

# BAHRAIN

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## A symbolic cabinet reshuffle that confirmed people's fear The challenges ahead

How worrying is the existence in office of the old guards? This is one of the hottest topic circulating in the public domain in Bahrain following the introduction by the Amir of a much-awaited reform programme. It is not true to suggest that what is going on in Bahrain is simply window-dressing. It is certainly more serious than that. The widening of the scope of debate among people who have until recently been denied the right of freedom of expression, jailed for raising a dissenting voice, and labeled traitors and saboteurs for taking an active role in opposition, is certainly a serious step. It has come from within the ruling family which has all along refused to modernize and has viewed the people of Bahrain as virtual enemies.

For the Amir and his son, the Crown Prince, to undertake the challenge of allowing people a relatively free debate, free association and tolerating the return of exiles whose activities until recently had brought the regime to disrepute is surely a big step in the right direction. Whether the reform programme has gone far enough to satisfy the people's demands is another matter. It is clear that the Amir is trying to maintain a critical balance between the people and the old guards. This is one of the most ambitious aims that could either make or break his reform programme.

The people have been receptive of the positive gestures of the Amir, including his visits to local dignitaries, mosques and professional associations. He is being held at high esteem among the ranks and files of the people who have maltreated by the regime for decades. The old guards, on the other hand, have been wary of these reforms and are in constant fear of their own survival. It is clear that their performance over the past three decades has failed to declared objectives; the economy has not performed well, the regime's stability has not been secured, the people's peace has all but disappeared, the country has been brought to disrepute by their unethical and inhumane practices. Decades of torture and mass arrests have only exacerbated the tense atmosphere while the people's con-

tempt to the ruling family has deepened.

For a while it looked the two sides, the people and the ruling family, are irreconcilable, but now that the Amir and his Crown Prince have gone a long way to allay people's fear, the relations have become less hostile. However, fears of an internal coup against the reforms are as strong as ever. They were confirmed by the cabinet reshuffle in April. The old guards were reconfirmed in office, the "sovereign" portfolios untouched, and marginal figures installed in marginal ministerial posts. One of the most notorious figures of the old guards to be promoted to a ministerial post has been the former head of the University of Bahrain, who has become the minister of education. Being of a military background, Mohammad Jassim Al Ghatam's management of the university has summed up all the ills of the regime.

Over the past six years, the university was militarized, and the torture apparatus of Ian Henderson established a base within its campus, and almost all dissenting voices whether among the lecturers or students were removed. He stands as a hate figure and his promotion shocked the country to the core. In a civilized and democratic country, Al Ghatam would certainly be brought to account for the fiasco that engulfed the university during his tenure.

Instead of allaying people's fear, the reshuffle has only led to more worries and concerns as to the direction of the reform programme, how genuine it is, how strong and how serious is the Amir in going about it. Further sources of worry include the existence of the torturers in their position and the apparent lack of the political will to reform the legacy of Ian Henderson, the most hated figure in Bahrain. Despite official assurances that this British colonial officer has been relieved of his duties, his men are still in place. These are people who have been at the forefront of the torture regime and who stand accused of committing crimes against humanity, are still enjoying their positions and are attempting to bully people into submission. The legacy of

the old regime is a source of serious concern and the Amir is well-advised to cleanse the system of these impurities if his reform programme is to succeed.

So far, the political openness is viewed as a personal gesture from the Amir and the Crown Prince. This image must change into one in which the rule of law is upheld and civil society institutions replace the personal endeavours and gracious acts. A modern society can only be sustained by the rule of law in which rights and duties are clearly defined and protected within the jurisdiction of the country. That is the long-awaited ambition of the people. Furthermore, the enthusiastic Amir has given personal pledges and promises to the people, including economic hopes. He has repeatedly ordered the re-instatement of victims to their jobs, promised more job opportunities and a gradual reduction of the foreign workforce and indicated his willingness to direct the anticipated revenues from any oil or gas finds in the Hawar islands to the betterment of the country and the people. These are encouraging promises, but need a iron will to make them work in a country that has been plagued by endemic management inefficiency and political incompetence.

The next few months will be crucial to test the seriousness of the Amir in ensuring the creation of a healthy environment for his reform programme. Dealing with the old guards in a way that creates confidence in the people will be warmly greeted and appreciated. The work of the two committees appointed by the Amir to look into ways of enacting the National Charter and constitutional changes may be important but the people's feelings and worries must be addressed by listening to their grievances and removing the symbols of the old regime that are a constant reminder of the black era. Political debate must not be impeded and neither should the idea of an open press free from the intervention of the security forces be revoked. There is a great enthusiasm for a new order that draws the curtain on the legacy of ancient regime.

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## Old guards re-launch

The military ex-president of Bahrain University, Mohammed Jasim Al-Ghatam, who had been promoted to the position of a minister, re-launched his repressive policies with a new outreach. By becoming the minister of education he was implicitly given the green light to implement his racism and dictatorship on all educational institutions. On 25 April, a seminar was organised in Sanabis Intermediate School.

The seminar was nothing more than a normal one with a medical doctor and a religious scholar discussing behavioural approaches to education. The headmistress received a phone call from the ministry of education enquiring whether one of the speakers is Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain. The headmistress confirmed the names of the speakers, none of whom was Mr. Hussain. An official from the ministry said that the "new" minister of education, has information that Mr. Hussain was delivering a talk at the school. Soon after the phone call, two police jeeps, laden with security personnel, arrived at the school for hands-on investigation.

Moreover, Al-Ghatam moved quickly to re-consolidate his military grip on the University of Bahrain by appointing a person from the military ranks. Colonel Majid bin Ali Al-Naimi was officially named as the new President of University of Bahrain. This is another setback in a series of steps that have spread gloom around the country.

The Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, met with Bahraini journalists on 24 April and reaffirmed his support for freedom of expression. However, several of the journalists were prevented from commenting on the recent cabinet changes. The Amir called on the press to speak openly, but the citizens are finding it hard to square this reformed call with the ban imposed on journalists to freely air their opinions.

The people are also finding it hard to participate in the decision-making process with the channels being increasingly monopolised by handpicked stooges and parasitic-type of people. There are many issues which the people feel powerless to influence. Many thousands of mercenaries are being granted Bahraini citizenship in a reignited process aimed at destabilising the demography of Bahrain. The structure, distribution and naming of constituencies have been decided behind closed doors with no say whatsoever for independent views. These and other critical issues are matters of concern for the public at large. While the people hear about transparency and accountability, in practice nothing is being realised and no process is being started-up to achieve such aims.

## Journalists banned

The government imposed a ban on all columnists who may comment on the recent cabinet changes. Articles and columns for Ali Saleh, Hafedh Al-Sheikh and Abdul

Rahman Al-Nuaimi were banned because they attempted to comment on the unacceptable cabinet changes announced last week. Pessimism in the country has returned as the old guards showed their resistance to change.

In a seminar organised by Alumni Club on 22 April, three speakers, Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain, Dr. Yaqoob Janahi and Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi debated the recent events in Bahrain. Speakers from the audience also contributed by calling for the resignation of the interior minister who had been responsible for operating an oppressive apparatus for the past 25 years. The audience were in agreement that promoting certain individuals to the positions of minister has dealt a blow to the reforms announced by the Amir.

In fact the old guards are resurfacing in many forms. A pregnant lady, Fatima Akbar Jawad, was detained for one night at Bahrain International Airport after returning home from Syria on 22 April. She and her husband (still to return from Syria) have been in exile for more than 20 years. Many Bahrainis have submitted their papers to the Bahraini embassies in London and other parts of the world but have received no response from the authorities. These hurdles are now increasing with hard-liners fighting back against reforms.

The president of Islah Society, Sheikh Isa bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa, said that the programme of the society for participation in the next political phase is now ready. He said that the programme is based on key principles including: the preservation of social identity, citizen-centred development, consolidation of national unity and activation of the constitution and charter. The recent moves for uniting Shia and Sunni efforts will be systemised and a co-ordination committee between the leaders of the two sides is being formed.

The Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, will be visiting the USA and will meet with President George W. Bush on 7 May. The US Administration wants Bahrain to sign a new expanded military contract, replacing the one that expires in April 2001. Bahrain has expanded the military co-operation agreement with the UK last year, for a 10-year period.

## Cabinet changes: A setback

The minor changes announced on 17 April promoted several persons who were instrumental in repressing the Bahraini people in the past years. Instead of dismissing these individuals, they were either kept in their places or promoted to higher positions.

The military person responsible for the worst racist policies in Bahrain University, Dr. Mohammed Jasim Al-Ghatam, was made a minister of education. Mr. Nabil Al-Hamer was made a minister of information despite the fact that his era as editor-in-chief of Al-Ayyam was not impressive. Dr. Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar Abdulla who

was responsible for spreading lies against the pro-democracy opposition in Washington DC was promoted to a minister of state for foreign affairs. The promotion of the old guards created a bad environment in the country, signified by a rapid return of general cynicism and pessimism.

On the positive side, the efforts of citizens to realise their rights through the formation of unions are beginning show some good results. Labour unions, which have been prevented since 1956, may soon be allowed to operate legally in Bahrain. The unconstitutional law banning the formation of trade unions may have to be bypassed. The pro-democracy personality and president of Bahrain Pharmacists Society, Mr. Rasool Al-Jishi said that Bahrain had taken huge steps forward that may put it ahead of many other Arab countries.

The press has also been allowed to speak about the banned National Union of Bahraini Students, and it is expected that next year the university students may be allowed to elect their representatives to the Students Council. Elections to the council has been banned for the past 18 years. A general union for women is also being talked about with active participation by the wife of the Amir in this process. The opposition hopes that the non-governmental organisations will remain faithful to those they represent, whenever they are allowed to function.

There is also a common debate inside both Bahrain and Kuwait. In both countries, pro-democracy figures are calling for allowing citizens to form peaceful political parties rather than the half-hearted approach currently in place. The various political trends are organising themselves informally, a state of affairs that neither helps the people nor the government.

## Opposition calls for a more serious approach

The interior ministry was back in action on 12 April. Several citizens who were recruited to assist in the latest census were summoned and told that they had been sacked. The citizens had previously been detained for political reasons and were released as part of the reconciliation process. The interior ministry reactivated its repressive machinery and dismissed these citizens without any justification.

Dr. Mansoor Al-Jamri participated in a special conference held on 11 April in the USA (Washington DC) to assess political reforms in five Middle Eastern countries (Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Iran and Bahrain). The meeting was organised by the International Forum for Democratic Studies and the Middle East Project. Dr. Al-Jamri explained the underlying factors driving the reform process in Bahrain and highlighted the challenges as well the constraints of the present and forthcoming periods.

Despite the setback caused by the recent appointments (for the activation of the National Charter) announced by the Crown

Prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, the people are hoping that the reform programme will continue so that the rule of institutional law can be established. Many people view most of the recent appointees as either weak or have dishonourable past records. There are also fears that the government is planning to change the constitution through another committee that was formed last month for amending the constitution.

The opposition hopes that the pledges of the Amir last February would not be forgotten. He had said that the Constitution is above the Charter and any amendments must be processed through the elected National Assembly. For this reason, the opposition calls for going to the polls sooner than 2004 so that these critical changes can properly be debated.

The people of Bahrain are expressing their satisfaction with the closing down of two centres of prostitution that are owned and run by the torturer Adel Flaifel. The two prostitution centres are called "BJs" and "JJ Murphys" and both were constructed by the torturer using the money he extracted out of the families of political detainees and prisoners. He accumulated hundreds of thousands of dinars through blackmailing of citizens. The victims of torture hope to see this person brought before justice so that the reform programme can be founded on a more solid ground.

## OMCT on Bahrain

The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) delivered an intervention on Bahrain last week before the 57th UN Commission on Human Rights. OMCT said "During numerous sessions of the Commission, OMCT noted grave violations of human rights in Bahrain. Today we would like to express our satisfaction at the measures taken in recent months. The national referendum, the abolition of the national security law and of the Security Court, the freeing of political prisoners and an amnesty for all prisoners in detention for crimes affecting national security are measures which go beyond mere formal reforms. The return of numerous exiles is proof of the genuine change that has taken place. OMCT hopes that this process will continue and that those guilty of crimes committed during the preceding period will be judged. Furthermore, OMCT would like to encourage the Bahraini authorities to intensify their co-operation with the various international mechanisms and in particular, with the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention."

The Bahrain Society for Human Rights (BSHR) participated in the UN session heralding a new and healthy practice whereby a Bahrain-based NGO could deliver a non-official view. However, the government's delegation was headed by people who were associated with hands-on torturing of citizens in the past years. These faces cause pessimism rather than opti-

mism. The opposition hopes that the Amir will replace these faces with fresh ones.

## BSHR meets NGOs

The delegation of the Bahrain Society for Human Rights (BSHR) met with the NGOs that supported the people of Bahrain during the past years of struggle. The NGOs were so happy to receive an independent delegation from Bahrain. The representative of Interfaith International, one of the organisations which supported the Bahraini people, said that he hopes the promises of the Amir would soon be institutionalised so that the future of democracy can be assured. He noted that the Bahraini government's insistence on some old practices and the sending to Geneva some members of the "old guard" are not conducive with the recent declarations and positive steps of the Amir.

BSHR was also invited to join other organisations, world-wide, for commemorating the 26th June, the day chosen by the UN as the "International Day in Support of Victims of Torture". In Bahrain, there are thousands of torture victims and the joining of BSHR in this campaign will be in line with promoting the concepts of human rights and the defence of victims of torture. The BSHR was invited to join this UN-led campaign by holding seminars, awareness workshops and displays, so that the Bahraini citizens can be part of the international network for supporting the victims of torture.

## Nor-Sod on Bahrain

In its special oral intervention at the 57th Commission on Human Rights, Item 11, "Nord-Sud 21" said "Bahrain has been witnessing dramatic changes since III The Amir in started his reform project in Oct.2000. This included the release of all political prisoners and detainees, the return of the political exiles, and granting them their civil rights. Women were granted equal political rights with men. Marginal freedom of assembly and expression was observed, where the civil society organisations are being revived and new organisations are licensed, the first of which The Bahraini human rights society. International human rights organisations are being invited to visit the country freely, the first of which Amnesty International (see AI report March 2001).

III The Amir repealed The State Security Law, which has been the main tool of the arbitrary detention for thousands of political opposition, and abolished The State Security Court, which has been used to incriminate political defendants for quarter of century.

The country is in processes of political reform, which was started by the popular referendum on The National Action Charter, designed to restore the constitutional rule. We appreciate these positive steps and congratulate III The Amir and the people of Bahrain. We hope that The State of

Bahrain should proceed with the reform project in order to establish the constitutional monarchy on solid bases. This requires the following:

1-Implementing the Charter, such that the Constitution is reinstated.

2-To ratify the major covenants and conventions on human rights, such that the national legislation and law enforcement institutions are brought in line with that.

3- To ensure the right of political, unionist, and NGOs, of association and free work.

4-To ensure the freedom of expression to reflect the diversity of the society.

5- To abolish all forms of discrimination.

6-To ensure free elections for the National Assembly, as soon as possible."

## Ashora-2001

The Ashora-2001 was commemorated in a new style and with fresh spirit. Both Sunni and Shia religious scholars led a campaign for donating blood to the hospitals. This new practice replaced the wrong and un-Islamic practices that penetrated sections of Muslims communities resulting in self-inflicted injuries. The civilised commemorations and the joining of the Sunni ulama are major steps in the modernisation programme of the Bahraini society.

## Low-grade Tourism

The opposition welcomed the instructions issued by the Amir to end the low-grade "tourist attractions". The low-grade practice have turned Bahrain into a centre for imported prostitution. A tourist official said that the tourist industry will be directed to attracting families and will concentrate on high-grade tourism.

In parallel with this announcement, an unconfirmed report stated that one of the discos owned and run by the torturer Adel Flaifel, called "BJs" was raided by a special unit belonging to the Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID). The torturer Flaifel established this prostitution centre four years ago by fraud and raised the capital by blackmailing families of prisoners who had to pay large sums of money to get their children released.

## National Unity

In his Friday prayers speech on 31 March, Sheikh Al-Jamri stressed the importance of national unity and harmonisation of political views. He said that the successes of the nation are attributed to the co-ordination and approximation of views on most critical issues. He thanked Islah Society and its president, Sheikh Isa bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa, for agreeing to form a Shia-Sunni committee to co-ordinate between the two main religious sects in Bahrain. He also called on all thinkers and activists to work together to develop plans for the next phase.

## Recent Political Reforms in Bahrain: A Pessimistic View

By Dr. Abdulhadi Khalaf

In several speeches delivered shortly after ascending to the throne in March 1999, Hamad bin Isa informed his people that his top priorities are 'achieving national unity and internal security, through the solidarity of all Bahrain citizens, without discrimination, whatever their origin or creed'. For most Bahrainis, the Amiri maiden speeches evoked little enthusiasm. Similar promises were made before. Each time such promises were made the future seemed so bright and the country would soon move away from being an ethnically segmented political entity into joining the new bold world of enlightened nation-states.

During most of his first two years as ruler, Hamad bin Isa's record seemed modest and uninspiring. Some perceived him to be too weak to initiate any of the reforms needed to salvage the country from its political bottleneck. For most of the period the Amir seemed to spend his energies on consolidating his reign. To the dismay of his more hopeful opponents, all his moves have been within the confines of the ancien régime. He has concentrated on mobilizing the same external and internal resources of legitimacy that supported his father's reign. Understandably the Amir first priority has been consolidating his position and establishing his authority within the ruling family while negotiating different bargains with its diverse factions. Similar care was directed towards cultivating the goodwill of two longstanding pillars of the al-Khalifa rule, the 'tribals' and the clerical establishments. Additional efforts were spent on a series of public relations exercises such as forming a human rights committee within the Shura Council. (Cf. Khalaf: 2000).

### Part II

In a speech delivered to members of the Shura, early November 2000, Hamad bin Isa announced his intentions to introduce a series of measures to reform the political system. Key words in his reform plan were 'constitutional monarchy' and 'bi-cameral legislative body'. Not until then did outsiders become aware that bargaining within the regime had drawn to a close and that the Amir was about to make up his mind.

Following the footsteps of his role model King Hussain of Jordan, Hamad bin Isa commissioned a national charter to elaborate the perimeters of the impending liberalisation process. When he commissioned his national charter in April 1990, the Jordanian monarch, too, was facing the consequences of a severe and chronic fiscal crisis combined with international pressure and an Islamist-dominated opposition. In both instances, the charter was presented as an

integral part of a liberalisation package. The package included a general amnesty providing for release of political prisoners, return of exiles, reinstating activists to their government and semi-government jobs, return of confiscated passports, lifting travel restrictions on prominent political activists, and most significantly, lifting of state of emergency and repealing of state security laws (Cf. Amawi, 1992: 27). In both instances, the liberalisation package was fashioned as an attractive element in a pre-emptive strategy whose main objectives are to restore calm, and to provide the regime with stability and political longevity without altering any of the pillars of its power (Cf. Robinson, 1998:387).

In similarity with its Jordanian mirror image, the Bahraini Charter, *mithaq amal al-watani*, is a serious attempt to reassert the legitimacy of the ruling family through conceding to opposition demands for reinstating the constitution and for curbing the excesses of the security services. Authors of both charters defined the state as a constitutional monarchy where government decisions are subject to the approval of a freely elected parliament. The latter's decisions are balanced and moderated by an appointed consultative council.

The Bahraini Charter created nearly the same confusion that perplexed the Jordanians a decade earlier, with regard to its juridical and political status, its relationship to constitution and, particularly, which one of the documents would take precedence (Cf. Rath: 1994:549). In Bahrain, additional confusion resulted from the ambiguity surrounding the exact mandate of the proposed bi-cameral legislative body. What relationship is envisaged between the elected parliament and the appointed Shura, both procedurally and politically?

More alarming, perhaps, is the observation that the Amir and his interlocutors among leaders of the opposition did not raise the future role of the al-Khalifa Family Council in the proposed reform project. Worthy of note that the ruling family's council, in existence since 1932, was made a formal organ of the state in 1973 with an executive secretariat headed an al-Khalifa with a rank of minister. It remains to be seen how long these three councils are able to endure each other, and how detrimental is their coexistence to the constitutional monarchy project.

During the first half of February, Hamad bin Isa seemed to make best use of his skills as an astute tactician to reassure his interlocutors and their increasingly apprehensive constituencies. He even abandoned the already announced parley of 'some 2000 people of all walks of life and representatives of civil society' that, in the Jorda-

nian style, would ceremoniously adopt the Charter.

On the eve the plebiscite on 14-15 February, Hamad bin Isa looked triumphant. He has already appeased most critics of the text of the Charter, and of the ways it was drafted and the modalities proposed for its adoption. Bahrainis, including most of the opposition networks, offered a nearly unanimous approval. Many, otherwise sober, opposition voices started speculating whether 'the era of democracy in Bahrain has finally dawned'. No one cared to listen to the few sceptics or to the warnings of the 'grand scheme of deceit' shouted by remnants of radical networks within Bahraini opposition. In varying level of enthusiasm, everyone, from the Crown Prince to the exiled bidoons, joined in singing the praise of the Amir, his audacious moves, and, the launching of what was designated, rather prematurely, as the 'democratisation process' in Bahrain.

As the pace of political relaxation gained momentum, a state of national euphoria reached its peak on the eve of the plebiscite. Among additional measure that turned the whole country into a carnival site, were the two Amiri decrees, of February 18, abrogating the State Security Law, and abolishing the State Security Court.

Popular approval of the Amiri moves was evident in the massive turn out for the plebiscite, in which women participated, and in the reported 98.4% of the votes in his favour. Everyone was declared a winner. To his, by now loyal opposition, the Amir offered to give back the parliament in exchange for their active participation in mobilising popular support and legitimacy for his constitutional monarchy project. In the process Hamad bin Isa appears set to transform Bahrain, to use Nazih Ayubi's (1995) distinction, from being a 'hard state' into becoming a 'strong state'. The former punishes and coerces, whereas the latter achieves its objectives through civil means.

In spite of the persisting national euphoria, the Charter is, by design, a confusing document. Its imprecise language and its other deficiencies could become a source for serious contentions between, as well as within, the regime and the opposition. Yet, the Bahraini Charter, like its Jordanian counterpart, is likely to provide more time for the Amir to attend to his other pressing business of state, and to strengthen his position vis-à-vis his rivals within the ruling family. Moreover, because of its long-term perspective, it could ease some of the immediate pressures on his regime and could give it some additional room for manoeuvre (Cf. Rath, 1994:543).

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