

BAHRAIN

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A state of disappointment reigns over the country

Failure to deliver can be catastrophic

An Amnesty International delegation led by June Ray, the Programme Director for the Middle East, started a visit to Bahrain on 28 June. Ahead of the visit, an air of pessimism was spreading in the country after hopes of eventual political reforms have been dashed. The people had tinged their hopes on the good offices of the new ruler having ascended to the throne after his father demise in March. He had given himself three months to deliberate on the situation, while the people were ready to go the extra mile so as not to jeopardize any possible reconciliatory move.

The period of mourning ended in the first week of June, and the only positive gesture from Sheikh Hamad was an order to release 320 detainees (in batches of 40s) and a handful of political prisoners. The releases were not conducted in a way indicative of a serious approach to reconciliation. It later transpired that those covered by the "royal pardon" were either people who had completed their prison sentences or detainees who had spent considerable periods behind bars without charge or trial.

The Amir himself later conceded in a meeting with Egyptian journalists during an official visit to Cairo that he would only pardon those who did not commit any offence. He said it was improper for him to release those who had taken active part in the protests.

The optimist view came after Sheikh Hamad had repeatedly indicated in interviews following his assumption of power that he had a serious programme of reforms. His aides overemphasised this programme in their meetings with people. In fact the local media was encouraged at the beginning to debate issues that had been a no-go area before. Some pro-government commentators went as far as suggesting that the time was now suitable for the reinstatement of the country's constitution and parliamentary democracy. Debates on human rights were encouraged and the feelings of people were whipped up to expect major changes in the political arena.

The first shock came after the first cabinet reshuffle took place. The prime minister, who had been behind the reign of repression in the country ever since its

independence in 1971, retained his post and reinstated his ancient cabinet.

Evidence suggest that the release of some detainees was more of a sinister act than a "gracious gift" to the nation. Bahrain had been in the firing line of the international human rights groups for the past years. The government had been under increasing pressure to allow human rights groups to visit the country and monitor the situation. A second UN resolution condemning its practices in the field of human rights was inevitable (if no improvements is reported) during the UN Sub-Commission for Human Rights in its session next August, and the only way to avert it was to allow a visit by the working group on arbitrary detention to the country (due on 20 October).

Furthermore, under pressure from the British government a visit by Amnesty International was allowed to take place between 28 June and 1 July. It was the first visit by the renowned organisation to the country in thirteen years. For these visits to take place, it was paramount for the government to impress the visiting agencies by exhibiting a less evil record on human rights violations. The spate of administrative (more like a production line) trials by the notorious State Security Court was intended to reduce the number of detainees who have not been either charged or tried. The release of the prisoners whom the Amir had himself described as innocent, would fulfil the two aims of impressing the visiting Human Rights agencies and showing the public that the new Amir means business.

These marginal moves fall short of the demands by the opposition that a modern civil society be fostered in Bahrain. None of the modest demands appear to have been seriously addressed by the government. The initial hope that the new Amir, being of a different generation and frame of mind, would embark on serious political reforms may have been premature.

Unlike the rulers of Jordan and Qatar, for example, who have started their ventures by introducing reasonable reforms, Sheikh Hamad appears to have been blocked by his uncle, whose political life has been based

on repression and human rights violations.

The friends of the Al Khalifa have not sought to induce the new Amir in a serious way to undertake serious political reforms. It is recognised, however, that the welcome visit of Amnesty International is a direct response to the plea made by the British government, especially the late minister, Mr. Derek Fatchett. The new minister, Mr. Geoffrey Hoon thanked the Bahraini government on 23 June for allowing Amnesty International to visit Bahrain. The British government is under pressure from British MPs who had campaigned for halting human rights abuses in Bahrain.

Nevertheless, the status quo appears to have been maintained. Instead of welcoming the opposition's move for calming the situation and preparing the grounds for Sheikh Hamad to reinstate constitutional political life, derogatory remarks were published in the government's controlled media. The new ruler has appointed three advisors, two of whom are respected by the people. Both Dr. Mohammed Jaber Al-Ansari and Dr. Hassan Fakhro are considered as liberal-minded people who are keen to present a different image (and possibly a different content) for the government of Bahrain. These two honest advisors can assist the new Amir to undertake the issue of political reforms more seriously. They could counter the claims of so-called influential fascists who argue the prime minister's heavy-handedness with the pro-democracy activists are better for the stability of the region. This ill-conceived approach can only lead to more miseries and political upheavals. Dictators cannot preserve peace and stability. It is only through the establishment of the rule of law, respect of human rights and allowing political participation, that a sound and stable regime could be maintained. More troublesome periods cannot be avoided if the wishes of people and their rights were not respected.

The experience of the past five years indicates clearly how ignoring people's rights can lead to instability. Sheikh Hamad will enjoy his position more if he were to respect the wishes of the people and does not give in to the repressive doctrines of his uncle.

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Al Visits Bahrain

The new UK Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Geoffrey Hoon, addressed a meeting in London on 23 June, evening. Mr. Hoon replaced the late Mr. Derek Fatchett who was responsible for the Middle East. The new minister hailed Qatar's Municipal elections as well as the Amir of Kuwait for his adherence to the constitution. He also spoke about the smooth transition of power to the new Amir of Bahrain.

The new minister was asked about the human rights situation in Bahrain and about his views towards the demands raised by the people of Bahrain. Mr. Hoon referred to the pledges made by the new Amir for reforming the situation and the release of political prisoners. He emphasised the British historical relations with Bahrain and reiterated that the British government would use its good office for more development in Bahrain.

He also welcomed the Bahraini government decision to allow Amnesty International (AI) to visit the country. AI is starting an investigative visit to Bahrain on 25 June and this will be the fulfilling of the promises made to both the UK Government and to AI to allow such a visit to go ahead. This explains why the government of Bahrain has been embellishing the releases of citizens who had been interned and tortured for more than three years. This also explains why the intelligence department summoned one of Sheikh Al-Jamri's sons and forced him to speak to Reuters and other media organisations to deny reports about the ill-treatment of Sheikh Al-Jamri.

The Amir was quoted as saying that he released "his sons", while those who "committed crimes will remain in jails." This is a dangerous statement. If these people had been detained and tortured without reason, will the Amir order the trial and punishment of the torturers?

The people of Bahrain are aware of the government's need for a public relation exercise. However, the reforms that are sought by the people can easily be addressed if the Amir is to choose a different policy towards the nation. The ancient government that still controls the society limits the channels of communication between the ruler and the ruled and insists that these channels must be under the control of the security forces and the intelligence department. The latter are staffed and controlled by mercenaries imported from outside Bahrain for the sole purpose of repressing the nation. The new Amir has yet to choose a different course of action. The public relation exercise will soon come to an end after the completion of visits by Amnesty International and by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. The latter will visit Bahrain on 20 October. Once these short-term pressures are over, the public relation exercise will be over and the ugly face of repression will show-up.

Suffering "gratitude"

** The health of the detained pro-democracy leader, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, has deteriorated in the past two weeks. He was spotted in an exhausted condition in the Military Hospital last week and his condition was described as worrying. Sheikh Al-Jamri had been placed in solitary and semi-solitary confinement since January 1996. The jailers continue to ill-treat him in various ways. He is completely isolated from the outside world. Members of the intelligence department, keen to disorientate Sheikh Al-Jamri, transmit false news to him. Bugging devices are placed everywhere inside his cell and during any short interview he is allowed with his family. The short interviews take place once every two months and the undisciplined intelligence officers usually sit around his sides.

While the pro-democracy leaders are being ill-treated, the government's newspapers continue their medieval political language. Stories about the "gratitude" of the Amir and the prime minister continue to be published. The freeing of youths that had been tortured for more than three years without charges and trial is considered as a "gratitude". This medieval mentality is sickening those who are being released following ordeals of prolonged torture and ill-treatment.

** One detainee, Abdul Jalil Al-Sha'er, from Barbar, had been transferred to Salmanya Hospital a week ago suffering from the torture he had been subjected to inside the cells of the interior ministry. He is now being treated in Ward 23 where his condition is not yet recovering. Two weeks ago, the elderly Haji Abdulla Fakhro 70, was also transferred to hospital from his cell. Mr. Fakhro was released on 25 June.

** Another, Abbas Saeed Hassan Sabt, 19, is suffering from critical illness in Salmanya Hospital section 412. Mr. Sabt was first admitted to the Bahrain Defence Forces' Hospital (BDF) on 28 June 1998, then transferred to Salmanya Hospital on 13 July 1998. Mr. Sabt had been brutally tortured by the notorious Khalid Al-Wazzan upon his first arrest in February 1997. He was re-arrested and detained for a second time in Al Khamis Centre in which he received a second dose of torture. He was finally re-arrested and detained in Budayia Centre on 12 April 1998. In there his torture was supervised by the notorious Ali Al Khllifa and the mercenary Farooq Al Ma'awda. Several methods of torture were used on Mr. Sabt. They include: forcing him to stand for fifteen days, flogging his feet and beating and kicking him on his head and kidneys. He is now fighting for his life after being diagnosed of suffering from a fatal illness.

** A further evidence that human rights situation is continuing comes from inside the jails. Two persons were brutally tortured in Jaw prison for their protest against the inhuman treatment they received. The

two detainees, Shaikh Hussain Al Daihi and Shaikh Ali Ashur, have suffered physical injuries and are now denied treatment as a further punishment. They were told to strip down and handcuffed if they wanted to see their families. When they refused to see their families in that state they were beaten and placed in solitary cells in section (5) of Jaw prison.

** In the meantime, the notorious torturer and the person in-charge of the North-West Region Police HQ, Farooq al-Ma'awdah met with dignitaries of Duraz on 19 June and informed them he had received orders from higher authorities to allow the re-opening of their community centres (Matams) which he had attacked and closed down in the past two years. Three months ago, Al-Ma'awdah said to the same dignitaries that the centres would never open so long as they refused his humiliating conditions.

** Seven citizens were brought before the unconstitutional State Security Court on 19 June. The session was held in camera. The court, presided by a member of the ruling family and staffed with Egyptian judges (on short-term renewable contracts) had been condemned by all international human rights organisations.

Women arrested

A group of women were beaten up just outside the Bahraini Amiri Court in Rifa'a by security forces on 12 June. The security forces dragged, beaten up and forced the women to turn back, thus preventing them from reaching the Amiri Court to submit a petition requesting the release of their relatives.

One of the women, Layla Khaiil Dashti, was told by an officer that the Amir "does not interfere in such issues." He is only there "to assist those who request for plots of land to build houses or those who need tickets to travel abroad for treatment along other matters of this nature." He has "nothing to do with internal political affairs" said the security officer.

On 14 June, the group of women then attempted to hire a coach from a Al-Nussir Agency in an attempt to drive their way to the Amiri Court to submit their petition. The security forces attacked the agency, closed it down and arrested its owner. Several women were arrested and tortured, including Kareemah Hassan Al-Mosawi, 31, and Ramlah Mohammed Hassan, 23.

The lawyer of the women was summoned shortly after he met with the women. Abdulla Hashim, a prominent and outspoken lawyer, was summoned on 15 June and threatened against taking any legal action regarding the assault on his clients.

Lack of liberties

The prestigious Al-Oroba Club was prevented from hosting a seminar that was supposed to have taken place on the evening of 9 June. Dr. Sabeeka Al-Najjar was invited to speak on "Women and political

participation". At first the authorities allowed the seminar to go ahead. But shortly before it started, the club was ordered to cancel the meeting. The order came from Mohammed Al Bin-Ali, who works in the office of the Interior Minister. It is worth noting that the government's body that authorised the meeting was the General Organisation for Youth and Sports, which is responsible for regulating clubs' activities. This cancellation shows how the unaccountable interior ministry interferes in public life and extinguishes any drive for liberalisation in the country.

The prevention of Al-Oroba Club from hosting a seminar is casting doubts about the seriousness of the government for opening up the political environment.

** Similarly, the reaction of the government to the broadcasting of an interview with a member of the opposition on Sunday 7 June on Al-Jazeera Satellite TV reflects the lack of seriousness towards political openness. On that day, members of the opposition were interviewed by several media organisations including the BBC Arabic Service and Al-Jazeera. However, the reaction of the government was to lodge a formal complaint (against Al-Jazeera) to the GCC Secretary General on 9 June. The submission of the complaint followed an emergency meeting between the prime minister, the foreign, the interior and the information ministers. The government's journalists in Al-Ayyam and Akhbar Al-Khalij were ordered to launch a low-level attack against the opposition in the editorials of 9 June.

The Middle East Mirror (MEM) wrote on 9 June that "two state-guided newspapers" aired their anger on 9 June after Al-Jazeera satellite television interviewed Dr. Mansoor Al-Jamri. The MEM reported the editorial simultaneously published in Akhbar Al-Khaleej and Al-Ayyam. Both editorials used a bad language incompatible with today's world of politics. Both columnists receive orders from the interior and information ministries before publishing such comments.

Release of 320 people

Amnesty International (AI) issued a press release on 8 June 1999 welcoming the announcement of the government's decision to release 320 citizens. AI said "This is a positive step in the right direction and further measures to improve the human rights situation in the country are needed". The organisation requested details regarding all those released including their identity, dates of arrest, reason for arrest, charges that were brought against them, their place of detention and sentences that have been passed against any of them. AI said "a number of people are still being detained solely for their peaceful opposition to the government. The detention of such people must come to an end."

The opposition welcomed the announcement by the government on 6 June

that it would free more than 300 detainees held during anti-government protests. The announcement said that the Amir ordered the release of 320 detainees and 41 people sentenced for criminal acts. He also "pardoned" 12 Bahraini political exiles, who had asked for a pardon and pledged "good behaviour," the statement said.

A spokesperson for the BFM said, "the Bahraini opposition welcomes all moves that foster a political relaxation and openness. Those released represent less than quarter the number of detainees. However, the opposition hopes that the Amir will start addressing the core issues and not only the symptoms. The people in Bahrain are awaiting the initiation of reforms, which had been spoken about by the Amir in the past three months. Integral to these reforms are the restoration of the constitution, the release of all political detainees and prisoners, and allowing all political exiles to return home without pre-conditions".

The opposition also called on the Amir to assume the responsibilities for the internal political crisis. It was the mismanagement of the government that dragged the country into the turmoil. One of the mistakes of the government was to treat the crisis in security terms rather than considering political solutions.

The London-based Al-Quds newspaper published an article for the Bahraini personality, Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi in which he described the disappointment of the nation with the re-appointment of the same cabinet that had been responsible for dragging the country to its lowest political performance. He called on the Amir to take brave decisions towards the problems of the country by addressing the grievances as well as the legitimate demands that have been raised by the Bahraini people.

Back in action

Several checkpoints were established on 30 and 31 May following the re-confirmation of the ancient government back in office. Jeeps full of foreign security men began touring the residential area in a coward show of force.

As soon as the old government was re-confirmed, the repressive practices of the security forces were back in action. On 30 May, Hanan Salman Haider, the girl who had been detained for several months late last year, was re-detained for one day. Undisciplined security officers subjected her to ill-treatment and interrogation.

On the same day, Jaffer Al-Sayyah, from Sitra, was re-detained. He had completed his three years jail sentence and was released last year. However, all his friends who had been released following the completion of their sentences were re-detained. His re-detention is meant to be a message to citizens that the interior ministry is back in action without a change in mentality.

Similarly, inside the jails, many citizens continue to suffer torturing and solitary confinement. The twelve citizens who

were transferred from Jaw to Qala'a following attacks by security forces on their cells, are suffering severely. They are being tortured to serve as an example for other prisoners. Another citizen, Hussain Abdul Karim Abdulla, from Bilad al-Qadim, had been transferred to a solitary cell following receiving a 4-year jail sentence.

The Labour Ministry sent a memorandum to clubs and charity funds ordering them to acquire a prior permission before holding any function and before using any loud speaker. The late Amir has signed a decree banning the use of loud speaker in mosques and public places without prior permission. Few days later he died and the loud speakers decree was ignored. If it had been implemented, then mosques and other places would have been banned from using the microphones. However, now that the mourning period is over, the ancient regime is re-asserting its dictatorial powers.

Old cabinet sworn in

An Amiri decree named only three new ministers replacing two out-going ministers and creating a new minister of state post. The new finance and economy minister Abdulah Hassan Seif was the governor of the widely criticised Bahrain Monetary Agency. Recently the Agency was accused of silence and cover up over the issue of forged bank notes sold in the country. Former Bahraini diplomat Ali Ibrahim al-Mahrous was appointed as Public Works and Agriculture Minister, replacing Majid Jawad al-Jishi who became a minister of state. Another member of the Al Khalifa family was appointed as a Minister for Electricity and Water.

Bahrain's cabinet resignation on Sunday 30 May, came a head of a widely optimistic popular expectations of a real change. Shaikh Khalifa has headed Bahrain's cabinet since 1973 and several ministers have held their posts since then. The prime minister reshuffled his cabinet in 1995. Several days before the reshuffling of the cabinet the official media: as heightened peoples' expectations for reform. Government's trumpet-blowers were ordered to magnify the intentions of the new Amir to exercise a substantial change. The reasons for such a propagandist approach were not clear. The absolute and ancient cabinet stayed in power. This has delivered a message to Bahrainis that the government is unbeatable and that its backward mentality in running the country still holds.

In his statement after his reappointment, the Prime Minister reaffirmed his commitment to his old policy of denial of the political rights of Bahrainis. He reiterated the role of the Consultative Council as an alternative to the constitutional parliament. As the time of the coronation of Amir approaches, citizens are widely sceptical about the continuing propaganda for change alluded to by the official media. People are wondering whether this is just another lie.

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"Why Bahrain is releasing detainees?"

Mansour al-Jamri of the opposition Bahrain Freedom Movement tells Mideast Mirror the government is trying to beat an Oct. 20 deadline, when a UN team will visit Bahrain to investigate arbitrary detentions, but he says the new Emir seems inclined to introduce change for the better if and when he takes charge of internal affairs from the prime minister.

The Bahraini authorities' decision to release some 300 detainees held in connection with the disturbances which erupted in late 1994 does not appear to be part of a process of reaching a political accommodation with the opposition, according to Mansour al-Jamri, a prominent member of the London-based opposition Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM).

The move is essentially designed to release or sentence more than 1,000 held without charge or trial before next October's visit to Bahrain by a delegation from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which will investigate whether there are any "arbitrarily detained" people in the Gulf island state, Jamri told Mideast Mirror Friday.

Jamri said Bahrain's new Emir, who ordered the release, appears to be inclined to introduce change for the better. But for him to do that, he must first take over control of internal policy from his uncle and prime minister, who adamantly opposes any reform.

RELEASE:

Jamri was commenting on last week-end's announcement that the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa Al-Khalifa, had ordered the release of 320 detainees held during anti-government protests and 41 people sentenced for criminal acts.

He also pardoned 12 Bahraini political exiles, who had asked for a pardon and pledged "good behaviour," an official statement said.

A Bahraini official subsequently announced that 41 Shiite Muslims detained during the unrest were freed Tuesday and another 40 or so were expected to be released later in the week.

Hundreds of people had been detained in Bahrain since unrest erupted in December 1994, led by the majority Shiite community seeking political and economic reforms from the Sunni Moslem government. More than 30 people were killed in the disturbances, which abated in 1998.

The pardon was announced following the end of a three-month mourning period for the death on March 6 of Bahrain's late Emir, Sheikh Issa bin-Salman Al-Khalifa.

UN VISIT:

Jamri welcomed the release of detainees—as did the BFM in a statement earlier this week—but he said it would affect less than a fourth of the people held behind bars in connection with the unrest and appeared essentially aimed at preempting any criticism by the UN team that will visit Bahrain on October 20.

He said Manama allowed the visit by the delegation representing the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, to be led by respected French judge Louis Joinet, in order to ward off a condemnation of its record on human rights by the UN Human Rights Sub-commission during its annual session in Geneva last August.

The UN body condemned the Bahraini government's violation of human rights during its August 1997 meeting, he explained. It was poised to adopt an even more strongly-worded resolution in August 1998 had Manama not agreed to allow the UN delegation to visit as well as to drop its reservations on Article 20 of the convention Against Torture.

Though the visit should have taken place within a year of the August 1998 meeting, Manama negotiated a postponement until October 20, and it seems the government is now in a race against the clock to either free or sentence the 1,000-plus "arbitrarily detained" people by that date, Jamri said.

This also explains why sentences have been hastily passed over the past couple of months, with up to 20 people sentenced at a time in some cases, he said.

Anyone detained for more than 48 hours without charge or trial would fall in the "arbitrarily detained" category, Jamri said. But under Bahrain's State Security Law, people are detained without charge or trial for up to three years, and the detention is "renewable" once the three years have elapsed, he remarked.

Jamri said a least 1,500 people are in jail in connection with the unrest, around 500 of whom have been sentenced. This means that the release which started this week would benefit less than one-fourth of the total, he noted. As to the 12 "political exiles" who have been pardoned, Jamri said, they are effectively not opposition activists. The Bahraini government has banished many Shiites who are not involved in politics, and these are among them, he added.

Jamri, who is the son of leading Shiite opposition activist Sheikh Abdolamir al-Jamri, said the new Emir had intervened to put his father's trial on hold, and it was not clear what would happen next.

The trial of Sheikh Jamri, a member of elected parliament dissolved by the previous Emir in 1975, opened last February, three years after he was detained on charges of inciting unrest. He was accused of spying for a foreign country [a reference to Iran], running an illegal organization, fanning unrest, and circulating false news. If found guilty, Sheikh Jamri could face a maximum penalty of execution.

Mansour al-Jamri told Mideast Mirror his father's trial had been adjourned to March 7 after the first session, but the hearing did not take place because Sheikh Issa died the day before. Since then, the new Emir ordered that the trial be put on hold.

EMIR vs PRIME MINISTER:

Jamri said he did not know what would happen next, but he hoped the suspension of the trial was a good sign.

As a matter of fact, he said Sheikh Hamad has stated that he wants to introduce change and appears inclined to allow a measure of liberalization. He has already lifted some restrictions on the press, which is now tackling the once-taboo subject of restoring the elected legislature, Jamri remarked.

Moreover, he said, the new Emir has named two qualified and liberal-minded advisers—Hassan Fakhro for economic affairs and Mohammad Jaber al-Ansari for cultural and scientific affairs. His Western-educated son and Crown Prince, Sheikh Salman bin-Hamad, is also a positive influence.

However, Sheikh Hamad and his entourage are still not in control of internal policy, according to Jamri. While the new Emir calls the shots in foreign and defense affairs, internal matters, whether political or economic, remain very much in the hands of Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman, who is fiercely opposed to any change, he said. That the prime minister is in charge of the home front was evidenced by the recent, very limited cabinet reshuffle which did not feature any significant change.

Jamri made clear the BFM would back any moves toward democratization the new Emir takes and noted it had sent him condolences on his father's death. However, the release of detainees which began this week cannot at this point be said to be part of a broader liberalization drive, he said.

From what has transpired so far, it appears Sheikh Hamad is "pro-some change. Exactly what that change is, we still don't know," Jamri said.

Economy

On 6 June, the Bahrain Monetary Agency announced that Bahrain's foreign trade showed a 24.6 million dinar (\$70 million) surplus in the first quarter of 1999 after a 57.1 million dinar deficit three months earlier.

Experts stated that "the surplus that has been achieved in the first quarter was due to decline in imports rather than rise in exports.

Decline of imports is an indicative of reduced economic activity. More importantly, for the year ending 1998, Bahrain reported a trade deficit of BD73m (or \$195m). In 1997, there was a trade surplus of BD149m. In 1998, total exports amounted to BD1,229m and imports BD1,302m. In 1997, total exports were BD1,649m and imports BD1,514m."