

Voice of Bahrain

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Public grief following the Gulf Air disaster

A mourning nation awaits better times

Bahrain was shocked by the tragic event of the Gulf Air crash that killed all the 143 passengers on board the aircraft on 23 August. The doomed aircraft had been approaching the airport when the tragedy occurred. The heroic attempts by local fishermen and residents of Samahij and Dair to recover the bodies of the victims surprised everyone. Within moments of the disaster, scores of them were on the scene recovering bodies and attempting to save the life of at least one child. Once again, Bahrain jumped to the forefront of the international news bulletins, but this time, it was unfortunately due to tragic news. The country has been on and off the international news media over the past few years, mainly for its volatile internal situation.

When the latest tragedy struck, it coincided with the 25th anniversary of the dissolution of the country's partially-elected parliament and the suspension of its Constitution. To many of its citizens, the anniversary was a moment of despair, having witnessed the hollow promises given by the rulers of the country. Many had hoped that the new Amir would take the opportunity to announce the resumption of the parliamentary life in the country and ending the emergency measures adopted by the Al Khalifa ruling family. None of this kind was forthcoming.

Instead, more repressive measures have been taking place in recent months. Arrests of juveniles have continued unabated despite the numerous calls by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and other human rights bodies. Boys as have been in jail for several months without charge or trial. Bahraini women are behind bars, while torture is rampant in police cells. More repressive measures have been adopted recently. A seminar to discuss the constitutional rights of citizens scheduled for 8th August was cancelled on the orders of the prime minister. A list of demands presented to him by the General Committee of Bahraini Workers was rejected outright and an order was issued by him to delay workers' committees' election from November to February. The delay is aimed at avoiding the critical month ahead of the ruling on Hawar at the Hague and the

holding of the GCC summit. The premier knows the determination of the labour movement to reject all candidates forced on them by the interior ministry and hence to delay the confrontation until after the critical month.

These actions have confirmed the suspicions of many Bahrainis who saw no real change in policies in the country despite the ascendance to power by the Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, following the demise of his father last year.

It is rumoured that the priorities of the two men, i.e. the Amir and the prime minister, are not the same. The Amir's occasional hints of reform were often rebuked by the prime minister. But questions are also raised as to the seriousness of the Amir in his declarations: Is he a reformer or is he playing for time? Is the prime minister as strong as he appears to be? Is the ruling family behind the Amir or the prime minister? Is it the family's tradition not to show discord among its members, or is it forced into total submission to the prime minister?

Some observers suggest that the Amir's remarks in favour of reforms are only a means of challenging the authority of his uncle, and he is not that enthusiastic about change. He is more of a showman who likes to travel leaving the day-to-day affairs to his uncle, the prime minister. He had earlier managed to appoint his son, the Crown Prince, in the cabinet who is now attending its sessions. When the prime minister leaves the country, the Crown Prince becomes an acting prime minister. It is a complicated picture of events, but it does suggest a lack of enthusiasm for real change in the way the country is run.

The new ruler has embarked on a public relations campaign to enhance the reputation of the ruling family, and has managed to secure some support from foreign powers. This is crucial to him especially if the stand-off with his uncle continued.

The jet crash has helped the government present a different preoccupation to the people who were clearly shocked and saddened by the event. The political situation is by no means less depressing to many. The stagnation that has befallen the country both politically and economically, has become endemic, and the longer it

remains the more likely it will reawaken the passions of the people. The expression of sorrow at the tragedy was a genuine one. But the desire to see a serious political change in the country is also strong. The rigorous use of the emergency laws is a grim reminder of the problems facing the country. Despite the promises to reform, these laws have remained firmly in force for more than 25 years. They have claimed thousands of victims over the years, and is being used extensively to combat the rising popular movement. The regime has been eager to gain some sympathy from the people in the border dispute with Qatar, and has adopted a different approach to the relations with the citizens. It has, however, failed to make good its promises to reform.

The formation of a human rights committee in the Shura Council did nothing to satisfy the victims of arbitrary arrests and torture. Since its inception a year ago, it has done nothing to alleviate the suffering of the innocent and has taken part in pro-government propaganda programmes. This has led other citizens to take seriously the issue of human rights and have submitted an official request to form a human rights group as a non-governmental organisation. It is not yet clear how the government will respond to their request.

It is difficult to foresee a serious change in the political environment in the country, but it is also difficult to see an end to the crisis without these reforms. The pro-democracy campaigners have made it clear they will not back down in their struggle. They maintain that their demands are moderate. They have not called for the overthrow of the regime, neither have they opted to use violence in their struggle. The reaction of the freedom-loving people of the world has been reassuring with several petitions being signed by senior politicians, academics and professionals in several countries supporting the people of Bahrain. The Bahraini opposition, which has achieved a good reputation on the international arena, is determined to pursue its agenda for political reforms. It is the government that can decide to resolve the crisis by acceding to these demands and upholding the rule of law. Without that, the present crisis will continue.

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An open letter addressed to the Amir

His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, Amir of Bahrain

Greetings

We have been following, with great interest, your statements since you assumed power. These statements have concentrated on the need to remove all obstacles that obstruct the development of Bahrain and its people, by positively responding to the wishes of the nation. You have also encouraged constructive criticism in the media and in the seminars that were held recently in the country, and you have stated your willingness to extend dialogue to all issues of concern to the nation. We do value these policies and we look for the day when all the sincere people are allowed to participate in resolving the political crisis that has worsened since 1994.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary for the dissolution of the National Assembly and suspension of key constitutional articles, we see our duty to address you and express our belief that ending the deep-rooted political crisis can only be achieved through a courageous initiative that fulfills the aspirations of the people of Bahrain. These aspirations were clearly outlined in the Popular Petition of 1994 that was signed by nearly 25,000 citizens. Such aspirations have also been frequently repeated by respected citizens in the local media and during presentations made inside and outside the country. These aspirations are:

1. The activation of the constitutional articles that have been suspended since 1975, which concern the elected legislative power.
2. The return of the National Assembly that was dissolved in August 1975.
3. Freeing all political detainees and prisoners.
4. Allowing exiles to return home without conditions.
5. Granting women all political rights in par with men.
6. Respecting public freedoms, the right to free expression and the right to trade unions.
7. Investigation the cases of human rights abuses and taking necessary steps for redressing the situation by punishing the perpetrators and compensating the victims of those violations.
8. Proper treatment of the citizenship problem and granting those called "bidoon" full Bahraini citizenship.

The country is in need for the solidarity of its entire people and for the utilization of all energies and capabilities. We trust that you would not agree with the staying of significant number of people outside the country, whose presence outside only indicates the continuation of the crisis. We do look forward for an era of dialogue and openness in order to reach a common ground for progressing the country.

At a time of a national tragedy that has

been caused by the ill-fated Gulf Air crash and the loss of great number of dear people, we offer our condolences to the families of the victims and pray to God for their souls. Please accept our greetings.

Signed on 30 August 2000 by: Abdulhadi Khalaf, Abdulhadi Al-Khawajah, Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi, Abdul Nabi Al-Ekri, Ali Salman, Saeed Al-Shehabi, Mohammed Abdul Jalil Al-Morbati, Mansoor Al-Jamri, Hani Al-Rayyis.

Campaigners urge the government to respond

Mr. Daniel Blackburn, the Administration and Research Director of the International Centre for Trade Union Rights (ICTUR) issued an appeal on 16th August urging the government of Bahrain to respond positively to the demands submitted by members of the General Committee for Bahraini Workers (GCBW). Mr. Blackburn stated that the petition submitted by the GCBW is an historic document that will be judged by all observers as a balanced and legitimate approach, which ought to be listened to.

Mr. Blackburn said, "The ICTUR has been invited to join the Bahrain trade unionists in campaigning for the right to organize trade unions in Bahrain. ICTUR is aware of the position of workers committees in Bahrain and urge the government to heed the request of the GCBW and the trade unions groups, which have called for the lifting of the ban, which outlaws trade unions in Bahrain. ICTUR considers the GCBW official petition handed to the prime minister on 31 of July to be a balanced document and one entirely in accordance with the principles of the International Labour Organisation and the Arab Labour Organisation. As such these are generally accepted principles throughout the world. ICTUR is most disappointed to learn that the prime minister has restated his opposition to trade unions and continues to deny the right of freedom of association to Bahrain's workers.

ICTUR will be publishing news of this petition in our respected journal "International Union Rights" which is read in over 80 countries worldwide. Our readers will be most concerned to learn that an opportunity to introduce laws and principles in accordance with International labour laws and human rights documents has been rejected in this way. The International community awaits news of improvement for workers rights in Bahrain."

PM orders GCBW to adjourn scheduled elections

On 14 August, a day before leaving the country on a private tour, the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa summoned an urgent meeting with Executive Committee of the General Committee

of Bahraini Workers (GCBW). The interior and labour ministers also attended the meeting.

The urgent meeting was called following an extra-ordinary meeting by the GCBW that discussed the response of the PM to the letter submitted by the GCBW demanding the restoration of labour rights in accordance with Bahrain constitution which states in Article 27 "Freedom to form associations and trade unions on a national basis and for lawful objectives and by peaceful means shall be guaranteed in accordance with the conditions and procedures prescribed by the law".

The prime minister had formally rejected all labour demands on 6 August, and during the meeting on 14 August, the prime minister stated to the members of GCBW that they must adjourn the next elections scheduled to take place next November. As an absolute dictator, the prime minister did not explain his reasons and ordered all attendants to abide by his orders. The presence of his interior minister was the clearest message to the GCBW member who had earlier been threatened that the interior ministry will not hesitate to use its unlimited powers to suppress them.

Earlier in the day, the GCBW had gathered in an extraordinary meeting and agreed on the following:

1. Pulling out and boycotting the meetings of the High Council for Vocational Training and General Organisation for Social Insurance until the government allows representatives from the General Assembly of the GCBW to attend these meetings.
2. Insisting on the holding of elections for the joint committees in 18 companies according to the schedule set out by the General Assembly on 29 July. The elections shall take place next November without the intervention of interior and labour ministries as in previous years.
3. Rejecting the orders of interior ministry and going ahead with the election of the main GCBW in February 2001.
4. Insisting on pursuing all legitimate demands as has been detailed in the letter submitted by the president of the GCBW to the prime minister. These are the demands for the right to unionise and collective bargaining as per international and Arab agreements set out by the International Labour Union and Arab labour and human rights organisations.
5. Insisting on the right of the General Assembly for freedom of expression and access to local media.

The response to these resolutions was swift and dictatorial. The prime minister summoned an urgent meeting in a muscle show and ordered the adjournment of elections, thereby challenging the will of the labour movement.

Labour representatives summoned and threatened

The ancient prime minister of Bahrain reaffirmed his rejection of all moves aiming at restoring the political rights of citizens.

He ordered his labour minister, Abdul Nab Al-Shu'alato meet with the Executive Committee of the General Committee of Bahraini Workers (GCBW) on 6 August and to warn them of the grave consequences awaiting them if they were to continue demanding their right to unionise. The GCBW submitted a petition on 31 July to the prime minister demanding the following:

1. Guaranteeing the right for forming a trade union and the development of labour laws, especially Chapter 17 of the Labour Law. Raising the standard of the laws to the level required by the International Labour Organisation and Arab Labour Union regarding union rights and collective bargaining. This requires the development of the GCBW to the status of a trade union (Bahrain Labour Union) and the return of exiled unionists.

2. Granting the representatives of the GCBW the right to participate in the trilateral councils, in the High Council for Vocational Training, and in Social Insurance, as specified by the basic law of the GCBW.

3. Granting the right of access to places of work to verify the conditions of employment and to solve workers problems.

4. Granting the GCBW the right to supervise the elections of workers' committees and to lay down guidelines and bylaws for organising the forthcoming 8th election.

5. Granting freedom of expression to the GCBW in local media.

6. Putting an end to the intervention of the interior ministry in the activities of the GCBW and to put an end to the ministry's rejection of candidates for election.

7. Removing the obstacles created by the labour ministry that were put in place in 1995, since the present minister took over.

The response of the despotic prime minister to these demands was swift. He ordered his labour minister to summon leading members of Executive Committee of GCBW (Abdul Ghaffar Abdul Hussain, Saeed Al-Sammak, and Yousif Abdulla Yousif) on 6 August and to inform them that all their requests and demands were totally rejected. The prime minister's message was clear: the labour ministry will continue to supervise the GCBW's elections; the interior ministry will continue to intervene in the selection of candidates for elections, and the labour minister will continue to have his powers to intervene in the affairs of the GCBW and to dissolve it as and when.

The labour minister also demanded that the GCBW officially withdraws the petition or faces the consequences of its insistence on them.

Such a move by the prime minister confirms what the opposition has been saying for years, that he is the biggest obstacle to political reforms in Bahrain. He is not only the prime minister, but he is also the prime businessman who unfairly competes with citizens in all types of trades, and he is the prime jailer and extinguisher of hope in the country.

Banning a lecture on democracy*

Only six days after the Amir stated to the CNN that he "would follow his people's will on introducing democracy", the intelligence department intervened on 8 August to ban a meeting organised by Al-Ahli Club. The club invited the well-known lawyer, Mr. Hasan Radhi to deliver a lecture on "constitutional rights of citizens". Many people had taken the words of the Amir about political openness on face value and went ahead to organise a series of meetings. Moreover, the local press had published the announcement for the lecture and many citizens intended to participate. Several of those who approached Al-Ahli Club on the evening of 8 August were informed that the intelligence department had ordered a ban on this particular lecture.

The prime minister and his cronies could not bear to hear citizens debating their constitutional rights. The entire government and its practices are unconstitutional. The citizens are repressed and discriminated against by an oppressive regime that does not believe in the rights of Bahrainis to live with dignity and honour in their homeland.

The prime minister sees himself as the biggest loser from any marginal openness that the Amir might be thinking of. He is more concerned with crowning his greedy son (also a minister of transport) as his successor for the post of premier. He understands that this is something opposed by his own Al-Khalifa family and he knows that he and his son are disliked figures, locally and regionally.

While the Amir spoke about reforms, all what is implemented nowadays is concerned with imposing more repressive structures against the citizens. There are daily reports about meetings of the "social spies", referred to by the ruling family as "mukhtars". These are individuals selected by the interior ministry to monitor social functions and to report any public event to the interior ministry for direct repressive action.

National mourning coincides with the 25th anniversary

National days of mourning are being commemorated by the people of Bahrain following the tragedy of the ill-fated Airbus crash off the coast of Bahrain on 23 August which killed all 143 people aboard. Thousands of citizens flocked to mosques around the country to pray and offer their moral support for the families of the victims.

The tragedy has brought to light the capabilities and attributes of the honourable people of Bahrain. However, on the first day of the crash one of the individuals who had been imported by the government for running its propaganda machine, Seyed Abdul Adhim Al-Baboli, created a havoc when he distributed false statements about

the route of the plane (falsely insisting that the plane was leaving Bahrain to Cairo) and the cause of its crash. Insider sources revealed that this person was ordered to shut-up and to concentrate his efforts within the remit for which he was originally imported to perform, namely to insult the pro-democracy movement that is campaigning for political reforms.

Gulf Air's chief pilot for the A320 fleet, Hameed Ali, provided more details about the ill-fated plane. He rejected the rumours and ill-advised statements (originally made by Al-Baboli) about the cause of the crash and about the pilot. He confirmed that the pilot, Ihsan Shakib, 38, was one of the best-trained professionals amongst Gulf Air staff. The Irish wife of the pilot, Tracy Shakib, appeared on TV and her statements were well received by the people of Bahrain who offered their wholehearted support for herself and her three children.

These sad days also coincide with the 25th anniversary for the dissolution of the National Assembly on 26 August 1975. Several pro-democracy figures, including Mr. Ali Rabea, Dr. Saeed Shehabi, and Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi, wrote important articles in the Arab press (Al-Quds and Al-Bilad) calling on the Al-Khalifa family to respect the social contract with the people of Bahrain by restoring the elected National Assembly and ending the state of emergency laws, particularly the State Security Law.

Brave citizens were at the forefront

The people of Bahrain were deeply saddened by the Airbus crash of Gulf Air flight GF072 on 23 August. The plane plunged into the sea off Bahrain killing all 143 people on board. The passengers were 63 Egyptians, 34 Bahrainis, 12 Saudis, 9 Palestinians, 6 UAE citizens, 3 Chinese, 2 Britons, and several others from other countries.

The cause of crash has not yet been identified. The Bahraini pilot, Mr. Ihsan Shakib, was an experienced person who had an impressive record. His British wife and three children were being comforted tonight by relatives and citizens.

The residents of Samahij and Dair were at the forefront of the operation for recovering the bodies and belongings of the victims. One citizen and a group of his friends from Samahij salvaged 16 bodies. The residents of Samahij also collected the belongings of the victims, including gold pieces, and forward them to the officials for further handling and investigation. Samahij residents confirmed that at least two victims were alive when they were picked up by citizens. They died later on the boat that was bringing them ashore.

Later on, six helicopters, four of them belonging to the US marines, joined the emergency operation that ended with the recovery of all 143 bodies and the two black boxes recorders.

The government has not been very open with the news and most of the official statements did not provide adequate information. Most of the news and information came from non-official sources.

Motion by UK MPs

Commemorating this occasion, a group of 16 British Members of Parliament submitted a motion stating the following

"That this House notes that 26th August 2000 is the 25th anniversary of the dismissal of Bahrain's Parliament and the suspension of its constitution; recognises the importance of 26th August 1975 in the history of the people of Bahrain in their struggle for democracy and the rule of law; is gravely concerned that, 25 years on, Bahrain's Parliament and constitution remain suspended; supports the people of Bahrain who are calling for the restoration of their constitution and democratically-elected assembly; is also concerned at the continuing human rights violations in Bahrain as documented in the Annual Report of Amnesty International; particularly deplors the arrest of minors and women, the systematic torture and general ill-treatment of detainees, the forcible exile of Bahraini citizens, and the unfair trials conducted by the State Security Court; regrets the Bahraini Government's refusal to enter into dialogue with the members of the Committee for Popular Petition for the restoration of Bahrain's Parliament and constitution; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to urge the Bahrain Government to enter into dialogue with the members of the Committee, to put an end to all human rights violations in Bahrain, and to allow freedom of expression, of press, of association and freedom of assembly.

More violations

More forcible deportations were reported last week. Mohammed Al-Zuheiri and his family returned from Iran to his homeland only to be stopped at the airport, intimidated and then forcibly deported. Another citizen returned from the United Kingdom and faced the same treatment. Mr. Abdul Halim Al-Halwachi returned home but was not allowed to step inside his homeland. Instead, the interior ministry's officials at Bahrain International Airport forcibly deported him to the UK. The government of Bahrain is the only "national" government in the world that forcibly deports the natives of the country while at the same it imports mercenaries from outside Bahrain and grants them free citizenship.

More detentions were reported in the past weeks. On 27 July, the following children were detained in Abo-Saiba'a: Seyed Mahmood Alawi Ibrahim, 16, Seyed Jawad Hassan, 16, Seyed Hassan Ali, 16, Seyed Sadiq Mohammed, 16, and Seyed Ammar Alawi Omran, 16. Another teenager, Hassan Dawood Salman was arrested on 24 July. All were kept for ten days, tortured

and then released.

During the past week, several 15 and 16-year old youths were arrested in Hamad Town (fourth roundabout), amongst them: Hussein Ali Hassan, Abdul Karim Hassan Ibrahim, 35, from Dair, was detained and ill-treated for one day last week.

The following teenagers were arrested in Dair recently and transferred to Budaya Police Station for interrogation. They had been released but they are summoned every now and then for interrogation by the intelligence services. These are: Ahmed Radhi Salman Al-Oneisi, 19 years, Ahmed Abdulla Ali Rabea, 18, Mohammed Saleh Jaffer Mushaimaa, 19, Hussain Ali Rustom Habib, Rustom, 16, Ali Abdulla Saad, 16, Hassan Abdul Rasool, 19, and Hesham Ali Hussain, 19.

Moreover, the following were arrested three months ago and nothing is yet known about them: Mohammed Mansoor, 12, Mortadha Ali Al-Oreibi, 17, Abdulla Zabil, 14, Seyed Gaffer Hussain, 15, Hussain Saeed Zabil, 17 (this is his second arrest), Hussain Ali Shamtoot, 17 (spent by now six months in detention), Ahmed Mansoor Qambar, 17 (four months in detention by now), Nabil Hassan Al-Bonni, 16, and Aqil Hassan Al-Bonni, 17.

29th anniversary of Bahrain independence

Twenty-nine years ago, on 14 August 1971, Bahrain gained its independence from the United Kingdom. Bahrain had been under British control since 1820. British involvement in Bahraini affairs increased every year and in 1869 it was Britain that intervened to end a civil war inside the Al-Khalifa family that had cost the country its stability. Britain removed a branch of the Al-Khalifa family and appointed a 21-year Isa bin Ali as ruler for the next 54 years.

The 54 years of Isa bin Ali were one of the worst periods in Bahrain history when serfdom and exacting tribute became the norm. The indigenous population that existed before the arrival of Al-Khalifa to Bahrain were dispossessed from their lands and converted into serfs in their own farms. A feudal governing system meant that each member of an Al-Khalifa family was awarded an area to rule arbitrarily as he wished.

Each sheikh exacted tributes and extracted taxes, the worst of which was called Raqabeyya. This is a poll tax imposed on the indigenous population only. These tributes, land-confiscations and feudal practices emanated from a medieval concept adopted by the Al-Khalifa family. It is the concept of Al-Fateh, meaning "The Conqueror". According to this medieval and backward concept, the conqueror legitimizes to himself the exacting of tributes, killing of people and confiscation of lands from those who lost in the battle. The Al-Khalifa considered the indigenous population as losers in a battle with them in 1783

and as a result of this they had to be subjected to the mentality of "Al-Fateh".

In 1895 and in 1922, the indigenous population revolted against this feudal and inhumane system and it was Britain that intervened and removed Isa bin Ali in 1923. His son came to power with the promise of ending those practices and with the formation of modern administration. Soon, the cosmopolitan Bahraini society took shape. In 1938, the first national movement surfaced calling for establishment of parliament, trade unions and rule of law. It was crushed and its leader were forced into exile. In 1954-56 another national uprising surfaced and in this case the British army was deployed, the movement was crushed and its leaders were sent into exile.

In 1971, the ruling family faced regional challenges when Britain decided to pull out. The Shah of Iran laid claim to Bahrain while the people desired independence under a modern sovereign state. The Al-Khalifa family promised to be modern and to abide by a constitution that was ratified in 1973. A parliament was formed in 1973 but in 1975, the then Amir dissolved the constitutional body following a request from the prime minister, who still governs Bahrain in an absolute manner.

In place of the parliamentary laws, the prime minister imposed a State Security Law that provided with absolute and unaccountable powers to govern the country as he wished. In 1994, the most powerful uprising surfaced in response to the return of absolutism and medieval practices. The country was being driven back to the times preceding 1923, a process that continues to date.

The struggle of the cosmopolitan society of Bahrain has remained steady and will continue until the achievement of constitutional rights. The despots who believe in medieval concepts will have to upgrade themselves for the modern age, or go.

Articles on Bahrain

The London-based Al-Quds newspaper published an important article on 22 August for the pro-democracy figure, Mr. Ali Rabea. Mr. Rabea questioned the possibility of solving the political and economic issues on the basis of unconstitutional laws. He described how the political situation deteriorated since the dissolution of the parliament on 26 August 1975. He explained that the laws that triggered the dissolution of the parliament (the State Security Law) has been and continues to be implemented to repress the aspirations of the nation. He pointed out that the wishes of the people of Bahrain were clearly stated during the seminars organised by the clubs in the past weeks. All have demanded the restoration of political and civil rights of citizens. He clarified that for the Amir's recent announcements to be realised there is a need to start addressing the issues head-on, by implementing the constitutional framework suspended by the ex-Amir.