

Voice of Bahrain

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

25th anniversary of the suspension of constitution

Twenty five years ago this month, the Constitution of Bahrain was suspended and the first National Assembly abruptly dissolved. It could have been a matter related to a lack of cooperation between the legislative and executive powers, that would have been sorted out within the framework of the constitution. Perhaps this assumption was behind the lack of immediate hostile reaction from the people against that move. But as time dragged on, it became clear that the real reasons lies in the nature of the ruling family, and more specifically, the prime minister. Together with Ian Henderson, he asked the former ruler, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, to take that unprecedented step. The latter issued the Amiri Decree No. 4 of 1975 suspending the articles of the Constitution. It was a step on a dangerous road. As the two months allowed by the Constitution for a return to the ballot boxes elapsed, the situation turned into despair and the hope for a return to constitutional rule were gradually dashed. Instead of referring to the Constitution, the Al Khalifa adopted a draconian law introduced in 1974, known as the State Security Law. It empowers the minister of the interior to order the administrative detention of any political suspect to a period of three years without charge or trial. The State Security Court (SSC) was thus established on the basis of that law to deal with political activists. The country suddenly returned to its former hereditary dictatorship. A black era had started.

Over the past quarter of a century, the political situation never recovered, and the country went through a bleak period under a reign of terror unleashed by the security apparatus under the command and control of the notorious Ian Henderson. Having first served in Kenya during the colonial rule, he had developed special skills in interrogation and torture. The British Government introduced him to the Al Khalifa in 1966 who were more than happy to offer him the job of security chief. Having rebuilt the Special Branch, he became well-equipped to deal ruthlessly with any dissent. In the sixties and seventies hundreds of Bahrainis were arrested, tortured and exiled by Henderson's apparatus. The situ-

ation took a turn to the worst in the eighties. The bodies of torture victims started to pile up, while the Al Khalifa ignored the pleas to abandon the torture regime and return to constitutional rule. The torture system has become one of the worst in the Middle East and many human rights organisations took a courageous stand against its practices and called for the overhaul of the political system. The government has, hitherto, remained non-committal on the basic demands of the people. It was the former Amir, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who issued the Amiri decree 25 years ago to dissolve the parliament and suspend the Constitution. That decree has remained in force until now. Sheikh Hamad took office after his fathers demise on 6 March 1999, but refrained from taking a historic step towards the reinstatement of the Constitution. He has, however, taken small steps to minimise the international outcry against the excesses of his uncle, the prime minister, such as releasing some prisoners and allowing back some exiles. He has left the emergency laws in place and has not taken positive steps to uphold the rule of law in the country.

The outburst of popular anger in 1994 took everyone by surprise. The people's uprising became a landmark in the history of the country and has shaken the hereditary dictatorship to its core. The uprising erupted in the light of the sudden upsurge in public desire to uphold the rule of law in the country. The constitutional movement was already a strong one. Having started in 1992 with a petition signed by the cream of the society, it continued its struggle to force the Al Khalifa to listen to logic. The call of the people passed unheeded. But the fall-outs have been much greater than the regime had expected. The world community suddenly became aware of the internal situation in Bahrain, and the United Nations became aware of the crisis. The European Parliament issued two resolutions calling on the Government of Bahrain to reinstate the Constitution and respect human right. International Human Rights Organisations took serious steps to expose the serious human rights violations in the country. The Government reacted by investing heavily in public relations, employing numerous

foreign companies and persons to defend its reputation outside.

The change of rulers led to a peripheral change in the attitude of the ruling family towards the people. Sheikh Hamad has taken some steps to enhance his image inside and outside the country. Friendly governments have advised him on these steps.

Now that the people of Bahrain are re-living their recent political history with anguish and expectations, the world has a duty to stand by this peaceful nation, and take all necessary steps to ensure that its government takes serious steps towards democracy and respect of human rights. The people of Bahrain have shown enormous resilience and exhibited great self-restraint. They faced the bullets of the Al Khalifa with patience and determination, but refrained from being sucked into a cycle of violence. The freedom-loving people of the world have expressed support to the cause of the people convinced that their demands are moderate. The struggle will continue as long as the rule of law is not upheld in the country. Perhaps Bahrain is one of the few countries which has more jails than hospitals. The torture cells were at certain periods overcrowded. The victims of torture stood up in the face of their torturers and demanded their rights. They are still doing so behind bars. The Al Khalifa torture chambers still house hundreds of innocent citizens. Those who want to support the regime for financial gains have chosen not to listen to the pleas from behind bars. But there are many noble voices in the world which declare their support to the just struggle of the people of Bahrain. The hereditary dictatorship must not be allowed to win; they must be made to pay for the ill-treatment of the innocent. We take this sad anniversary to express our determination to continue our just struggle for justice and freedom. Those freedom-loving institutions and individuals who have supported our cause over the past quarter of a century deserve respect and appreciation. Our people will never forget their support, and will repay in kind. Dictators and despots must be challenged by the world community. This is the only way to achieve peace and stability in the world.

UK military backing to Bahrain ignores "ethical" policy

The UK Foreign "ethical" policy suffered another set back following the visit of the Amir of Bahrain that ended on 26 July. The Financial Times (23/24 July Weekend) reported that Saferworld, a pressure group, objected to weapons sales to Bahrain. The FT reporter Robert Shrimmsley said "British arms exports halved in value last year, with sales falling from 1.9 bn 1998 to 980m pounds. A substantial reduction in arms sales to Saudi Arabia fell from 803m to 131.09m. There were also sharp falls in the value of exports to UAE which fell from 172m to 5.53m. Saferworld voiced concern at the sales of arms to repressive regimes. It also objected the weapons sales to Gulf states with histories of repression including Bahrain and Qatar."

The UK officials stated that the British government's conditions on sales of equipment are that they are not to be used for "internal repression" or "external aggression". However, there is no indication on how will the UK check on whether the equipment would be used for other purposes.

Visit to UK and Morocco linked to vital issues

The high profile visit by the Amir of Bahrain, accompanied by his senior advisors, to the UK and the scheduled visit to Morocco next Wednesday 26 July are expected to focus on several issues. One strategic issue will be the continuing dispute with Qatar as the International Court of Justice is expected to pass its verdict later this year about the disputed islands of Hawar.

Six years ago (December 1994), the Gulf Cooperation Council summit was held in Bahrain amid the sounds of bullets and smell of tear gas being fired by the security forces against the citizens. The events that disturbed that summit are still lingering and the possible escalation with Qatar this year may create another environment that may see the end of the Gulf security alliance.

Morocco has recently withdrawn its ambassador from Qatar following press allegations that Qatar had purchased British military equipment and passed them to Algeria. The Algerians support the Polisarios who are engaged in a conflict with Morocco and are struggling for their independence. The high-profile Bahraini delegation that will be visiting Morocco is expected to utilise the deterioration of relations between Qatar and Morocco and this may play a role in the alliances being forged by each country ahead of the ICJ ruling.

The current visit to Britain is expected to cover other issues relating to the ongoing political situation inside Bahrain. The government of Bahrain has expressed its happiness with the third annual report published by the British Foreign Office regarding alleged "improvement" of human rights

in Bahrain. The Bahraini government has been leaning towards France in the past years, and the recent gestures between the two governments are aimed at regaining the influential relationship.

The on-going investigation about the fate of Ian Henderson who led the repressive security forces in Bahrain since 1966 is bound to overshadow the discussion. Scotland Yard continues its investigation in his case and any future trial of Mr. Henderson will be a trial for the entire repressive system that has ruled Bahrain for a long time. The opposition hopes that the UK will use its influence for promoting human rights and democracy. The worst would be if the British Foreign Office were to be seen as apologising for dictatorship.

OMCT on Bahrain

The International Secretariat of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) issued two urgent actions on 18 July raising concern that "at the beginning of July 2000, security forces attacked several houses in Bilad al-Qadim and arrested a number of citizens, releasing them a couple of days later..."

"Also, it is reported that on 21st June, a child, Mosa Jaafar Al-Shaikh from Daih was arrested and kept in jail for four days, allegedly tortured severely and then released."

Moreover in June 2000, a number of young people were sentenced to seven years of imprisonment, following their arrest as children three to four years ago.

The International Secretariat of OMCT recalled that "Bahrain is a state party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 37b) which states that "The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time." Furthermore, that "No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." OMCT urged the Bahraini authorities to:

- i. take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity of the mentioned children;
- ii. order their immediate release in the absence of valid legal charges;
- iii. carry out a full and impartial investigation into the alleged arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment and torture, in order to identify those responsible, bring them to trial and apply the penal, civil and/or administrative sanctions provided by law;
- iv. put an immediate end to the use of arbitrary or illegal detention of children and abrogate 1974 State Security Law and all national laws which are not in compliance with international human rights standards;
- v. guarantee the respect of human rights and the fundamental freedoms throughout the country in accordance with national laws and international human rights standards, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Contradictory messages and practices

The Geneva-based International Organisation Against Torture issued an important survey of human rights abuses in Bahrain between 1995 and 1998. OMCT revealed that it had documented the cases of 843 children who had been detained and ill-treated by the Bahraini interior ministry. OMCT stated that Bahraini children cases represented 38% of all children's cases in 31 countries documented by the organisation.

The Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Ra'y Al-Aam said on 16 July that the Bahraini government refused to allow Bahraini teachers to work in Kuwait. An official denial was published by the government today, but it has been well known in the Gulf that the Bahraini government has consistently intervened to make life worse for those Bahrainis who decide to go abroad in search for a decent living away from the repressive regime in their homeland.

The government-controlled press has continued to cover the seminar early this month (4 July) in Al-Ahli Club. Intellectuals and pro-democracy figures spoke freely in favour of the restoration of the National Assembly and rejected the plan to consider the Shura Council as a replacement to the constitutional body or an improvement to the political process. The papers said that the Amir supported the statements in the seminar. If this is so, then the BFM welcomes such sentiments and hope that the Amir will permit the return of democracy to Bahrain.

It is recognised that certain positive steps were announced, and next year may witness the resumption of the Municipality Election that existed in Bahrain between 1926-56. The BFM had declared its support for this step. However, there is concern that the plans for appointing "mukhtars" will not only violate the rights of citizens to play their role but will also jeopardise the planned local elections. The "mukhtar" is a person appointed by the interior ministry and is charged with spying on people and monitoring public functions. The position of the mukhtar was mainly fostered after 1956 when the local election had been banned. The two systems are contradictory to each other.

The contradictory practices and messages may reflect differences of opinion between those who might allow a limited reform to take place and those who are objecting to any reform.

Exhibition emptied from history of Bahrainis

Exiles exposed the atrocities of the government when a group of them took the case of the people of Bahrain on 14 July to the Bahrain-Delmon Exhibition being organised by the government at London University (SOAS). Pamphlets were dis-

tributed explaining the demands of the people and highlighting how the Bahraini government treats its people. More than thirty British personalities wrote a letter to SOAS administration urging the closure of such exhibition that attempts to advertise false images by a government that denies its people all basic rights.

The Bahrain-Delmon Exhibition launched in London (12 July) is a replicate of the exhibition held in Paris last year. The Bahraini government approach towards the history of Bahrain reflects its present approach towards the people of Bahrain. The books that are taught in Bahrain schools and the presentations of the Bahraini ministry of information attempt to concentrate on certain aspects and at the same time to ignore or distort others.

The ancient history of Bahrain is characterised by its strategic position between east and west, fertile lands, fresh water, and pearls diving, all of which made Bahrain a centre of urban (i.e. non-nomadic) settlement throughout history. Some 2300 years BC, Bahrain became a centre of one of the ancient empires trading between Mesopotamia (now Iraq) and the Indus Valley (now the region near India/Pakistan). This was the civilisation of Delmon that was linked to the Sumerian Civilisation in the third millennium BC.

Bahrain nowadays is proudly a cosmopolitan society with mixed communities. The history of Bahrain is a rich one with a history of achievements in culture. Last year, the 700th year since the death of the great philosopher Sheikh Maitham Al-Bahrani (born 1238, died 1299) was totally ignored by the government. This is because the ruling Al-Khalifa family does not feel part of Bahrain that dates before its arrival in the country in 1783. This also explains why the indigenous population who existed since ancient times are amongst those who are discriminated against by the ruling family. This fact has been confirmed by the UN Human Rights Sub-Commission resolutions of August 1997 which condemned the government of Bahrain for its violation of human rights and discrimination against the indigenous population.

It is fair to say that all Bahrainis of today's society are suffering from the government of Bahrain. It is a tribally controlled government that depends on mercenaries imported from outside Bahrain for its security forces. These security forces have no loyalty to Bahrain and have been practising all types of abuses including extra-judicial killing and torturing detainees to death. Instead of bringing any of them to justice, the senior officers were presented with the highest decorations last March.

Insulting names for Manama suburbs

On 14 July, the appointed and unconstitutional Central Municipal Council renamed the suburbs of the capital, Manama. Fourteen new names were selected in away

that reflects the attitude of the ruling family towards Bahrain. The historic old capital name (Bilad al-Qadim) was ignored as well as other names such as Ras-Romman, Sanabis, Makhargah, and others. In their place came strange names such as Al-Fateh suburb. "Al-Fateh" means "The Conqueror" and refers to the grand father of the Al-Khalifa family who invaded Bahrain in 1783. The term "conquerors" is a medieval and outdated one that used to describe wars between Muslims and non-Muslims. The insistence of the ruling family to use this term is not an affront to the civilised Bahrainis.

Will the government manage to fool the UN team?

Government's efforts are being intensified following the agreement with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to visit Bahrain in the period between 25 February and 2 March 2001. This visit was initially scheduled for October 1999, but the government presented several excuses for delaying the visit for one year until October 2000. However, earlier this year, the government proposed that the visit be cancelled or postponed until later in 2001. The chairman of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), Judge Louis Joinet made it clear during the UN Human Rights Commission session last April that the Bahraini government attempts to delay the visit indefinitely will be rejected and that unless the visit takes place before the beginning of next UN meeting (April 2001), the WGAD will name and shame the Bahraini government for its continued atrocities. In the mean time, two other UN working groups requested to be allowed to visit Bahrain and investigate cases of torture and extra-judicial killing. The government's manoeuvres were further exposed when a leading Swiss newspaper revealed how a torturer, Abdul Aziz Atteyat-Allah Al-Khalifa, was leading the Bahraini government delegation during UN session on human rights last April. The paper also revealed that the US delegation had made a point of not meeting with the torturer to avoid the liability of such interaction.

With all the pressure that was mounted by UN teams and human rights activists, the government finally succumbed and agreed that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention will be allowed to visit Bahrain before next April (hence 25 February - 2 March). Since then, the interior ministry has been rushing scores of Bahraini youths to receive sentences of imprisonment following very short and secret sessions of the unconstitutional State Security Court that are held in the militarised village of Jaw.

It is not yet clear how the government intends to deal with the detained pro-democracy figures such Abdul Wahab Hussain and Hassan Mushaimaa. News from inside the jails revealed that the interior ministry is applying extreme pressure

to get them to sign to pre-prepared confessions. Several of them had been transferred to solitary confinement as part of the torture process. The clock is ticking and the interior ministry wants to get rid of as many cases as possible before the arrival of the UN team.

One of the ways adopted by the regime to clear cases is to sentence the citizens by the State Security Court which is condemned by all international human rights organisations. The UN team's remit concerns those arbitrarily detained and the people who receive sentences by the security court are still considered as arbitrarily detained people as the due-process (by which they were sentenced) falls short of all constitutional and international requirements. The government will attempt to fool the UN inspection team but such attempts may backfire in the face of the human rights abusers.

Security Court Injustices

More names of citizens came to light following their secret sentencing by the unconstitutional State Security Court. The month of June witnessed the sentencing of scores of citizens in batches. The ruling family is rushing Bahrainis through its court following the fixing of a date for the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to visit the country in the period between 25 February and 2 March 2001. The ruling family wants to get rid of as many cases as possible before the arrival of the UN inspection team. The following citizens were amongst those sentenced in June. These were arrested in Tobli and Isa Town three to four years ago when they were children. After growing up in jails, they were brought before an Al-Khalifa judge for sentencing:

- Tahir Abbas Hussain Mahffodh, 18 years old (7 years imprisonment).
- Ali Alshaikh Mosa Hassan Al-Oraibi, 18 years old (7 years)
- Nabil Abdul Nabi Al-Saffar, 19 (5 years)
- Jawad Salamn Isa, 19, (5 years)
- Ammar Isa, 18, (5 years)
- Mohammed Badr Alshaikh 18 year (5 years)
- Naji Ahmed Salamn 18, (5 years)
- Sadiq Ali Al-Shofa, 18 (5 years)
- Hamid Ali Ibrahim, 18, (5 years)
- Alsayed Jaafer, 18 (5 years)

Three others were also sentenced to three years imprisonment by the same court.

Intellectuals confirm the national demand

The evening of 4 July witnessed an intense debate between Bahraini intellectuals with strong women presence at Al-Ahli Club. The main speaker was Dr. Abdul Aziz Obol who summarised the views held by most Bahrainis that the Shura Council, in whatever form, is unconstitutional and can never be a replacement for the main

demand: "the restoration of the National Assembly". Other pro-democracy personalities joined the debate including Mr. Abdulla Hashim, Mr. Ibrahim Isa, Mr. Ibrahim Kamal-u-Din and the journalist Ali Saleh.

They all confirmed that the demand that brings all Bahrainis together is the restoration of the constitutional parliament. They called for the activation of Bahrain's Constitution and urged the Amir to hold talks with the Committee for Popular Petition (CPP). The CPP has been denied any meeting with the Amir since November 1994 when it collected some 25,000 signatures from the public calling for the restoration of political rights to Bahrainis.

National Guard!!

Local newspapers said on 4 July that the Cabinet has approved the law regulating the National Guard. This paramilitary unit was formed by the Amir (then a Crown Prince) in early 1998 in the absence of the prime minister. The premier considered the formation of the force as one of the steps to out-manoeuvre his grip on the security forces.

British 'torture chief' quits

Brian Whitaker, The Guardian, Tuesday July 4, 2000, page 13.

A British colonel accused of torture while running the secret police in Bahrain retired abruptly yesterday from his post as an advisor to the island's interior ministry.

A statement by the Gulf News Agency said the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, met Ian Henderson and thanked him for his 'long service in the security department'.

Mr Henderson, 71, a Scot, took charge of Bahrain's security in 1966, five years before it gained independence from Britain. He had previously served in colonial Kenya, fighting the Mau Mau uprising.

Opposition groups in Bahrain, which has a population of 400,000, frequently complain of human rights abuses. In 1995 they accused Mr Henderson of 'masterminding a ruthless campaign of repression'. He denied the accusation.

Mr Henderson's retirement comes as the new ruler of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa, sets about liberalising the state. Besides announcing steps towards democracy, he has released several political detainees and set up a committee to monitor Human rights.

An Amnesty spokesman said: 'We've repeatedly raised our concerns about torture with the Bahraini authorities and with Henderson himself, since 1987.

'The government of Bahrain has consistently denied torture, but has never, to our knowledge, carried out a proper investigation.'

Mr Henderson left his post as Bahrain's head of security two years ago to become an advisor to the interior ministry.

In January this year Jack Straw, the home secretary, announced that the organised crime branch of the Metropolitan was investigating Mr Henderson's activities.

This came after it was reported that Mr Henderson had celebrated New year at his country home on Dartmoor, which is marked with a 5ft-high gallows and a sign saying 'Beware of the Dogs'.

Lord Avebury, vice-chair of the parliamentary human rights group, suggested that Mr Henderson was liable to be arrested if he set foot in Britain again.

Scotland Yard confirmed yesterday that the papers in the case were still being examined.

Government's declaration on Henderson

The Government of Bahrain declared on 3 July that Ian Henderson, the chief of intelligence department since 1966 has retired. The news was displayed in the local papers and this is the first time since 1966 that his name and title has been announced in the Arabic language media.

The declaration is aimed at sending a message to the outside world that the "Henderson Era" is over. A spokesperson for the BFM said that this declaration would not change the actual policies of the regime for the following reasons:

1. There are a dozen British officers who assume senior roles in the internal security apparatus, such as Donald Bryan and Dave Derby. Al-Khalifa members and other people, mainly from the outside, fill the rest of the top positions.

2. The security system has been extended with more authorities given to local police stations to intimidate and persecute political activists. This internal security system has unlimited and unaccountable powers by virtue of the State Security Law that was masterminded by Ian Henderson.

3. Ian Henderson and his men will remain in Bahrain to oversee other operations they are involved with, such as espionage.

In the UK, Scotland Yard is investigating the case of Ian Henderson for alleged involvement in torturing Bahrainis since 1966. Human rights campaigners are calling for his arrest upon his return to the UK so that other torturers are warned that there is no impunity for human rights abusers.

Henderson's Singaporean villa

More information was revealed about the British officer who has led the repressive security forces since 1966. Sources inside Bahrain indicated that the ruling Al-Khalifa family has purchased a large villa for him in Singapore and that he plans to travel between the two countries. The Singaporean villa will be used as his residence if and when he feels that returning to the UK would be risky for him. On 2 July, the ruling family honoured him publicly. His name was mentioned in the local Ara-

bic media for the first time since he assumed his role in Bahrain in 1966.

In the UK, Channel 4 and the Guardian covered on 4 July the news of the retirement of Ian Henderson and confirmed that Scotland Yard is still examining his case. The "chief torturer" will be awaited in Britain where human rights campaigners are calling for his arrest and trial.

Unionists expose the malpractice of the government

Members of the Committee of General Committee of Bahraini Workers wrote a letter to the authorities and other concerned bodies highlighting the fact that they are being threatened and pressured by the Bahraini interior ministry. The Executive Committee of the General Committee of Bahraini Workers had taken a decision to boycott all international labour meetings whenever a Bahraini government's delegation attends. This decision has been taken as protest against the continuation of the Bahraini government to deny the labour movement their constitutional rights. The workers committee is denied all powers that would lead to its status being upgraded to a union position.

The Executive Committee had submitted a petition to the government stating several key demands, amongst them: amending the Labour Law so that unions are legalised as specified by Bahrain's Constitution; return of exiled unionists to Bahrain; and equal representation between employers and employees in decision making relating vocational training

However, the interior ministry threatened the workers' committee that they will be banned and punished. Furthermore, the interior ministry forced the committee's president to defy the decision taken by his colleagues and to attend the International Labour Union in Geneva in mid June, where the labour minister and government delegation were also present. Arab trade unionists met in Geneva and condemned the Bahraini government policies and practices towards the labour union movement in Bahrain. Mr. Hassan Jammam, Secretary General of the Arab Labour Union, criticised the Bahraini government for its continued violations of citizens rights.

The political situation in Bahrain is not improving despite attempts by the government PR machine to misinform the outside. This is what the leading pro-democracy personality, Mr. Ali Rabea, wrote in Al-Quds a lengthy article on 28 June explaining how Bahrainis enjoyed more rights under British colonialism that under independence. Pro-democracy figures, such as Abdul Wahab Hussein and Hassan Mushaimaa are languishing in the ever-increasing jails of Bahrain. No reforms what so ever had taken place, and indeed the dictatorial practices are being consolidated through the issuing of more laws that favour the rule of dictatorship in Bahrain.