

BAHRAIN

Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" to promote human and constitutional rights

Troubling times ahead as the people begin to "smell a rat"

The past few months have witnessed sudden rise in public interest in politics, having tasted a degree of openness following the endorsement of the National Charter in February. The release of the political prisoners last month led to rising hopes that the country would be moving towards a new phase of political activism that has not existed for decades. The repeal of the notorious State Security Law and the court associated with it has enabled the people to become more politically active as government's policies unfold. The Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa had promised the people that they would live days that they had not seen yet. Whether these developments herald a new beginning or the constitution of the old policies is not yet clear. What is obvious is that the relative easing of repression and the curtailment of the excesses of the security forces have led to new public dynamism unseen since the early half of the seventies. In those times, the British had officially "withdrawn" from the country, elections were held to draft up a permanent constitution for the country and the formation of parliament chosen by the people. Yet those early hopes were soon dashed when the ruling family abrogated their earlier commitments and promise to the people.

Today, Bahrainis are still full of hopes, and are looking for a new future under the 1973 constitution, the re-instatement of which had been the cornerstone of Hamad's "reform programme". But suspicions have arisen in recent weeks following the forming of two committees; one to oversee the implementation of the National Charter, the second to propose constitutional changes in line with the Charter. While the first committee has started working in the open and its activities are widely covered by the local media, the second committee's work has remained a secret. No one knows the mandate of the committee, the depth and width of the constitutional changes or whether the body of the 1973 constitution would be retained intact. There are deep worries that something sinister may be in the making by the committee of the constitution as it continued its work behind in total secrecy behind closed doors. Privately, senior figures so the opposition are casting a shadow of doubt

about the seriousness of the ruling family to undertake real reforms or re-instate the constitution.

Seminars held in the past few weeks to discuss various issues related to the labour market and laws, the unemployed and the constitutional changes have attracted many as a climate of doubt circulates in the country. As the unemployment sours young people started to organise and demand proper job opportunities. This clearly clashes with the government's policy of political naturalisation which has mushroomed in recent months. There is a deepening apprehension about this policy that is considered to be a major step in a process of ethnic and cultural genocide. Tens of thousands of passports have been issued to foreigners as native Bahrainis remain unemployed.

The situation appears to be calm on the surface as a degree of public freedom is maintained. Opposition figures are expressing their opinion in statements or seminars while the government appears to be conducting new policies aimed at undermining the opposition and its ability to mobilise in the future. The uprising of the nineties was a shock to the al-Khalifa rulers and are adamant on preventing future mass rebellion. Yet the issues of the past decade have not been properly addressed. The perpetrators of the bleakest human rights violation campaign remain at large. The repeal of the State Security Law is only a small step on the road to created a torture-free country. Yet the masters of this policy remain in their positions. Some of them have been "honoured" by the Emir himself, like Ian Henderson and Adel Flaifel. This did not go down well with their victims who demand justice. Unless torturers are tried for their heinous crimes people will remain suspicious of the regime's intentions. There is an urgent need for a truth and reconciliation commission, along the lines of the experience of South Africa after the downfall of the Apartheid regime. It is clear that the government lacks the will or policy to put an immediate end to all practices that undermine the natural rights of the people, secure their human dignity or convince them of the government's seriousness in tacking the violations.

In the debates that take place in clubs and societies, there is one central theme; that the government gives an undertaking to go through a democratic transformation and establish a situation similar to that of Kuwait. This is an opportunity to avert the repetition of the experience of the past 25 years. The former Emir, Sheikh Isa and his brother, prime minister Khalifa missed the opportunity provided by the constitution and election in the first half of the seventies. Now the new Emir, Sheikh Hamad, is well-advised to uphold the achievements of the country in the past few months. He must not let the opportunity slip away. If this happens it will be a disaster. Yet all indications are that the release of the political prisoners is the most he can do as he lacks the stomach for real reforms that grant the people the right to run their own country. The Bahraini people have shown beyond any reasonable doubt how deep is their love of their country and how much they cherish freedom while not opposing the tribal rule of the ruling family. If these feelings are not reciprocated by the government, another opportunity for a permanent state of peace will be missed.

The people and their leaders have been wary of the regime's broken promises and his natural tendency to use force to quell the people. But that will be extreme form of madness and political suicide. Having gone this far in repatriating the natives, the only wise way is forward. This needs sacrifices, compromises and clearer vision. This is possible only if the ruler can convince the people that he was serious in implementing reforms. People will believe him when he orders the immediate and unconditional re-instatement of the 1973 constitution, dissolve the constitution committee and propose power-sharing formula. Bahrain needs to break with its immediate past that was overshadowed with images of protests, collective punishment, torture, killing, banishment or execution. A new beginning needs a different approach. Meanwhile the people will continue their political dynamism, organise protests and communicate with the outside world. The Khalifa regime must abandon its policy of deception and broken promises.

Lord Avebury's forthcoming trip to Bahrain

The Vice-Chair of the UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group, Lord Avebury, will be visiting Bahrain in the period between 9 to 15 June. During this period he will be meeting with NGOs and officials to assess the recent changes in the field of human rights.

The British peer has been campaigning alongside Bahraini activists for several years in his capacity as the Vice-Chairman of the UK's Parliamentary Human Rights Group. He had met regime's officials on numerous occasions and has vehemently defended the rights of the Bahrainis. He held several press conferences and seminars at the House of Lords at which human rights and political figures presented anti-regime views. He is also critical of the UK government's policy on Bahrain which has been largely supportive of the regime and dismissive of its flagrant human rights abuses.

Prior to the visit the official English mouthpiece "Bahrain Tribune" had preempted the visit by publishing an article on 18th May titled: 'National issues not to be debated by foreigners'.

In response Lord Avebury issued the following statement on his forthcoming trip: Re: Visit to Bahrain, 9th June 2001

I have noted carefully the statement by the Minister for Amiri Court Affairs, reported in the Bahrain Tribune of May 18, 2001, on the principles that must be observed in discussing national issues. I am visiting Bahrain from June 9-15, and I have been invited to participate in several public meetings during my stay. However, I entirely agree that it is for the people of Bahrain to decide how they



should be governed, and that any suggestion of dictation by foreigners is unacceptable. In the national debate, it may be useful, however, to look at the steps which are being taken towards better governance elsewhere in the world. Having visited some 50 countries in every part of the world in the course of my work as a member of both Houses of Parliament over the last 40 years, I recognise the need for sensitivity when speaking as a guest, as well as the restrictions on freedom of expression which are allowed by international law.

During my visit to Bahrain, I have no intention of departing from the laws of the land, or to dwell on sensitive issues. I have been looking forward to this visit for several years and I am delighted to be coming at a time when HH the Amir has introduced major initiatives for political and constitutional reform. I look forward to learning more about these plans, and without seeking to interfere, to explore ways of promoting exchanges of information between our two countries on democracy and human rights, both official and non-governmental.

Lord Avebury
Vice-Chair, Parliamentary Human Rights Group
United Kingdom, May 18, 2001

IMF calls on GCC states to open their economies

Gulf Arab leaders gathered in Bahrain on Monday to coordinate policies amid calls by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for them to open their economies and lure more foreign investment. Officials said there was no agenda for the "consultative" summit of leaders of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

But they expected the one-day meeting to be dominated by the bloody seven-month Palestinian uprising against Israel and steps needed to unify the six members' economies. "There will be no agenda or official opening of the summit. There will also be no statement issued after the meeting," one official told Reuters.

GCC Secretary-General Jameel al-Hujailan said the leaders were free to exchange views on any regional or international issue.

It is the third consultative meeting for the GCC leaders since they agreed to hold a bi-annual summit in 1999. The GCC was set up in 1981 by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait to protect the states from the 1980-1988 Gulf War between their powerful neighbours Iraq and Iran. The six sit on more than half of the world's oil reserves.

IMF URGES MORE REFORMS
The IMF has urged the GCC states to eliminate subsidies and open their econo-

mies to foreign investments to meet the growing challenge of creating new jobs for their nationals.

The call came during a rare meeting between IMF Managing Director Horst Koehler and Gulf Arab finance ministers and central bank governors in Bahrain on Saturday.

"I do think that the region has to attract even more foreign direct investment, and (it) can do this... (by) first demonstrating that (it) is politically stable," Koehler said after the meeting.

Leaders of Gulf Arab states approved at a summit in Manama in December 2000 steps to issue a unified currency. They also agreed the U.S. dollar would be the common denominator for the planned single currency.

Currencies of all GCC states, with the exception of Kuwait, are pegged to the U.S. dollar, in which their crude oil exports, their main source of revenue, is traded. Kuwait's dinar is currently linked to a basket of currencies.

In 1999, GCC leaders agreed to unify their customs tariffs at between 5.5 percent and 7.5 percent by March 2005.

The move to create common tariffs is part of a wider plan by the GCC for a regional currency and a unified trade zone, and is designed to speed up free trade talks with the region's biggest trading partner, the European Union.

Khalifi girl given US residence

The al-Khalifa princess who fled Bahrain with a U.S. Marine was granted permanent residency in the United States on Thursday 24 May after arguing she would be persecuted if she returned, her lawyer said.

Meriam Al-Khalifa arrived in the United States about a year and a half ago with Jason Johnson, then a Marine stationed in Bahrain, where she is related to the royal family.

The couple's love affair and flight from the Gulf country was the subject of a TV movie. They have since married.

The princess sought asylum in the U.S., claiming that she feared for her safety because she had violated strict royal tradition by dating a non-Muslim.

Her lawyer, Jan Bejar, said he and U.S. immigration officials negotiated the arrangement, which was granted Thursday morning.



The un-employed mobilise seeking jobs

Fresh pressure by a growing number of jobless Bahrainis has pushed unemployment to the top of the government's priorities, but immediate remedies are not expected, officials and diplomats said on Monday.

They said the government of the Gulf Arab state was now actively trying to find solutions to rising unemployment, the main reason for the 1994-1998 unrest by the majority Shi'ite Moslem community seeking political and economic reforms.

"The unemployment issue is a big challenge to Bahrain. The government has made that clear," a Western diplomat said. "I think the government is giving unemployment a very high priority, but it cannot create jobs out of thin air."

Unemployed Bahraini women and men have over the last two weeks gathered outside several ministries asking for jobs. Some of them had been jailed for years for their role in the unrest -- which erupted after similar gatherings by jobless Bahrainis.

Officials had said that some of those jailed and others allowed to return from exile under a general amnesty -- part of political and economic reforms -- have been re-employed.

GOVERNMENT COMBATS UNEMPLOYMENT

"We are now more than confronting unemployment. We are now fighting the problem to find solutions through different areas and channels," Labour Minister Abdel-Nabi al-Shula told Reuters. "All government ministries and institutions as well as the private sector are opening their doors for the unemployed," Shula said, adding that he met Bahraini businessmen on Saturday who promised to employ more Bahrainis. Official figures showed the number of people seeking jobs increased to 9,670 by April 25, or 3.1 percent of the total workforce compared with 2.5 percent at the end of 1999.

Diplomats put the jobless figure at around 10 percent of the workforce -- estimated at 307,000 out of a population of around 666,000, one-third of them foreigners. The government, aware of the social and economic repercussions of unemployment, is also trying to cut reliance on foreign workers, making way for more jobs for its nationals. Shula said he met a group of 150 Bahraini job-seekers on Saturday at the Labour Ministry.

A group of about 50 women university graduates went to the Education Ministry

on the same day and other unemployed people went to the Health Ministry to seek jobs, witnesses said. "It is the right of all nationals to knock on all doors for jobs anywhere," the minister said.

BAHRAIN TO PROVIDE FINANCIAL HELP

Bahrain said last week it would provide financial help to unemployed Bahrainis. Under the programme, married job-

seekers will get 100 dinars (\$265) a month while single people will receive 70 dinars a month from May 1 for a period of six months. Since then hundreds of jobless people have registered at Labour Ministry centres.

Bahrain, a regional financial and banking centre, has also said it would set aside 25 million dinars for a programme to create new jobs and provide training for nationals.

"I think people need to be patient with the government. The (jobless) programme is less than one week old and people have to wait and see how its works," another diplomat said. Shula said several new projects being established in Bahrain would create thousands of jobs. "We are working on two fronts -- creating new jobs and replacing expatriates," Shula said.

He said his ministry would undertake other undisclosed steps to reinforce the government's employment plans. (\$1-0.377 dinars)

On this issue, the Bahrain Freedom Movement said the

following, in a statement on 1st May: "More than 200 jobless citizens picketed inside the labour ministry on 30 April, while a 16-strong delegation representing them was holding talks with the minister of labour. This meeting was promised after an earlier picket. The attitude of the minister was different from the years before. In the middle of the discussions, the Amir telephoned the minister and ordered him to start paying monthly "poverty wages" for a period of six months. The married jobless citizens will receive BD 100 (USD 265) a month while single citizens will receive BD 70 (USD 186).

One of the problems is that the labour ministry refuses to accept the true number of jobless people. It is hoped that the ministry will stop its games and will recognise the real figure of a minimum of 15% unemployment.

The attitude of the Amir is different from the past governmental approach. When in June 1994 a group of jobless citizens staged a similar activity, they were encountered by the security forces which clamped down and arrested many of them. The BFM extended its appreciation of the Amir's move and called on the jobless citizens to give the labour ministry the six months ordered by the Amir. More than 60% of the workforce in Bahrain (around 300,000) are foreigners. Many of the foreign workforce come from the Indian Subcontinent and are themselves denied all rights. They are being abused by influential people, and the old guards that control the government use them as a means of repressing the nation. "



Bahrain, Iran sign security pact

On 17th May Iranian President Mohammad Khatami ended his landmark two-day visit to Bahrain saying they were working with other countries in the region to "rehabilitate" Iraq through an "effective UN role" to ensure the establishment of an Iraqi national government. The signing of a security treaty between the two countries was the highlight of the visit, the first for an Iranian leader in 25 years.

The treaty, which follows similar pacts that Iran signed with Saudi Arabia and Yemen, is aimed at combatting organised crime, smuggling, drug and weapons trafficking, and allowing the extradition of criminals, according to Iranian interior minister Abdul Wahid Mousawi Lari.

"It is an important treaty which will consolidate our efforts to build the bridges of trust not only between Bahrain and Iran but also amongst all countries of the region," said Bahraini Foreign Minister Shaikh Mohammad Bin Mubarak Al Khalifa in a joint press conference with his Iranian counterpart Kamal Kharazi.



Miscellaneous news

* The government complied with an earlier order issued by the Amir to curb the low-grade tourism by publishing new regulations whereby single women travelling to Bahrain alone and coming from places known for export of prostitution would be denied entry visas upon arrival to Bahrain. This measure will be welcomed by the people who have witnessed the degradation of Bahrain's reputation due to these low-grade "tourist" activities.

* Mr. Hani Al-Rayyis, the representative of the Denmark-based Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Bahrain, will return to Bahrain on Thursday 3 May after about 20 years in exile.

* Dr. Alaa Al-Yousuf, who returned in the past few days, will participate in a panel discussion organised by Al-Oroba Club in the capital, Manama, on 2 May at 7.30 pm. The panel discussion is aimed at defining the priorities of the present political phase.

* A new non-governmental organization was formed in Bahrain under the chairmanship of the leading personality, Mr. Jasim Fakhro. The new NGO aims to resist naturalization with the Israelis and to combine its efforts with similar organizations in the Gulf and the Arab world.

* A petition signed by about 10,000 Bahraini citizens is calling on the US Government to end its bias against the Palestinians. The petition is expected to be handed to the US Ambassador in the Bahraini capital, Manama.

* On 3rd May fourteen members were elected or re-elected to the 53-seat U.N. Commission on Human Rights Thursday by its parent body, the U.N. Economic and Social Council.

The United States, in an unexpected defeat, lost its seat on the U.N.'s top rights body for the first time since the commission, based in Geneva, Switzerland, was

created in 1947. Many members are not happy with US human rights record.

Chosen for the commission Thursday 3rd May were: Armenia, Austria, Bahrain, Chile, Croatia, France, Mexico, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Sudan, Sweden, Togo and Uganda.

The other 39 members are: Algeria, Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Britain, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Cuba, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Germany, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, South Africa, Spain, Swaziland, Syria, Thailand, Uruguay, Venezuela, Vietnam and Zambia.

Regional groups at the United Nations nominate candidates for the commission, and the "Western Europe and Others" group proposed four candidates for three seats, with the United States coming in fourth, behind France, Austria and Sweden.

Pro-democracy speakers define the priorities of the present political phase

Eighteen leading personalities contributed to an important session organised by Oroba Club on 2 May to define the priorities of the present political phase. Among the speakers were Sheikh Isa bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa, Mr. Rasool Al-Jeshi, Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi, Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain, Ms. Jalila Al-Sayyed, Ms. Mariam Al-Rowei, Dr. Abdul Aziz Obol, Dr. Abdul Hadi Khalaf, Mr. Ali Rabea, Mr. Hassan Radhi, Mr. Salman Kamal-u-Din, Dr. Monira Fakhro, Dr. Alaa Al-Yousuf and others.

Dr. Al-Yousuf said that what he sees as priorities can be targeted and achieved within one or two months. He said that both committees for proposing amendments to the constitution and for activating the national charter should present definite timetables for their defined deliverables. The government should publish a new and true budget showing all incomes and all expenditures. The government should come forward and announce the

date for the municipal elections rather than keeping matters confidential. The prime minister should meet with journalists on a weekly basis to present the programmes of the government and subject them to questions & answers sessions. "I call for solving unemployment by liasing and co-operating with other GCC countries. I request that all ministers declare their private interests to remove conflicts with their public duties. That the government should foster the creation of institutions whereby needy citizens can resort to without losing faces", he said.

Dr. Al-Yousuf called on all political trends to rise above trivialities and ensure that the interests of the nation are considered rather than private or selfish ones. He called on the political circles to open-up dialogue and aim to reach common consensus so that democracy can be established on more solid grounds.

The meeting was unique because most political trends in Bahrain were represent-

ed and the attendees were able to question speakers with regard to their views and policies. Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi criticised the government because it failed to resolve unemployment while at the same time it continues to practice the "free visa" policy, whereby surplus foreign workers are imported from the outside and dumped in the local market (without jobs) to compete with citizens in all types of work.

On the other hand the 16-strong committee that was formed in the past few days met with the labour minister on 3 May to discuss the programmes to be put in place for ensuring that all registered jobless citizens are provided with the opportunities to work or train within the next six months. The committee is meeting with the ministry to ensure that the pledge (made by the Amir) to employ or register them on salaried vocational programmes is fully realised.

BFM, 4 May 2001

