

BAHRAIN

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Freedom of expression is a prerequisite for transparency

Confusion and uncertainty are becoming features of the political game in Bahrain. The public morale was last month subdued by the lack of transparency in certain government's policies and intentions. Six months have now passed since the Amir started executing his reform programme. So far, the actions have focused, and rightly so, on issues relating to security and human rights. Most of the outstanding issues relating to these areas have almost been settled. What has not happened yet is tackling the sensitive issues relating to the reinstatement of the Constitution. One of the sources of anxiety is the attempt by the government to enforce changes to the Constitution in violation of the tenet of article 104. That article confines the right of constitutional changes to the elected National Assembly. The Amir has been urged to uphold the Constitution and prevent any violation of its articles. A committee comprising ministers and other government officials has been charged with changing the Constitution. These changes are illegal and will not be accepted by the people.

The Amir has achieved public endorsement of the National Charter that gives the Amir more powers than those stipulated by the Constitution. The opposition argues that violating the Constitution is not part of the extra powers given by the Charter. Changing the Constitution without recourse to the elected body is not conducive to the mutual trust invested in the Amir by the people of Bahrain. It is hoped that the Amir will opt for more reconciliatory approach to the future politics of the country. The National Charter also empowers the Amir to change the political system of Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy. He has postponed this until the parliamentary elections that may be held in 2004. Last month, however, Britain became the first country to declare the monarchical system. During an official visit by the Amir to London, the UK foreign secretary, Jack Straw, addressed the Amir in terms reserved for monarchs and monarchies. He used the term "the Kingdom of Bahrain" alongside the United Kingdom. The inference is that the UK

could only have used these terms if sanctioned by the Bahraini authorities. It has been widely claimed that the UK has endorsed the idea of a constitutional monarchy in Bahrain. London has perhaps decided to bring the news home to the people that the proposed official name of the country has now been put to practice. What it means in reality remains to be seen. Critics of the plan argue that

Another point of confusion is related to the minister of information. Nabeel Al Hamar, a junior journalist has been awarded for his faithful service to the previous security-led political process, has infuriated the people of Bahrain. He is reported by the Al Hayat newspaper to have attacked the opposition and defending the perpetrators of the crimes of torture. Mr Al Hamar is notorious for his interventionist policies and censorship of ideas. He issued instructions to the editors not to publish articles which he did not like. In one case he was reported to have contacted an international news agency telling them to publish a statement on behalf of one Bahraini citizen without the knowledge of that person. Mr. Al Hamar is also believed to be behind a mysterious "order" issued last month by the General Organisations for Youths and Sports (GOYS) banning the organising of public seminars and ordering all clubs and associations to obtain a special permit for holding any function. This order is attempting to bring back one feature of the State Security Law that was abrogated by the Amir last February.

The problem lies in the fact that many people within the executive are not sympathetic to the reform programme of the Amir. Moreover, some of them are against any change that would legitimise the existence of the dissenting voices. Others have amassed huge amount of wealth and are reluctant to let loose their grip on power. In an open society their business empires are likely to be scrutinised by the public and are likely to lose their favorable positions. It will therefore take great efforts to dislodge these elements who will fight off any chal-

lenge to their authority. The reform programme thus needs a strong will from the Amir and his circle. The absence of transparency is also a worrying sign. The government has apparently shelved its plans to organise municipality elections which received huge publicity when they were first announced two years ago. The prime minister had announced his decision to allow these elections, but he is now said to be contemplating the idea of delaying these elections for at least three years. No reason has been given. The problem of unemployment remains a volatile issue. The government has failed to produce a programme to solve it and has attempted to force the private sector to shoulder the responsibility of employing Bahrainis in their businesses.

The public view is that the government must take the initiative to reduce foreign workforce in governmental institutions before asking the private sector to do so. It is clear that the government does not want to take real steps to introduce changes to the present recruitment policies in the security and police forces. They still have no confidence in local people and would still prefer foreigners in the various forces. This has led to a rapid programme of naturalising non-Bahrainis in order to change the demographic balance in the country. The Ministry of the Interior has recently published some figures claiming that the non-Bahrainis who were naturalised amount to more than 80 thousand people over half a century. This is considered to be a misleading figure and the opposition has called for a full investigation by a neutral commission in this quagmire.

Transparency has thus become a necessity if the Amir's programme is to be a success. At a time when public feelings are running high and anxiety has disturbed hope and optimism, it is only appropriate for the authorities to respond favourably to the request for independent commissions to look into the issues of concern. Only then could there be considered to be a good chance of gaining a meaningful civil society in Bahrain.

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Unconstitutional measures

The General Organisation for Youth and Sport (GOYS) issued a follow-up statement following the uproar it created last week when it banned the organising of seminars in Bahrain. In its latest statement it said that "the forums are required to notify the GOYS and they should abide by the laws and regulations and respect the spirit of the National Action Charter and unity." GOYS also said that "it should be informed about a forum's dates, topics and speakers and its commitment to laws and regulations." The initial and follow-up statements contradict the Constitution of Bahrain and would, if implemented, deal a severe blow to the reforms championed by the Amir. The Bahraini Constitution states in Article 28 (a) "Individuals shall have the right of private assembly without permission or prior notification, and no member of the security forces may attend such private meetings." Furthermore Article 31 states that "Public rights and liberties laid down in this Constitution shall neither be regulated nor defined except by a law, or in accordance therewith. Such regulation or definition shall not affect the essence of the right or liberty." These constitutional clauses make it clear that the GOYS officials have no legal base whatsoever to ban the seminars.

It is feared that the banning of seminars would be coupled with the on-going clamp down on freedom of press in order to process unconstitutional programmes behind closed doors. The Information Minister, Mr. Nabeel Al-Hamar, has utilised his position to curtail the freedom of press. He even contacted press organisations in Kuwait requesting that no article or interview for a member of the opposition be published. During the Amir's visit to London he visited the BBC Arabic Service and other Arab media organisations as part of his public relations exercise. He was questioned by independently-minded journalists about his undemocratic practices and why is he attempting to stain the image of the reforms initiated by the Amir.

Mr. Al-Hamar is not only a Minister of Information. He is also the managing director of Al-Ayyam daily newspaper and the president of the Bahraini Journalists Society (BJS). Bahraini journalists are therefore unable to complain to their professional body especially that the society was formed last year, before the voting on the National Charter last February. The BJS was condemned by many journalists because its remit was, and still is, to control journalists rather than to represent them. It is a sad state of affair that such individuals are continuing to play an influential role while their history and present practices indicate that they do not identify with the reform programme.

There are several key issues in Bahrain that must be addressed properly to ensure that the dark period of dictatorship does not return. Freedom of expression comes on

the top of these issues because it is needed to provide a breathing space for citizens especially as Bahrain has no elected parliament and citizens may have to wait until 2004 before an elected body is in place. The people of Bahrain are demanding transparency and the opportunity to monitor critical governmental activities. A good example of a popularly accepted mechanism is the way the Ministry of Labour is being checked by a committee made-up of ordinary citizens (Committee to Assist the Jobless). The latter was given the authority by the Amir to attend all meetings of the ministry in relation to finding jobs to the unemployed and to check over the implementation of an action plan. More of such committees are needed to monitor other critical issues of concern to the citizens.

Reuters Report

MANAMA, July 21 (Reuters) - A leading Bahraini Shi'ite Muslim cleric on Saturday rejected as unconstitutional a recent ban on unauthorised political forums in the conservative Gulf Arab state. "The decision does not conform with the constitution or the (national) charter," Sheikh Abdel-Amir al-Jamri told Reuters before he flew to Amman on Saturday for a medical check-up.

"It (the ban) is a war against the intellectual movement... We hope that the General Organisation for Youth and Sports (GOYS) will review its decision," Sheikh Jamri said.

An official at GOYS, a government body that controls clubs and associations, said last week that hosting political forums needed prior official approval. The official said the move was aimed at enforcing law and order in the island state shaken by the 1994-98 anti-government unrest by members of the Shi'ite community demanding political and economic reforms from the Sunni-led government. Some clubs and associations have hosted forums to discuss political reforms by Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, who took power on the death of his father in March 1999. Bahrain-based diplomats and analysts said some of these debates have been seen by authorities as an attempt by some activists to stir trouble. "If there were violations by some speakers at the forums, they must be dealt with by the judiciary system... There is no justification for this ban," said Sheikh Jamri, a former member of parliament that was dissolved by the government in 1975, two years after it was set up.

Bahrainis in February voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to support the Emir's reforms, which call for an elected parliament alongside an appointed Shura consultative council, a constitutional monarchy and an independent judiciary. Sheikh Jamri said he saw no evidence that the government had retreated from the political reforms initiated by Sheikh Hamad in February, when he pardoned hundreds of

political prisoners and abolished controversial emergency laws.

He described the situation in Bahrain, the Gulf's financial and banking hub, as stable, but said there were still some unresolved problems such as citizenship. Manama has granted citizenship to hundreds of people born and raised in Bahrain. The move applied to people whose families had come to Bahrain from neighbouring countries, mainly Iran, to work and later settled. Around 15,000 people living in Bahrain — 7,000 stateless people and 8,000 from Arab and other countries — have applied for Bahraini passports.

GOYS campaign to silence the nation

The General Organisation for Youth and Sports (GOYS), headed by the son of the Interior Minister, issued an order threatening clubs and associations. In a move characteristic of the Bahrain under the notorious State Security Law that prevailed until last February, the GOYS said it will ban clubs from organising seminars that deal with political issues. The GOYS ordered all clubs to acquire a permit before holding any seminar and before announcing it to the public. This is apparently designed to ensure that all political topics are eliminated. Also, the GOYS want to prevent any individual not desired by the authorities from addressing a seminar. This attack on freedom of expression follows several letters of warning sent by the GOYS to clubs that organised seminars on political reforms.

The launching of this crackdown runs in parallel to another crackdown led by the Information Minister, Mr. Nadeel Al-Hamar against freedom of press and expression. The minister has recently banned the broadcasting of a TV programme after completion of its production. He was quoted as saying "no more politics". The Information Minister is also one of those old guards behind a failed attempt to falsely implicate Iran in the internal affairs of Bahrain. Several articles have been published attacking the Iranian Radio because the latter reported an "internal event". It was an absurd attempt as the same event was reported by Reuters, Associated Press, and Al-Jazeera TV, amongst others, and no other country had its ambassador summoned by the foreign ministry.

Although the GOYS is responsible for sport clubs only, the information ministry published the order (on 17 July) in the two official newspapers, Akhbar Al-Khalij and Al-Ayyam, in an obscure manner, implying that the ban applies to all clubs and associations. This step, if implemented, means that the authorities will end a period of relative openness and free debate without dictatorial measures and censorship. Tightening the grip on seminars, while at the same time dictatorially controlling the press, runs contrary to the reform programme.

Obstacles to Democratization in Bahrain

An intervention delivered to the Gulf Cultural Club in London, on Friday 13th July, 2001

Dr. Mansoor Al-Jamri

For me to talk about Bahrain is more than an analysis. It is a personal experience. I have been away from my country for a very long period. I returned two to three weeks ago for two weeks and my return to Bahrain was totally undreamed of. Personally I never dreamt to be back in my homeland. I always thought I was going to die here in the UK and I would never have the opportunity to see my country again. If anybody told me that I would see Bahrain in a very short period in March or April I would have said 'you are dreaming but I am not prepared to let myself dream'.

The situation has changed dramatically in Bahrain. The changes are so fast that you tend to lose track of what has caused this latest event because something has preceded it. Unless you are a keen observer and you have some sort of interest you tend to say this is a small island and I am just going to forget about it.

For good or bad Bahrain is small. Its strategic implications mean that there are so many people who are observing what is going on in that island. To see the implications and what would happen. It is like a microcosm of what could have happened if these events took place in Saudi Arabia or other state. They have a different social structure but politically and regionally the interests are similar. Saudi Arabia, especially, is something big in all respects.

I know events in Bahrain have been watched internationally and regionally by everybody. Bahrain has become a topic to be talked about in most Arab countries. Nowadays, we are told that even in Syria the Syrian people are looking forward to having what the Bahrainis have. They are asking 'why don't we have all our prisoners released, why don't we have some freedom of expression of whatever sort'.

The subject is very up and down. One day you would think that Bahrain has become so open that is unbelievable. The next day, within 24 hours, everything is turned upside down. Just before I went to Bahrain there was the story of Lord Avebury. The situation in Bahrain was calm, Lord Avebury was invited, he was welcomed by the Bahraini ambassador in London. There was also a meeting between the Amir and the Bahrain Human Rights Society during which the visit of Lord Avebury was mentioned. The Amir said Lord Avebury is most welcome and all of a sudden in the

official newspapers there was a vicious attack on Lord Avebury, and "British colonialism." And those who deal with him are branded as "traitors." This happened just out of the blue. Then there was a calming of the storm.

Two days ago the charge d'affaires of Iran was summoned by the Foreign Ministry and warned against interfering in Bahraini affairs. So you could see that there is some sort of contradiction. As an observer you would find this is so confusing to follow.

The aim of the presentation is to follow through some of these things which have happened in Bahrain, with the obvious aim of supporting reforms. Bahrain at last, I believe, is witnessing a genuine opening for reform. There is an Amir who believes he must change the way in which he rules the country. The country has been used to one type of system. It was a system where the state talks and the people must listen. It was a system where the state can intervene, can punish and can do whatever it liked without listening to the people. Listening to the people is an insult. The solutions that were adopted were aimed at silencing everybody who opposed the actions of the government. All the important positions in the state were security people. The security personnel, the security advisers, whether British or otherwise are the top people in the country. Any critical statement made by any citizens would be dealt with as a threat to the state. Therefore the state is taken as something that must be protected against all attacks and everything is defined as an attack.

The number one change which the Amir has made was to adopt a political, rather than a security-oriented, solution. For the first time in Bahrain he is prepared to meet with people who call themselves opposition. He talks to them and he is not ashamed of it, he does not consider this to be an insult.

The other feature of the change is that this Amir has political advisers who are natives and thinkers like Mohammed Jaber Al Ansari and Hassan Fakhro who are keen persons and considered to be clean, ie not corrupt. Add to these advisors the presence of an enlightened crown prince who is an intellectual. So the environment that the Amir circulates in is totally different from the environment that used to circulate the ruler in the past. That has its own implications.

Let us think about what the Amir has managed to do. He has made a small opening of confidence with a large section of

people who were not listened to in the past. For that he has to be commended. He has also managed to deal with other issues in a political manner rather than deploying security personnel to crush the people.

However, the problem is that everything is state-directed. This explains why all of a sudden the journalists who were attacking the opposition and those people who stood against words like 'democracy' and 'human rights' started to flag them up. They started speaking about these terms as if Bahrain were practising democracy and human rights for the past several centuries. If you read the newspapers, you will read articles in favour of democracy written by the same people who just a year ago were attacking anybody who uttered the word 'election'. This is evidence of state-directed reforms.

I will now outline the positive developments in the situation and the negatives that might drive the reforms back.

The Amir has abolished the State Security Law and Court. However the security personnel who tortured people and harassed the ordinary people are still there in their cars. They can still be seen everywhere and even though they are not touching any person, their presence creates a very bad impression. Their dress and the colours of their jeep, for instance, send a very bad message to the citizens. So what is the situation going to be regarding these people? They are a very ugly feature of the past and they are still there. They are not doing anything now, but seeing them is bad enough.

Bahrainis were allowed to return home but some have not returned. The obstacles in this situation cannot be excused. Hundreds of people in Iran were evicted from their land in 1980-81. Others are in the USA and elsewhere. They were put on boats and were the first to be exiled to Iran. They have no records because the government destroyed them. They only have copies of very old passports and have been stranded in Iran and in other countries. They cannot return.

At the same time there are thousands of people in the country who are not Bahrainis, yet they are being given Bahraini passports for political reasons. They are Bedouin Syrians, Yemenis and Saudis. They can be seen everywhere and they are getting passports free of charge and they are being portrayed as true citizens. We have no objection to this if this process is natural. But it is not natural.

The temperature of the nation was very

high in recent days. On Saturday the Interior Ministry released figures for the first time of those people who have been given passports. The figures are not believable but it is a first step towards openness.

There is the positive feature of allowing political debates. Wherever you go in Bahrain there are political debates. Before February if more than three people congregated they would be arrested and put in jail under the State Security Law. Today people open their doors, and debates are taking place everywhere. Until recently if you switched on a microphone without a permit from the Interior Ministry you would be arrested. Now there are seminars, everybody is congregating and talking.

But there are certain topics the government does not want the citizens to talk about. What to do with the torturers, is a taboo question. Dr Khalaf created a storm in Bahrain, when he went there and called for citizenship for all people to be equal and that there must not be super-citizens and sub-citizens. That statement created a storm and the official media never stopped attacking anyone daring to raise issues of such type. There are limits to what can be discussed but these limits are not clearly defined and above all they are not constitutional.

There is a government's statement that "foreigners are not allowed to speak about Bahrain". But the government means Lord Avebury only. They do not mean Omar Al Hassan or (with all respect) the British people working for Omar Al Hassan and are publishing a pro-government newsletter. These are on the payroll of the government. So they ban Lord Avebury from speaking about Bahrain but don't ban Omar Al Hassan. He has a centre and he regularly publishes a newsletter which is quoted every day in the official newspapers in Bahrain. He is not a Bahraini and neither are his staff, yet they receive full coverage inside Bahrain. They are allowed to speak about Bahrain but somebody who supports democracy isn't. These contradictions exist everywhere.

Nevertheless, the Amir has taken some very daring steps. He did not wait for advice from security personnel. About six to eight weeks ago there was a picket in front of the Labour Ministry. The Labour Ministry was stormed. But instead of putting the protesters in jail he telephoned the Labour Minister and told him to accept a committee elected by the protestors to monitor all ministry's activities with regard to finding jobs for the unemployed. The minister was told that jobs have to be found within six months and 25 million dinars was set aside for the people for six months. That committee was formed all of a sudden and it started to monitor the Labour Ministry by attending all the relevant meetings. The unem-

ployed were engaged in all the debates and discussions.

There is a will to solve this problem but the governing structure of Bahrain is so corrupt that it cannot be solved. An allocation of 25 million dinars for six months is going to give employment to only 3000 - 4000 people. The government is now recognising more than 10,000 unemployed and there are about 10,000 more still to be recognised. Hence, more than 15 thousands will still be out of work while there are more than 200,000 foreign workers in the country.

Another very negative aspect is lack of free press. The press is tightly controlled by the Information Ministry. It is controlled by an elite which is basically anti-reform. They are connected with the corrupt past and they are controlling the press and everything that is to be said in Bahrain.

There is a lack of transparency in many respects and the country is run by decrees. Many decrees are issued in a speedy manner to change every aspect of Bahrain's life before the parliament comes. So many decrees have been implemented without any popular monitoring.

To sum up, if someone asked me 'do you believe there is hope?' I think there is hope because we have somebody who wants to change the situation with a degree different from what it was in the past. Even if that will give us a small percentage of what we are aiming for, I think we should push for it because it is better than the complete darkness and the complete dictatorship that Bahrain has lived under for a very long time.

Questions & answers

Q: Would it not be good for the opposition to re-integrate into the elite and take government jobs?

Dr Al Janri: There is one danger in what is being offered here. This is the third time in 100 years that the political system in Bahrain changes: 1923, 1971 and now in 2001 it is changing again. The 1971 reforms were partly sabotaged by ex-opposition people. There were good reforms in 1971. What happened was that the government opened the door for previous opposition people to become ministers, ambassadors and leading officials. Then some of those started to attack the opposition, they not only disowned the opposition, they informed on the opposition and did so many bad things. They have created a bad image about the opposition and demoralised the morale of the people.

In the 1990s the opposition just about recovered its status as an important force inside and outside the country. Now as well, there are offers for many of them to

return to get houses and positions. Some of them were offered, I must say, not all of them, it is always selective targeting. Some of them have had offers to become advisers to ministers. I am against it. I said this openly in Bahrain in every speech that I gave. I am against senior opposition people assuming a government role. That is what happened in the 1970s, that is what killed the spirit inside the nation. Now that we have recovered there are many people who are running after concessions and the distribution of spoils. There is so much running after private gains and it is very disgusting. I am disgusted myself. I am sure that many opposition people could gain materially, individually, selfishly, if they wanted to. But I hope that at least some of us will remain outside this selfish game. Some have already fallen into that trap. They have become the government's spokes people. People who were in the opposition just few months ago are now attacking the opposition. Thanks God people have not lost confidence in the opposition. The senior figures are playing a significant role in sustaining the momentum. And whoever is just following selfish things will lose or has already lost the trust of the people.

Question: Are these changes indigenous or is there a regional or international direction to them?

Dr Khalaf: The Bahraini changes are like the Moroccan, like the Jordanian. We can look at Spain in 1974. It is not change that occurs because a ruler dreams something and he wakes up and implements those dreams.

Each situation has its own peculiarities. In Bahrain we had a sustained opposition movement for a long time. It started in 1992, 1994 and it continued despite attempts by the regime to destroy it. And it managed to unite. Elements of the opposition that were unlikely to unite: the leftists, the Islamists etc. This is one element. The second element is a sustained deficit in the budget for more than ten years.

The economy of Bahrain was in shambles for a long period depending largely on grants from Saudi Arabia and sometimes from the USA, but mostly from Saudi Arabia and sometimes from Abu Dhabi, from Sheikh Zayed directly. So we have the regime buying the loyalty of people through economic incentives. The budget deficit has the country directed to an acute crisis. International help also contributed. Human rights organisations were all over the place, in US, Europe and in the Arab world. They helped us in a way that made Bahrain a daily issue in conferences in Geneva, New York, Cairo. The international contribution was immense. For a small country like Bahrain dependent on its image as a haven for international business, stability was necessary. Input by human rights organisations