

BAHRAIN

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One year of openness: The Amir is well-positioned to defend the Constitution

As the Government of Bahrain prepares to celebrate the first anniversary of the National Charter, questions are being asked about the reform programme of His Highness the Amir of Bahrain, how serious is the ruling family in its drive for more "democratisation" of the country, and whether the presence of the "old guards" at the top of the government hierarchy may herald the collapse of the whole reform process. Amid all this, several facts are undeniable. Firstly, Bahrain today is different from what it used to be one year ago. The people are enjoying the relative freedom they have enjoyed since last February when the Amir pledged to introduce his reforms, while the notorious prisons which were under the strict commands and management of Ian Henderson have remained empty of any political prisoner. Secondly, there are no political exiles, a phenomena that has been in force for decades. Thirdly, the country has now lived for one year outside the restraints of draconian laws imposed by Henderson and his masters, namely; the State Security Law and the State Security Court. The Amir had enough courage to repeal both of them with a stroke of a pen. The prime minister had resisted all calls to repeal them for more than 25 years. Fourthly, there is now a deep-rooted perception among the rulers that the policies of the old guards were at the roots of the crisis and that the change in policies have enabled the country to reel itself free of the agonies of its recent past.

It is by no means beyond comprehension to suggest that there is a long way to go before democracy is established in this tiny Gulf island. It is equally true that the sacrifices of the people have merged with the political will of the Amir to create a more hospitable political environment in an arid land. How successful the experience is going to be remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the people of Bahrain are unlikely to accept anything other than the upholding of the rule of law. They view the re-instatement of the country's 1973 constitution as the cornerstone of any evolving democracy. They also have a firm belief that any attempt to tamper with that constitution through mechanisms other than Article 104 is bound to fail. It is this fundamental misgiving about the Amir's programme which is causing irritation among the public and members of the various opposition groups. The hope had always been that the Amir would have enough courage to take up the challenge of re-instating the constitution, call for elections of the National Assembly and end the political strife that has engulfed the country for the past quarter of a century. The Amir has been cautious in his programme and has always avoided taking steps that could anger his uncle, the Prime minister. Policies of appeasement may be positive in a sense, but they run counter to the spirit of reforms which needs new blood. The parliamentary experience needs people who believe in pluralism and dialogue, which is not the case with members of the old guards.

Furthermore, the people are uneasy about the government's policies that aim at a fundamental change in Bahrain's population equilibrium. Over the past year, thousands of non-Bahraini bedouins from Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Indian sub-continent were given the Bahraini nationality to the dismay

of the people. This process is ongoing and is leading to distrust towards the government. People view it as a dirty game in the struggle for influence and power. They have shown much understanding towards the reform programme of the Amir, but they are now wondering how serious and sincere it is. The problem is compounded by the lack of progress in another domain. The rate of unemployment among the youth has been a source of anxiety and anger in large sectors of the society. The lack of seriousness on the government part to take the issue more seriously has led to lost opportunities to rectify the situation. It is believed that in the process of reform one of the objectives is to keep large sectors of society dependent on the good will of the Amir. Although this approach may have led to improvements in certain areas, a modern state cannot be run on personal good wills and noble gestures. The rule of law is the main ingredient of a sustainable political system. The attempts to bypass the people's role in deciding the shape of their future are doomed, especially as the world marches towards more democracy and respect of human rights. The recent upheavals in the region, including the tragic consequences of 11 September terrorist acts were at least partly due to the nature of government in the Arab world in general and the Gulf region in particular. The absence of the rule of law, the lack of transparency and political participation, abandoning the rules of justice in applying international laws and conventions and the obscurity of the regimes have all contributed to a state of affairs in which extremism took root.

Over the past twelve months, Bahrain has enjoyed remarkable calm as the forces of evil within the old regime were kept at bay by the Amir. The attention given to human rights has gradually alleviating the feeling of injustice and victimisation, and the promises to uphold the rule of law have dampened the tendency to protest. For the situation to develop more positively, there is a need to institutionalise reforms, uphold the rule of law and exercise justice. A sustainable political modern system relies heavily on the participation of the people in decision-making through a democratic process. The people must be made to feel that their human needs, dignity and rights are respected and that they are allowed a share in the running of their own affairs. Their endorsement of the National Charter was one way of expressing their desire for a more democratic political system and rejection of the old system that had been based on disrespect of the sanctity of man, his rights and freedom. The Amir is well-advised to take up the challenge of re-instating the constitution, institutionalise his political reforms, decide on a date for general parliamentary elections, uphold the rule of law, abide by the mechanisms prescribed by the constitution for changes in its articles and re-affirm his trust in the people. Those who advise him to do otherwise must be ignored. For the country to march forward, the way is through collective decision-making, cooperation, mutual trust and upholding the constitution. The hope is that the Amir will heed these sincere calls and lead the country to a more democratic and progressive society.

Reading the History: Events in 1968

In response to the call by His Highness, the Amir, to re-write the history of Bahrain, researchers are encouraged to make real effort to make use of this valuable opportunity. The problem in researching history is usually finding the sources of information needed to take up the challenge. One of these sources which are rich when writing the recent history of Bahrain is the British Foreign Office documents. They are usually released after 30 years, but may be withheld for longer periods if they contain sensitive information. These documents should be treated with care as they represent the viewpoints of one of the parties involved in the events of the time. They should be taken as indicators of the events, and not absolute facts. In order to highlight some of important events in our recent history, some of these documents will be published in this publication. The following is a document summarizing the internal situation in 1968, written by Anthony Parsons, the Political Agent in Bahrain to Alec Stirling of the Arabian Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London.

Confidential
British Political Agency, Bahrain
3 December 1968

Dear Alec,
Internal Situation

I had a mildly interesting conversation a few days ago with the Ruler about Mohammed bin Sulman. Needless to say Mohammed has been making a slight nuisance of himself again, this time with the merchant community. He has used his position to force Hussain Yateem to sell him a piece of valuable building land in the centre of Manama at about half its market price: he has also had a flaming row with the Zayanis whom he tried to turf out of their showroom block (which belongs to him) in order to let his new proteges, the Habib Bank, occupy it, in spite of the fact that the lease still has some years to run, Fortunately he was frustrated in this attempt.

2. When discussing these incidents with the Ruler I asked him point blank whether he thought that his brother could ever prove dangerous to him. I said that I knew that Mohammed cherished dreams of becoming Ruler of Bahrain: these dreams might have become obsessive during his period of sulks. Did the Ruler think that there was any chance that he might try something on? Shaikh Isa roared with laughter. He said that he had of course known Mohammed ever since he was born. He knew that he had always wanted to be Ruler and would continue to harbour this ambition until his dying day; but he was only a foolish little boy and quite harmless. He had no physical courage (this is true) and it was almost inconceivable that anyone would follow him even in the incredibly unlikely event of his being prepared to try conclusions. Shaikh Isa went on to say that he had been very faintly apprehensive when Winder and Benn had been respectively Commandant and Head of Special Branch of the Bahrain State Police. Mohammed had succeeded in persuading them that their only chance of being able to do their jobs was to give their loyalty to him rather than to the Ruler. He, Shaikh Isa, had a low opinion of Winder and Benn and had been fractionally worried lest they might be stupid enough to be led away by Mohammed into some adventure. However, he was completely happy with Bell and Henderson. I said to him that I had suspected that the writer of the anonymous letters which I had received some time ago (correspondence resting

Political Resident copied to Michael Weir) might be Mohammed. Shaikh Isa said that the same though had occurred to him. However, it was unimportant. If Mohammed had been the writer he had either been acting on his own or, at most, with one or two malcontents from the Family. What could they or would they do? Nothing!

3. I found this frank exposition of Shaikh Isa's views on his brother interesting. Touching wood, they fit very closely with my own views on Shaikh Mohammed as a potential danger to the throne.

4. Meanwhile the Bahrain State Police have made another breakthrough into the NLF (National Liberation Front) with the discovery in a village of a cache of arms and explosives. The cache was a fairly mixed bag with the accent on the explosives; hence rather more sinister than the hotch-potch of weapons which one would expect to find in pretty well any Arab village, particularly amongst the Shia. Unfortunately, Shaikh Isa is tending to treat this discovery rather too light heartedly: he is adopting the attitude in conversation with me that the Special Branch probably planted the explosives and then found them in order to justify their existence. This is typical of Shaikh Isa. Whenever anything of this kind has happened in Bahrain ever since I have been here, he has half convinced himself that the whole thing is either a plant by the British or the Special Branch showing him that they are earning living. However, it is only with half his mind that he believes such nonsense and he is giving Henderson full support: Khalifah is a great help in keeping him up to the mark. Unfortunately the Ruler is not alone in holding these absurd views: intelligent Bahrainis have been known to say the same thing.

5. The NLF activists in the Electricity Department (paragraph 3 of my letter 1/16 of 22 October refers) have been sacked and there have been no serious repercussions so far. The individual in whose possession the first batch of explosives was found (paragraph 5 of my letter under reference refers) was given six years on Jida Island. There has been no public reaction to this sentence. However, there are now about 14 detainees on Jida Island whom the Police are not in a position to bring to trial. I gather from Henderson that this is probably the full extent of his proposed arrests for the time being. Needless to say the presence of so many detainees after a long period in which there have been none has stirred up public opinion. There is rather a lot of talk going on about the change of character in the leadership of the Bahrain State Police and of a recrudescence of the "Winder/Benn reign of terror". The Ruler is aware of this current of opinion as are Bell and Henderson. The Ruler's view is that the detentions should not be allowed to become protracted but that Henderson was quite right in carrying them out in the first place in order to give NLF and anybody else a sharp lesson. My guess is that the detainees will probably be let out in small batches over the next few months and that the worst of them will be rusticated to some other part of the Arab world for the time being. Meanwhile the Ruler has told me that he has allowed back into Bahrain a certain Sayed Ali, a Shia divine who was exiled at the same time as the St. Helena prisoners. The Ruler is sure that he is harmless. I have tipped off Henderson: the Ruler was obviously lying when he told me that Henderson approved of this move and I subsequently discovered that, characteristically, he had said nothing to Henderson about it!

Jobless Bahrainis hold protest marches

Throughout the last month the unemployed organised several demonstrations demanding job opportunities. At the end of January hundreds of protesters marched through the streets of the capital to the Diplomatic district raising banners and shouting slogans. The Government tried to appease them by low and high level meetings, but they feel betrayed by many broken promises. The long-term danger of ignoring the plight of the unemployed is enormous. The Government knows this but it lacks the political will to needed for major decisions. News agencies took interest in these demonstrations. Here are some examples.

On 16 January 2002 the AP reported the following:

Nearly 150 unemployed, banner-toting Bahrainis marched peacefully Wednesday in the island's key financial and commercial district, disrupting traffic as they paraded through the streets demanding jobs. "We want jobs, we want jobs," they shouted as they marched through the Diplomatic Area, which houses the central bank and hosts other major international offshore banks, embassies, local law courts and other commercial enter-

prises.

"If we don't have jobs how can we feed our families," said Sadeq, 28, a father of two, who was one of the demonstrators.

Though many of the demonstrators appeared to be unemployed, a few said they had jobs but wanted better-paying posts.

The protestors, who marched around the district for more than two hours, causing traffic jams as they moved along, said they would continue to hold similar demonstrations until their demands, which include, giving nationals jobs priority over foreign workers are met.

They also urged Bahrain's ruler Sheik Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa to find a solution, some suggesting that the hiring of non-Bahrainis was part of the problem.

There are an estimated 50,000 illegal workers in the tiny nation of 700,000. Most are believed to be Indians, who number more than 100,000 in Bahrain. Other illegal workers come from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

Millions of unskilled Asian workers have been drawn to Bahrain and other oil-rich Gulf states by jobs in the con-

struction, factories, restaurants and households. Many foreigners are also hired in the country's security force.

While Wednesday's crowd dispersed peacefully as police looked on, a similar protest last week outside the Labor Ministry ended with police firing tear gas and arresting five people after the demonstrators entered the ministry's building and disrupted work.

Jobseekers appear to be organizing the protests among themselves, spreading meeting times by word of mouth.

Labor Minister Abdalnabi al-Shoa told The Associated Press that the protestors were demanding jobs for which they had no qualification or experience. He urged them to be reasonable in their expectations.

Unemployment has long been a problem in Bahrain. It was a factor in the Shiite Muslim-led wave of unrest that gripped Bahrain in the mid-1990s.

Some 15,000 citizens have registered as job seekers, of which 60 percent are women. The unofficial unemployment figure is, however, believed to include more than 20,000 people.

Last June, the government launched a dlr 66 million program to train and find jobs for thousands of citizens.

Bahraini opposition calls for more freedoms

On 20 January 2002, Reuters filed the following report by Abbas Salman:

A year ago Hassan Mushaimea was languishing in a Bahrain jail for his dissident activities and Mansoor al-Jamri was in exile, working as a spokesman for an opposition group.

Now the two Shi'ite Muslims are back in the fold in Bahrain, openly involved in political discussions of sensitive issues -- a rare phenomenon in the conservative Gulf region.

Bahrain was shaken by four years of anti-government unrest in the 1990s when the Shi'ite majority demanded reforms and jobs from the Sunni Muslim-led government. Landmark reforms launched by the emir have transformed it tangibly.

Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, who took power in 1999 on the death of his father, pledged last year to give his people a bigger role in running the island state. In a bid to unify the country he pardoned hundreds of political prisoners, allowed exiles to return and abol-

"There is keenness to make the necessary liberalisation on the political and economic levels," a Western diplomat said. "Security fears are something of the past in Bahrain."

Jamri, Mushaimea and activist Abdel-Rahman al-Noaimi, who has returned after 30 years in exile, held a debate in a local club this month about the planned revival of municipal elections. Around 1,000 people attended.

"Since the emir launched the reforms, Bahrainis are allowed to express their opinions about important issues freely through seminars and councils," said Mushaimea, who was freed under the emir's pardon last year after five years in prison. Bahrain has pledged to revive municipal elections this year, in which women will have the right to vote and stand as candidates. It is the first solid step taken towards the pledged reforms.

The former British protectorate had municipal elections from the 1920s until they were suspended in the 1960s. The councils have since been appointed by

More Lively Press

"We can look forward to the municipal elections with confidence. They will confirm the soundness of Bahrain's emerging democracy and will provide a good test run for national elections," said British ambassador Peter William Ford. "The emergence of associations, the more lively media and the obvious independence of the judiciary are all healthy signs," he added. This month, a court reversed an Information Ministry ban on an outspoken local journalist for inciting sectarian strife in the Gulf Arab state, where many reporters observe self-censorship. Bahrain, which has a population of 650,000, has licensed two new pro-reform newspapers since December. One is being set up by Jamri, who returned last year after 15 years of self-exile.

"The emir has undertaken daring steps in the past 12 months, transforming Bahrain into a much more civilised country," said 40-year-old Jamri.

He was one of a dozen activists who in 1982 founded the London-based

Who is behind the "Free Visa" illegal practice?

The presence in Bahrain of thousands of illegal foreign workers, popularly known as "free visa" is certainly a matter of shame for the government, partly because they add to the unemployment problem facing hundreds of nationals. Those on free visa status are free to seek any employment, as their visas do not restrict them to specific jobs, hence the term.

Strangely enough, the authorities have not clearly made up their mind with respect to the very existence of the free visa practice. In a recent remark, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the prime minister, claimed that there is no such free visa problem in Bahrain. Instead, he blamed the media for creating such an episode. The premier's comments followed a statement by Abdul Nabi al-Shula, minister of labour and social affairs, which put the number of foreign nationals on free visa status at 20,000. But other observers estimate the figure twice that suggested by Mr Al-Shula. Free visa holders come mostly from Asian states such places as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and some African nations such as Ethiopia.

The free visa issue is wrong on several fronts. First, it causes disruption to the job market. The case is peculiar since joblessness exists amongst hundreds of Bahrainis who are actively seeking employment. The jobless include males and females with degrees, skilled and semi-skilled. As of 2001, expatriates were making some 63% of the labour force, and possibly more since those on free visa are not accounted for properly by official estimates. Nationals already constitute the minority of the work force in their own country and the presence of illegal workers only adds to the unemployment problem. Second, the matter allows some individuals to profiteer from the business of dealing with human beings. It is widely believed that persons with influence in the government obtain visas or No Objection Certificates that entitle them to import foreign nationals for open-ended employment. These people who profiteer from the business include members of the royal family, government offi-

those who are well connected with labour ministry authorities. Some influential people reportedly sponsor tens of free visa workers, a practice that guarantees them a stable source of income.

In many respects, these expatriates are treated as slaves. For example, the sponsors require that the workers pay them monthly or quarterly payments in return for the right to work in Bahrain. In order to arrange for the payment of their masters, these workers are forced to accept any sort of job. There are cases of expatriates working very long hours; twelve hours everyday seven days a week. Worse yet, at times some workers accept relatively dangerous jobs, by pretending to be fit to work as electricians. In other situations, some of these workers end borrowing money from others, thus entering into debt. In doing so, they largely accept paying extremely high interest rates, sometimes up to 50% per annum. Occasionally, newspapers publish reports of foreign workers committing suicide for failing to meet their financial obligations. The favourite suicide act involves hanging via the ceiling fan.

The inhumane practices do not end there. In order to live within tight budgets, expatriate workers are forced to take up residence in overcrowded premises; in many cases, more than ten of them sharing one room with limited sanitary facilities.

The practice is an open invitation for the spread of sickness amongst this category of expatriates. Undoubtedly, the government is then forced to offer medical care to these foreign workers, something that adds strains to public services originally designed for needy locals. To ensure compliance with payment rules, sponsors keep passports of free visa holders, a practice that is in contrast with basic international human rights standards. In desperate cases, some of these expatriates commit acts of crime in order to generate money to buy their freedom and travel to their home countries. Likewise, there are cases of female free visa workers engaging in extramarital affairs or prostitution so as to earn money to pay off their sponsors. This in turn causes the spread of corruption in the society, and provides illegal alternative

cruel practices take place when employers delay payment or salaries of free visa holders for up to six months. Since they are illegal workers anyway, these expatriates do not register complaints at the ministry of labour for fear of being subjected to measures, which include deportation.

Businesses often receive calls for employment from these free visa workers who tend to accept payment for jobs below the going market rates. Undoubtedly, the very presence of thousands of free visa workers willing to accept low compensation for working long hours produce negative consequences for employment of Bahrain nationals. In turn, this has served as one reason behind the low salary situation in Bahrain. By increasing supply while demand remaining stable, prices (in this case salaries) naturally drop. Today, low salaries are among the most difficult problems facing a large number of Bahraini workers. Certainly, no healthy economy could allow such practices. In fact, even the most open economies, including the American, restrict entry of foreign nationals, where visas prohibit accepting employment, while violators bear the consequences, which include deportation.

The presence of free visa foreign workers is definitely a clear sign of corruption in the economic system. The fact that these free visa workers openly accept jobs without fear of reprisals from the authorities reflect the fact that the sponsors tend to be highly placed individuals such as members of the royal family or senior government officials. Despite the high costs associated with free visa holders, the question remains: why the authorities have ignored this problem for years? The authorities are duty-bound to address this matter urgently and punish against those who have been business profiteering the of made their business by trading in human beings.

Meanwhile, the economic difficulties of the citizens have continued unabated. This is a worrying sign to everyone. Instability is often associated with economic deprivation and a bad economic regime is often the cause of this