to three years renewable. This law has been fully utilised to suppress the opposition since 1975.

1975-1977: As a religious scholar and active member of the Islamic Enlightenment Society he was involved in many cultural, social, charitable and educational activities for the promotion of religious teachings and social justice.

1977-1988: He accepted an offer to join the Religious Court as a judge. The religious courts are part of the Ministry of Justice which were established in the twenties to cater for resolving cases pertaining to personal affairs,

such as marriages, divorces, inheritance and other community's religious affairs. The courts are divided into two departments, one for the Shia community and one for the Sunni community, being the two major Muslim sects of Bahrain. Sheikh Al-Jamri was a member of the Shia court.

As a prominent figure in the society, his domain of activities extended beyond the courts to include all cultural activities, including peaceful opposition to the social injustices caused by the banning of the parliament and the rough implantation of the State Security Law.

In 1988, the Bahraini authorities decided to punish him for his open opposition. On 14 May 1988, the security forces surrounded and searched around the Mosque where Sheikh Al-Jamri leads the daily prayers. This was considered as a muscle show by the security forces. Although Bahrain Law does not allow the sacking of any judge, in July 1988 Sheikh Al-Jamri was suspended from duty. Then, in September both his son (Mohammed Jamil) and son-in-law (Abdul Jalil Khalil Ebrahim) were arrested, severely tortured, charged with anti-government activities and sentenced to Ten and Seven years imprisonment. Sheikh Al-Jamri himself was arrested on 6 September, but was released after few hours when people demonstrated instantly against the government action. The sentencing of both his son and son-in-law was a punishment substitution.

1988-1993: From his house and the neighbourhood mosque, Sheikh Al-Jamri resorted to his usual activities in addition to authoring books and forming educational circles in the mosque. He continued campaigning against government's unjust policies.

In November 1992, he, together with five others, sponsored a petition calling for the restoration of the constitution and the dissolved parliament as stated in the constitution. The petition was signed by hundreds of leading personalities from all sections and tendencies in Bahrain's society. The sponsoring six-people committee included Dr. Abdul Latif Al-Mahmood (a university professor and a leading Sunni figure) Mr. Mohammed Jaber Sabah (an ex-MP, a nationalist and a Sunni personality), Sheikh Isa Al-Joder (a Sunni religious scholar), Mr Abdul Wahab Husain (a Shia personality) and Mr. Hamid Sangoor (a lawyer, a nationalist and Shia personality).

The petition was submitted to the Amir in mid November, but the latter disregarded it and went ahead on 16 December and appointed a 30-member Consultative Council. A meeting between the committee and the Amir ended with failure as the ruler insisted on the best option he sees for Bahrain is the appointed council. Furthermore, the ruler attempted to personalise the issue by asking the delegates if they distrusted the people he had appointed.

On 6th March, both Dr. Al-Mahmood and Sheikh Al-Jamri were invited to speak at Al-Khawajah Mosque in Manama, and present

their views to the public in a peaceful way. The Bahraini authorities took the matter seriously and intervened to cancel the meeting. Both speakers were contacted and ordered not to attend the meeting, otherwise they would be arrested. Then, the security forces encircled the mosque, closed its gates and hung the walls with a prohibition notice.

Sheikh Al-Jamri was invited for another meeting on 18th March at Mo' min Mosque in Manama. This time the security forces spared no time and rushed to arrest Sheikh Al-Jamri just before starting his journey towards Manama. Crowds of people gathered instantaneously and after heated exchanges, the security forces left the scene.

1994-1995: In October 1994, a petition was sponsored by 14 pro-democracy leader. These included Islamists (both Shia and Sunni), secularists, leftists and liberals (including for the first time a female university professor). Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri headed the list. The petition called for the restoration of the constitution and reinstatement of the dissolved parliament. Some 25,000 Bahraini citizens (male and female above 18 years of age) signed the petition which was supposed to have been submitted on 16 December 1994 (Bahrain's National Day). However, the government escalated the political situation by arresting a leading cleric, Sheikh Ali Salman, who was instrumental in the campaign for collecting signatures from the public. People responded by demonstrating for his release. The situation intensified, and the government attacked demonstrators and killed many demonstrators, injured hundreds and arrested thousands. The situation continued to deteriorate as the government's security forces embarked on a massive repression campaign that captured news headlines all over the world.

Government's Strategy Fails

The security forces have followed a tightly controlled strategy. They concentrated their attacks on certain areas of Bahrain in an attempt to depict the uprising with certain colours. Then, the information and interior ministries issued orders (published in dailies) that any person who dares to transmit any news to the outside world will be punished.

The iron-curtain was meant to pave the way for the worst campaign of oppression in the history of Bahrain. Whole villages were ransacked, mosques were damaged, houses' contents were stolen, elderly men and women were taken prisoners, children were tortured and killed. On the other hand the information ministry activated many of its propaganda agencies to give the fictitious picture of stability.

The Economist of 22 April published a two-page paid advert on Bahrain where the government attempted to give an impression of a business haven. However, the main news on page 6 of the same Economist issue reversed the effect the government's advert. The latter stated "Interior ministers from the Arab Gulf states met in Bahrain in a show of support for the Bahraini regime's crackdown on its Islamic opposition. Security measures included the arrest of Sheikh Abdul Amir Jamri, a leader of the group calling for a return to the constitution".

Eyewitness Account from Bahrain:

Kathy Evans: Bahrain is the Only Country in the World which Exiles its Citizens

The Guardian, 11 April 1995, Kathy Evans in Bahrain. "Shia mosques smashed as police answer Bahrain unrest". At The Mukbara mosque in the Bahraini village of Sannabis, Hussein swept the broken glass into neat piles.

"Two days ago, they came again. This time they wrecked our mosques. This one, and one down the road. We all saw it from our roofs," he said. "They" are the Bahraini police, who Hussein said pay almost nightly visits to the Shia coastal village, terrorising its inhabitants. In the courtyard, small, round tablets used in Shia prayers, stones from the holy city of Kerbala, lay smashed into tiny fragments. "They hate us Shia," Hussein said as he sorted through the broken prayer stones.

Elsewhere in the village, shops were closed, shutters firmly down and the streets empty of life. Sannabis is just one of a series of Shia villages which have seen the worst of the governments' response to the five-month uprising by Bahrainis demanding jobs and parliamentary elections.

Shi'ites constitute some 65 per cent of this Gulf island's population, but since the last century Bahrain has been ruled by a Sunni family of sheikhs, the Al Khalifas. Five months ago, the island saw an unprecedented series of demonstrations about unemployment and the need for democracy, many of them joined by Shia two months ago, Hussein's two sons were taken away. Police broke into his house at 3am, smashing windows and holding a gun to his wife's head. Hussein has not seen his sons since. "I've been round all the police stations in our area twice, but they say they don't know where they are," he said.

Bahraini government officials say foreign-trained Islamic fundamentalists are behind the protests that have left 10 people dead and banks, power stations and schools blackened and burnt out. "Foreign hands" are at work, they say, hinting obliquely at Iran.

Bahrain plays a key role in the Western protection of the oil-rich Gulf. The United States navy has a base in the southern part of the island, from which its ships mount continuous patrols of Gulf waters. Western embassies have remained silent. Bahrainis are convinced Western powers prefer the present regime to the alternative of a parliament dominated by fundamentalists. "This may happen, but democracy would cleanse it in time," one leading secularist businessman said. "We do not want to overthrow our government or the emir, but we want democracy to return."

Opposition spokesmen say the almost daily demonstrations are a symptom of popular frustration at the government's refusal to discuss their demands. Two petitions, one signed by 20,000 Bahrainis, have been drawn up, but the island's emir, Sheikh Issa, has refused even to accept them. Opposition figures deny their movement is dominated by Shia religious fanatics influenced by Iran. The demands for democracy and the release of prisoners are backed by both Shia and Sunni religious groups, as well as by secularists, they say.

The Bahraini government has responded to the demonstrations by cordoning off villages at sunset with squads of riot police. Shia villages have become no-go areas, which local taxis fear to enter. In the early hours of each morning, village residents say Bahraini police, many of them Pakistani mercenaries, burst into homes and take away young men and boys, some as young as 12.

Opposition activists and lawyers believe as many as 5,000 people may be in detention, but only 19 have been charged. In the village of Jidhafs, residents said 30 children from three alone had been arrested. Ali, aged 12, said two of his school friends were taken away from their classroom by police squads.

"That happened the week before last, and I haven't seen them since. Then one policeman, a

Yemeni, started to hit me as I was walking home from the mosque at 6pm," Ali said in a whisper, "he told me that if he saw me out late, he would take me in, too.

Under Bahrain's security laws, detainees can be held for three years without charge. Local newspapers rarely report demonstrations or arrests, and opposition statements are never published. Last week, Bahrain's information minister, Tariq al Moayed, banned citizens from speaking to the foreign press.

More than half of the 500,000 population are foreigners. In the 1970s, Bahrain attempted to carve out a role as a regional banking centre, and dozens of foreign offshore banks are now based on the island. One senior executive with a foreign trading company said foreigners were increasingly a target for Bahraini anger at the lack of jobs. Asian workers say they have been stoned by Bahraini women, and that labour camps for construction workers have been frequently attacked.

Unlike its rich neighbours, Bahrain has only small and rapidly depleting oil fields, and its annual budget requires bolstering by Saudi Arabia. This has not dampened expectations that Bahrainis should enjoy the same luxurious lifestyles as their richer Gulf neighbours.

"There is very little unemployment on this island," the executive said. "The problem with these people is they are unskilled and lazy. These demonstrations are just organised by the fundamentalist." The government, he added, gave companies many incentives to employ Bahrainis. Even government loyalists appear to back demands for the return of parliamentary rule, scrapped in 1975 after protests against the security laws. The emir appointed a powerless consultative council instead. The opposition also wants the release of prisoners and the return of exiles from abroad.

Bahrain is the only country in the world which exiles its citizens for political activity.

Avebury: Britain Should Help Bahrainis to Escape From the Middle Ages

On 4th April, Al-Ayyam daily published an order from the information ministry prohibiting citizens from conducting interviews or speaking to international news organisations. This was intended to impound Bahrain and ransack the country under the cover of emergency powers. The government on the other hand commissioned outsiders to whitewash its image. Private Eye magazine of London reported on 21 April that "The three-day conference (10-12) was convened by the Gulf Economic Forum which is financed almost entirely by the government of Bahrain. Its title was the New Agenda for Finance in the Middle East. Sadly the headlines from Bahrain on all three conference days were stolen by reports of explosions and fires, all of them caused by the determination of the Amir...to stamp out opposition to his government: a task which is becoming increasingly difficult as the opposition gets the support of more and more of the 500,000 Bahraini population...Thatcher often cites the historic ties which binds Bahrain to Britain. Perhaps the closest such tie is

Brigadier Ian Henderson, 73, director-general of public security in Bahrain". Private Eye wrote in a preceding issue "A parliamentary delegation led by Mr William Powell, Tory MP for Corby, went there for a few happy days in March. The delegation got a petition from some of the dissidents but did not manage to see them. The day after the petition was delivered, one of its signatories, Abdul Wahab Hussain, was arrested. On his return, Mr Powell wrote an angry letter to the Financial Times protesting at an article (16 March)...Eye readers will recall Mr Powell as the lucky recipient of substantial regular payment of 500 pounds a month from the Gulf Centre for Strategic Studies"

Perhaps the strongest, yet the vaguest, semi-support came from Douglas Hurd, the British Foreign Secretary. The Guardian of 7 April wrote that "Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary, used a banquet marking the 50th anniversary of the Arab League to express his unhappiness at "malevolent" campaigns being run from Britain and to support the government of Bahrain....He mentioned no names, but the com-

ments were widely interpreted as being mainly intended for Saudi Arabia, furious over the presence of the committee for the defence of legitimate rights...Mr Hurd's second message was for the tiny Gulf emirate of Bahrain, which has come under the criticism from Amnesty International in recent weeks for heavy-handed suppression of unprecedented unrest. "Our thoughts are with the government of Bahrain in the difficulties they face" he said. "As old friends they should know they have our full support as they work to ensure a stable and prosperous future for all the people of Bahrain". Eyebrows were raised at this statement, felt by some to be inappropriate in a situation which the protesters are demanding the restoration of constitutional rights and are not apparently supported - as the Manama government has claimed - by outside forces. Lord Avebury, the Liberal Democrat peer, wrote to Mr Hurd: "If you were a true friend of Bahrain you would be helping the people to escape from the Middle Ages and to enjoy the benefits of democracy, not attempting to prop up a system which is going to change anyway".