

Voice of

BAHRAIN

Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" for promoting Human and Constitutional Rights

The Amir's reforms are well overdue Will he deliver?

When the Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa undertook his first visit to Europe last month in his capacity as a head of state, he ought to have realised the depth of the feeling of international human rights activists with regard to what is happening in Bahrain. The French media gave a cautious welcome to the visit indicating the unease about the events in that country and the extent of repression that has befallen its people over the past quarter of a century. Several human rights organisations made their position clear in letters to both the Bahraini ambassador and the French president. They asked for a return to constitutional rule and the abolishing of the tools of repression especially the State Security Court and the State Security Law. Such protests from notable international organisations must have caused a degree of embarrassment to the visiting ruler, who would have liked to enjoy his first overseas visit free from the trouble of having to answer the accusations presented by concerned parties. The ruler has suddenly found himself in the middle of a furore and having to answer the concerns caused by the actions of his uncle, the prime minister.

Prior to his departure to France and other places, Sheikh Hamad had issued a decree pardoning the veteran opposition figure, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al Jamri, a victim of the repressive policies of the prime minister. Although the Amir wanted the release of the Sheikh, the presentation of the pardon to the nation by the government caused severe anger and frustration among the people of Bahrain. None of them wanted the play to be so disastrously produced especially after several international human rights organisations have put their weight behind Sheikh Al Jamri. The Amir ordered the release, the prime minister wanted to implement it in his own style; through public humiliation. The end result is that the Sheikh was released, but the people felt more hatred towards the system that seeks to humiliate the nation. The prime minister was instrumental in denying the Amir a gracious response from the people.

The people of Bahrain have been waiting for the period of mourning to end so that

political reforms may begin. For the past two months since that happened no serious reforms have taken place. Some releases were ordered by the Amir prior to that of Sheikh Al Jamri, but again they were done in the prime minister's style. Meanwhile, the people of Bahrain were taking heart from several regional developments.

First came the parliamentary elections in Kuwait. That event in itself inspired the people to be more forceful in demanding the reinstatement of the Constitution and the election of the National Assembly. Second came the announcement by Qatar that the Amir had appointed a committee to draw up a constitution. Again, it became apparent that the other Gulf states are moving forward in a faster pace than the Al Khalifa. Thirdly, the Saudi authorities released high-ranking clerics who, five years ago, had called for a major change in Saudi internal and external policies. They were released without public humiliation.

A Saudi politician recently expressed astonishment at the way Sheikh Al Jamri had been treated. He said: "What sort of a judicial system do they have? How could they pass such a harsh sentence against him one day and release him the next?"

It is within the context of the relations between the ruler and the ruled that the situation in Bahrain must be judged. The people sought to protect not only their constitutional rights but also their moral stand. For decades the present government has been inflicting heavy blows on the people and subjecting their pride and dignity to enormous torture. When they found the opportunity in 1994 they immediately grabbed it and aired their angry feelings to the world. For the first time a small Gulf country witnesses such widespread protests. If it were not for the opposition which has tamed the public feelings the situation would have been different. When a notable figure such as Sheikh Al Jamri, who has consistently and peacefully campaigned for a return to civil society and constitutional rule gets silenced in the most humiliated way and paraded on TV screens in the way it happened, it needs more than kind words from the opposition to stop the anger of the people claiming more devastating dimen-

sions. Up and until now, no serious initiatives have been taken by the new Amir despite the goodwill expressed by the opposition. Diplomats and observers have repeatedly sought excuses for this inaction, citing the policies of the prime minister as the main obstacle. But it must be emphasised here that the rights and wellbeing of people cannot be tampered with in this way for the sake of one person. Indeed there is a system of repression in the country which has been in operation ever since Ian Henderson came to Bahrain in 1966. But isn't it time for a solid stand by the friends of Bahrain to put an end to this tragic situation?

As the country embraced itself for the coming of the new Amir, the people looked for the friends of Bahrain to help it overcome the ordeals it has been subjected to for more than quarter of a century. Countries like Britain and the United States should have realised by now that their interest will be better served by a return to a constitutional rule and not by an absolutist regime. Unfortunately, the game of wait-and-see has dominated the scene ever since the new Amir came to power last March. The repression continues, so does the people's feelings towards the system. It is a test of wills between the people and the repressive regime. The hope is that a smooth change takes place soon towards a more democratic regime. If that fails then the only alternative will be instability. That surely does not safeguard anybody's interests.

There are plenty of opportunities to drive home to the Amir the idea that the people of Bahrain deserve to be respected and treated in accordance with international laws and conventions. The people who have been struggling for more than seventy years to attain their basic rights are worthy of respect and support. Whether through ambassadors, foreign ministers, head of states or even through representatives of these countries in Geneva, the avenues for delivering the message are plenty. What is lacking is the will to support democracy and human rights in Bahrain. A second thought on this may change the minds and inclinations of those in power both in London and Washington.

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Ethnic cleansing

There are some 15-20 thousand people who were born in Bahrain and served the country but are now being forcibly evicted from Bahrain.

These people are called Ajam (a section of the cosmopolitan Bahrain whose grandfathers have come from Iran over a century ago). A new governmental order is now in place and will be effective from the beginning of September 1999.

The governmental order discriminates against this section of Bahrain society in all walks of life. As from September, the children of this section will be prevented from all public schools. They will all be denied any medical care. If anyone of them needs an emergency treatment, he or she must pay 2 dinars (\$6) as an entry fee.

They will have to pay 100 dinar (\$267) for any newly born baby. They will only be issued with a one-way travel document that takes out of Bahrain. They will be prevented from purchasing any land and will be evicted from any employment. Most of these people live in Seqaya (Manama), Dafnah (near Salmana, Manama), Bin Ali Quarter in Muharrag, Mushber Quarter in Manama, and Halah Quarter in Muharrag.

Expelling H. Al-Ansari

July 1 (Reuters) - Bahrain has expelled a former talk show host of al-Jazeera, an outspoken Qatar-based satellite television station, for allegedly insulting Kuwait during a live programme, a government official said on Thursday.

The expulsion was the latest controversy involving the TV station which began broadcasting in 1996 and has established itself as a forum for debate on Arab issues for many Arab viewers in the Middle East, Europe and North America. The official said Hamid al-Ansari, who has left the station, had arrived in Bahrain on Tuesday to take part in a seminar.

Al visit concluded

Amnesty International announced that a "delegation led by June Ray, the Program director of the Middle East Program, Said Boumeddouha, a researcher in the Middle East Program and Angela Gaff, a British lawyer, will be visiting Bahrain from 28 June to 1st July, to discuss with senior Bahraini officials and representatives of the civil society, issues related to human rights protection and promotion.

French media coverage

3 July: The French TV station ARTE aired a programme on Bahrain on 3 July (8.05 pm). The programme "Le dessous des cartes" ("under the maps") - a 10 minutes geopolitical programme - explained some aspect of the political situation in Bahrain and why the government of Bahrain discriminates against the indigenous Shia population.

The ARTE programme counters the Bahraini government's initiative that launched an exhibition in Paris about Bahrain's history. The exhibition attempted to ignore the present suffering of the people, but ARTE showed part of the other side of the story.

On the occasion of the Bahraini Amir's visit to France, the French newspaper "Le Monde" published an article by Muna Na'im on 17 July titled "the Bahraini opposition calls for respect of liberties". The writer interviewed Dr. Saeed Shehabi of Bahrain Freedom Movement.

"The new Amir did not begin his tenure with a new political approach in the country", said Dr. Shehabi. The government refuses to publish a list of those released, most of who had spent many years in detention or have completed their sentences. He said that "the release of Shaikh Al Jamri was as a result of intensive international pressure on the government of Bahrain". The writer also referred to a letter by the opposition to the Bahrain Amir urging him to release all prisoners, ending of torture, return of all exiled and restoration of constitution and parliament. The French news agency quoted a spokesperson of the BFM on 17 July reiterating the just demands.

Dr. Mohammed expelled

The London-based newspaper Al Quds published an article on Saturday 17 July for Dr. Omran Hassan Mohammed, a member of the Kuwait Institute for Science Research, titled "the reasons for the release of Shaikh Al Jamri". Dr. Mohammed said "international condemnation and economical difficulties in Bahrain were behind the government's decision to release Al Jamri. The struggle of the people of Bahrain against repression and intimidation by the government has paid off. He mentioned that while Kuwaitis and Qataris are celebrating democracy, the Bahrainis are mourning their stolen freedom."

Danish support

On 17 July, the Danish Rights and Youths Organisation issued a statement of solidarity with the Bahraini people. The statement said that "we the Danish Rights and Youth Organisation are convinced of the just demands of the people of Bahrain for democracy and the restoration of the constitution and parliament, the independence of the judiciary and civil society in Bahrain".

Also, in Denmark, Radio Sawt Al-Arab interviewed a member of the Bahraini opposition, Mr. Hani Al-Rayis. Mr. Al-Rayis said regarding the release of Al Jamri that "it was obvious that the Bahraini regime had to release Shaikh Al-Jamri after he spent three years in jail and this is the period prescribed by the unconstitutional State Security Law. The government released him because it was under strong international pressure to do so".

Middle East International
July 1999

Opposition leader freed

By Simon Taggart, London

If the sentencing and release one day later of Bahrain's leading opposition figure, Shaikh Abd Al Amir Al Jamri, was meant as a signal to campaigners for a return to constitutional rule, it was misjudged: they understood neither the intent nor motivation behind the move.

On 7 July, a three-judge security panel sentenced the 62-year-old Shi'ite clergyman and former MP to ten years in prison and a fine of 5.7m dinars (\$15m) for working for a foreign power and inciting unrest. The following morning members of his family were summoned by the prime minister, giving a dressing down, and told Jamri would be conditionally released that evening. The condition was for him to make a public statement asking for a pardon. He was freed and received rapturously by thousands of well-wishers in his village of Bani Jamra.

Presumably the idea was that the regime could only show clemency if it had confession of sorts. To free a sick man held in isolation for three and a half years on remand without a confession would have looked like weakness, especially given the interest the international human rights lobby has shown in the case.

But who initiated the release? The official version is that the order came from the late Amir, Shaikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa, who died four months ago. Then who carried it after the conviction, the new Amir - still unknown quantity as regards the movement for the restoration of the elected parliament scrapped in 1975 - or his uncle, hard-line Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa? The answer is important because it indicates who is calling the shots. Oppositionists in Bahrain and in exile confess that they don't know and suggest that attributing the move to the departed ruler could be a way of disguising responsibility.

There are two conflicting interpretations of the release in opposition circles, a Manama-based veteran pro-democracy campaigner said the release was a significant move towards the improving of the political situation which hopefully indicated that calls for a return for a constitutional rule are now "getting through to the correct channels" rather than being blocked by the prime minister. "we are very eager to sit with the Amir. There is a bright future for dialogue," he told MEI, adding that the opposition was willing to be "very flexible" if the Amir reinstated the constitution - such as agreeing to postpone elections for up to 18 months after restitution. But he said the opposition had received "no clear signals" that the Amir sought dialogue and was planning another letter to request a meeting with him.

The reaction from the exiled oppositionists has been more skeptical. A

Mideast Mirror (8 July 1999):

"Explosive situation" forces release of Bahrain opposition leader one day after harsh sentence

The surprise release of Bahrain's top opposition leader, Moslem cleric Abdul Amir Al Jamri, should be attributed to the "explosive situation" triggered by harsh sentence passed against him just 24 hours earlier, according to Jamri's son Mansoor, himself an oppositionist.

Bahrain's Sunnite rulers clearly feared matters would get out of hand, Jamri, a prominent member of the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM), told Mideast Mirror shortly after receiving news that his father has been set free.

SENTENCE:

The State Security Court had on Wednesday sentenced Shaikh Jamri to 10 years in jail and the equivalent of a \$15,000 fine. In addition, he and unspecified "others" convicted of involvement in disturbances which began in late 1994 were fined equivalent of 15 million as a compen-

spokesman for the Bahrain Freedom Movement emphasised that the repression by the security forces is continuing, not only against active oppositionists but more generally against the villagers where the majority Shi'ite population lives. The periodic freeing of prisoners, assiduously publicised by the government, is explained no more as the usual release rate of detainees dressed up to impress human rights organisations. The opposition maintains that there are 15,000 detainees, while the government talks of under 400.

BFM's spokesman said he would "still like to believe the release of Jamri is intended to be part of a reconciliation process", but he doesn't. A simple release without humiliation a "confession" would have built trust, he said. But with continuing attacks on the opposition by security forces and the official media, "I see no reason to be optimistic" about the likelihood of dialogue, he said, noting this analysis was shared by other sections of the opposition. But the BFM has yet to give up on the new Amir. It is not calling for another upsurge of mass protests and hoping for the international pressure in support for the call for a return to constitutional rule.

However, if the position of Britain as a former colonial power is a measure of international pressure, the authority can rest easy. Speaking recently in London, the new foreign office minister responsible for the Middle East, Geoff Hoon, showed no inclination to press for reform in Bahrain. He talked of more than one path to democracy, without recognising that Bahrain had experienced a brief period of parliamentary democracy in the 1970s before the Assembly was shut down. And questioned about human rights abuses, he said visits to Bahrain by groups such as Amnesty International were "a safeguard".

sation for the material damage caused by the unrest.

A three-judge security panel convicted Jamri of spying for a foreign power and inciting unrest against the Al Khalifa ruling family. He was accused of having ignored government warnings and stepped up a campaign for political reforms.

Jamri a member of an elected legislature dissolved by Bahrain's former Amir in 1975, was the most prominent voice calling for political reforms before he was detained in January 1996 on charges of inciting protests which mainly involved members of the majority Shi'ite community.

The protesters demanded political and economic reforms, chiefly the reinstatement of parliament, the release of political prisoners and the repatriation of deportees.

Dozens of people were killed and hundreds were arrested during the protests, which abated in 1998. Manama accused predominantly Shi'ite Iran of backing a plot to overthrow the Al Khalifa government -- a charge denied by Tehran. Seven other leading opposition figures detained with Jamri remain behind bars.

Shaikh Jamri's trial by the State Security Court, whose verdicts cannot be appealed, was closed to the media. His wife and three of their children attended Wednesday's five-minute session in Jaw, 20 miles south of Manama. The 10-year sentence included the three and a half years that Jamri, 62, had already spent in jail awaiting his trial, which began last February.

PEOPLE'S POWER:

Mansoor Al Jamri told Mideast Mirror early Thursday afternoon he had received confirmation from Bahrain that his father had been set free and was on his way home in Bani-Jamra, hampered only by the large crowds that went out to greet him.

He said that he did not yet know the exact circumstances that led to his release, but it was safe to assume that an announcement would be made that Shaikh Jamri had been "pardoned" by the Emir, Shaikh Hamad Bin Issa Al Khalifa.

(an indication that authorities were pondering such a scenario came after the sentence was passed on Wednesday, when an unnamed official was quoted in news agency dispatches as saying the Bahraini ruler might grant Shaikh Jamri a pardon if he asked for one)

But Jamri said he believed the real reason the opposition leader had been set free was that the authorities felt the shocking sentence against him threatened to spark large-scale disturbances.

He said protesters took to the streets of Shi'ite populated area soon after the sentence was passed on Wednesday and some 200 people were rounded up. With people stocking up [gas cylinders], all the signs

were that the situation would get out of hand, Jamri said.

The authorities must have been particularly keen on warding off unrest ahead of a visit to Bahrain in October by a delegation from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that will investigate whether any people are being "arbitrarily detained" he explained.

It was only natural that the harsh sentence should have threatened to trigger fresh disturbances, Jamri said.

"People realised that this sentence was not against one person, but against the Shi'ite community as a whole. Such a feeling creates frustration, and frustration generates non-peacelike acts.

"As the Arabic saying goes, you cannot throw someone in a pool and tell him not to get wet. The government virtually pushed the people into a pool."

MESSAGE:

By issuing a harsh sentence against Shaikh Jamri, Bahrain's ruling family meant to send a twofold political message, Jamri said.

The first message was specifically addressed to the Shi'ite community, which was told it would not be allowed to act as an opposition, he said.

Bahrain's rulers invariably treated the island's indigenous Shiites as "serfs," or "semi-slaves," Jamri said. "They cannot tolerate the fact that the Shiites have managed to gain respect at the international level and join with the country's Sunnites to create a national consensus [in favour of reform]."

Hence, the message to the Shiites was meant to be that "you will always be treated as serf, or second class citizens at best. So log as you accept this you will be left in peace," Jamri said.

The second message was addressed to the pro-democracy opposition as a whole and read something like this "the government does not recognise a national consensus and it will continue to rule Bahrain on a sectarian and tribal bases."

One manifestation of this sectarian approach was the State Security Court refusal during Shaikh Jamri's trial to take evidence from prominent Sunnite opposition activist such as Ali Rabi' and Issa Al Jawdar, Jamri said.

It would be recalled that the authorities never agreed to receive a joint Sunnite-Shiite delegation of opposition activists to discuss demands for reform, insisting that each group should come forward separately, he added. However, Jamri said the release of the opposition leader shows that the authorities have failed to achieve their goal. "They meant to say, 'We'll break your heads.' But it didn't work," Jamri said.

Key facts about the trial of Sheikh Al-Jamri

On 7 July, the State Security Court issued one the harshest sentences against the pro-democracy leader, Sheikh Al-Jamri. The unconstitutional court was headed by a member of the ruling family, Abdul-Rahman bin Jaber Al-Khalifa with a panel of two Egyptian judges: Ali Mansoor and Mohammed Ra'afat Mostafa Barghash. The court sentenced Sheikh Al-Jamri to 10 years imprisonment and \$15 m fine.

* On 21 February, the first session was held. During this 40-minute session, the prosecutor general read five charges against Sheikh Al-Jamri:

1. The crime of communicating with those who work for a foreign country.
2. The crime of directing an illegal organisation aiming to overthrow the government by force.

3. The crime of inciting saboteur

4. The crime of inciting sabotage that led to destruction of property and endangered the safety of people.

5. The crime of broadcasting false news and rumours aimed at intimidating the State.

The trial was held behind closed doors at the new building of the State Security Court in Jaw, 30km (18 miles) south of the capital, Manama. More than 12 international organisation requested to send observers, but the authorities failed to answer any of them. Sheikh Al-Jamri pleaded innocent to the five charges and told the court: "All I ask for is parliament and I am not a criminal."

* The second session was scheduled for the 7th of March, but the death of the late Amir a day earlier resulted in its postponement.

* The lawyers of Sheikh Al-Jamri have been informed on 29 June that the second session of Sheikh Al-Jamri trial before the State Security Court will resume on Sunday 4 July.

* 4 July: A 45-minute session was held. The defence presented four witnesses falsifying the claims of the government.

* 4 July 1999: MANAMA, Bahrain (Dow Jones)—Bahrain's state security court Sunday adjourned until Tuesday the trial of the Shiite opposition leader, Sheik Abdul-Amir al-Jamri, who is charged with spying and inciting unrest in the country, his lawyer told Dow Jones Newswires.

The lawyer, Abdul-Shaheed Khalaf, said the court listened to four defense witnesses Sunday and decided to hear the final defense argument Tuesday, July 6.

Al-Jamri's trial resumed earlier in the day, five months after the first hearing in February.

Al-Jamri had recently spent three weeks in solitary confinement, further fueling rumors that he would be released this week, said Abdul-Shaheed Khalaf, one of al-Jamri's lawyers.

Al-Jamri's wife Zahra Attiyah who attended Sunday's session with three of their children, said the solitary confinement had

exhausted her husband who already suffered from shortness of breath and high blood pressure.

"His health is frail, I hope he's released soon," Attiyah said.

Al-Jamri's first hearing was held in February and adjourned until March, but the death of Bahrain's late Emir, Sheik Isa Bin Salman Al-Khalifa, and the three-month mourning period that followed pushed it to July 4.

* 6 July: A 5-minute third session was held. The prosecutor general submitted a written reply. The reply contained harsh insults against Sheikh Al-Jamri. The session was adjourned to the next day.

* 7 July: The final session lasted less than 5 minutes. The defence submitted a reply to the submission of the prosecutor general. The judges received the reply, and before reading any of it, the presiding judge read the harsh sentence of 10 years imprisonment and \$15 m fine.

* MANAMA, July 7 (Reuters) - Bahrain's State Security Court on Wednesday sentenced a prominent Shi'ite Moslem cleric, Sheikh Abdul-Amir al-Jamri, to 10 years in jail, his lawyer said.

Sheikh Jamri, a member of the parliament which was dissolved by the government in 1975, was detained in 1996 on charges of spying for a foreign country, running an illegal group, fanning unrest and circulating false news.

"He (Sheikh Jamri) was sentenced to 10 years. The court's ruling was final," defence lawyer Abdul-Shahid Khalif told Reuters. Sheikh Jamri, 62, was also ordered to pay 5.7 million dinars (\$15 million) in damages. Verdicts by the State Security Court cannot be appealed. The international writers' group PEN wrote last week to Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa asking for Sheikh Jamri's release.

* 7-8 July: Outrage and civil protests proliferate after sentencing Sheikh Al-Jamri. The people of the country were outraged after hearing the verdict issued by the unconstitutional State Security Court. The total time for all the four sessions is less than two hours. The last two sessions lasted less than five minutes each.

The court refused to allow any independent observer to attend the trial and refused to accept the evidence of any non-Shia citizen so as to preserve the plot of the Interior Ministry. The latter strove to depict the pro-democracy movement as a Shia one sponsored by Iran. Within two minutes of the fourth session, the judge announced the politically motivated sentence of ten years and a fine of \$15 millions.

* 8 July: People gathered around the house of Sheikh Al-Jamri on the afternoon of 8 July upon hearing that he would be released. In the evening, Bahrain TV showed Sheikh Al-Jamri reading a letter in front of the leading members of the ruling Al-Khalifa family. In an attempt to humili-

ate Sheikh Al-Jamri, the torturers at the Ministry of Interior offered him the options of remaining in his solitary confinement or being released after pledging to keep silent. With ill-health, Sheikh Al-Jamri was forced to give an undertaking to keep a low-profile on the political scene. He had suffered immensely with torturers using all inhuman ways to ill-treat him.

Upon hearing the weak voice of Sheikh Al-Jamri on TV, several residential areas went out in demonstrations. In Sitra, the foreign-staffed security forces deployed tear gas and rubber bullets against the citizens. In Karzakkhan, the security forces mounted several attacks and arrested scores of people.

* On 9 July, all entries to Bani Jamra, the residential area of Sheikh Al-Jamri were blocked. The quarter where Sheikh Al-Jamri resides is under a tight security siege with security forces deployed in many places.

No visitors were allowed to see Sheikh Al-Jamri and the family of Sheikh Al-Jamri has been threatened of grave consequences if they spoke to the outside media.

A spokesperson for the BFM said "the government may have silenced Sheikh Al-Jamri, but all the people consider his silence as a motivating factor for further civil efforts to put an end to the on-going repression".

* The authorities are imposing this siege to prevent people from meeting with Sheikh Al-Jamri, while the government's controlled media continued their misinformation and smearing campaign. The oppression suffered by Sheikh Al-Jamri is igniting anger and frustration amongst the population. More information has come to light as to the extent of torture suffered by Sheikh Al-Jamri.

The ill-treatment started to intensify in March 1998 and continued until the last day of his release. He was firstly placed in a solitary confinement, deprived of sleeping, and threatened of indecent assault against his family.

The conditions were: not to speak to the outside media, not to deliver any speech demanding parliament, and to stop teaching students at the mosque in front of his house.

When Sheikh Al-Jamri agreed to these conditions, the torturers said the prime minister was insisting that the trial must go ahead. Showing Sheikh Al-Jamri on TV on 8 July was aimed at humiliating the entire population, which the ruling family treats with disdain.

It was also aimed at breaking the will of the broadly-based pro-democracy movement. However, neither the showing on TV nor the siege imposed on Sheikh Al-Jamri had worked for the government. The gloomy situation is spreading all over the country and many have come to the conclusion that this regime is up to no good.