

# BAHRAIN

*Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" for promoting Human and Constitutional Rights*

## Beyond the War threats: What about democracy?

The grim political atmosphere in the Gulf is a reflection of several disappointments. First the growing anxiety over the impending war against Iraq. Second, the lack of harmony among the governments of the countries comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council and the deepening mistrust among its leading families. Third, the economic stagnation as the prices of oil remain much lower than their real values. Lastly is the absence of a real political openness and the lack of reform of the ruling political systems.

As the war against Iraq draws nearer despite the indecisive report presented by the Hans Blix, the Chief Arms Inspector, to the United Nations Security Council, the emotions become even more tempered. The next few weeks are likely to witness more apprehension by the people as they see their rulers effectively contributing to the aggression against Iraq. They view their rulers' earlier support to Saddam Hussain in the eighties as a factor in enforcing the dictatorship in Iraq, and consequently, to the present crisis. The lack of unity among the GCC states has led to individual approaches by each of them to issues of great importance such as defence and political alliances, thus weakening their possible collective resolve and impact on the policies of the world powers. Finally, the connivance of these governments in the aggression by providing military facilities to the Americans and the British is another factor contributing to the state of despair among the people. While condemning the policies of Saddam Hussain and his oppression against his people and his neighbours, the people are not in favour of a military intervention that could only lead to further fragmentation of the Arab position at a time when the Israelis are committing their crimes against the Palestinian people. Anti-American feelings are running high and in some countries, like Bahrain, there have been some open protests. In others, people's feelings are expressed in the media or in public meetings.

The lack of unity among the GCC states is another factor contributing to the grim situation. This fragmentation is now visible in many areas and is despised by the people. It was openly expressed in the boycott by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain of the annual summit which was held in Doha, the capital of Qatar. The two governments wanted to express their unease at the open nature of the Qatari satellite station, Al Jazeera which has antagonised them by its neutral coverage of events in their countries. The boycott of the summit by Saudi Arabia is particularly significant. It enforces the opinion that Riyadh is abandoning the GCC which was created twenty years ago as a manifestation of the Saudi political dominance in the heydays of the economic boom. The Government of Qatar was infuriated by the boycott and could retaliate in time. The Government of Bahrain has never enjoyed good relations with the Qatari government due to historical reasons related to territorial and political claims.

A third factor contributing to the grim situation is the downward trend of the economies of the region. This is partly due to the low oil prices due to overproduction dictated by the United

States. Low oil prices are necessary to stop the recession that is gripping the western economies. The 11 September events, the war against Afghanistan, the global war on terror and the proposed war against Iraq have led to uncertainty in the economic markets and reduced the possibility of a quick fix for the over-stretched world economies. The Gulf region, in particular has been hit hard by the low oil prices and new economic realities are forcing a rethink of the strategies adopted by the governments of the region. The US is blackmailing the tribal governments of the Gulf into submission in return for continued US support of their weakening grip on the situation in their countries. The financial reserves of these countries have been dwindling over the past decade with vast amounts of cash going to the financing of America's war. The expanding population of the Gulf states is putting great pressures on the economies while the leaders continue their lavish lifestyles and the policy of exclusion of people from decision-making process.

The internal political situation presents one of the most difficult and complicated challenges to the ruling families of the GCC states. For decades, the situation has remained stagnant while international and domestic developments were ignored by the rulers. Despite calls to open up the political systems and introduce a degree of democratisation, the tribal regimes remained outside the bounds of the civilised world in terms of political participation by their people. Even those which claimed to have introduced some reforms, like Bahrain, failed to institutionalise democratic practices, and continued with their authoritarian rule. Instead of using the oil revenues to push forward development plans and create stable economies, the rulers used the oil revenues on extravaganzas and deceptive media campaigns. While most of them have acquiesced to the American war plans in Iraq, they have been lobbying against fundamental changes in the Baghdad's regime, especially against the introduction of real democracy in Iraq. Such a change in the strongest Arab country in the Gulf region is viewed as catastrophic to the existing tribal rule and is certainly not in line with the thinking of these rulers. Democratisation has remained a far-fetched mirage to the people whose eagerness to civility and modern governance has been confronted by repression. Their anger against the outside forces such as the United States stems from the belief that these forces are not interested to promote democracy in the Gulf region whose rulers are subservient to them, and that oil is the single most important commodity being provided by these rulers on the terms and the conditions set up by these forces. Saddam Hussain has never been a democrat and the West has chosen to ignore the plight of the Iraqi people so as to protect the regime. It is only when the West starts to address the real concerns of the people of this region that a degree of trust may emerge. Although the eleventh hour is approaching fast, the US is still unable to champion the cause of democracy and human rights not only in the GCC states, but in Iraq also. It is difficult to imagine how security and stability may be maintained if these basic demands are not fulfilled.

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## Flaifel banned from Australia

*Chris Griffith, legal affairs reporter  
The Courier Mail  
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A SENIOR Bahrain intelligence officer who spent \$100 million buying buildings in the Brisbane CBD and coastal development projects has been barred from re-entering Australia. Former colonel Adel Jassim Felaifel is unlikely ever to be allowed back in Australia after a Department of Immigration decision to reject his application for permanent residency as a business migrant, a senior source said yesterday.

Mr Felaifel hit the headlines last year when he settled in Brisbane after fleeing his native Bahrain, where he is accused of embezzlement, fraud, and of being responsible for the torture of Shi'ite political prisoners. Felaifel was Bahrain's deputy head of intelligence. In Brisbane he became the owner of four prestigious CBD buildings, including the State Government's historic

former Family Services building in George St, bought land for resorts developments up and down the coast, and lived in a luxury River Place apartment overlooking the Brisbane River.

While in Brisbane last year Felaifel negotiated settlements in two civil cases involving claims of \$59.5 million and \$3.8 million launched in the Brisbane Supreme Court by four Middle-East businessmen who accused him of embezzlement and fraud. The problems in Australia facing Felaifel, who denied the fraud claims, appeared to be abating.

But Felaifel landed himself in deeper water when in November last year he returned to Bahrain to appear before a court as a party to some financial disputes. The King had issued a decree offering amnesty to police officers accused of past human rights abuses. But the decree did not save Felaifel entirely. He was the subject of mass civil rights protests in Bahrain and was arrested over allegations of misuse of authority and is

now barred from leaving Bahrain. The refusal of his Australian visa means that if he were permitted to leave Bahrain, he could not return here. Now his Queensland property empire is being sold off.

A consortium of private investors bought 371 Queen St in an off-market deal, while 100 Eagle St was recently put under contract by companies associated with businesswoman Sarina Russo. She is believed to have offered \$10 million for the building. Felaifel's love nest at River Place which he shared with Brisbane girlfriend, former Gulf Air stewardess Anne Cherie Windsor, last month sold for \$380,000. Lord Eric Avebury, the deputy chairman of Britain's parliamentary human rights group, who asked the Australian Government to try Felaifel for torture under international law, last month visited Bahrain at the invitation of civil rights groups and held talks with government officials there.

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## Government incompetence exposed by Exhibition Road events

The Exhibition Avenue New Year events have many dimensions that indicate the true animosity with which the regime approaches the people of Bahrain. The events developed to an alarming degree despite the presence of the security forces in the vicinity of the area. Eye witnesses insist that there was an unprecedented number of security forces in the area soon after the sunset. These forces did not

take proper action to control the situation before it developed further to inflict harm on individuals and private properties along the avenue.

A number of people also made several telephone calls to the nearby police station. The callers were either told that a police force would come to the site or that the police had no instructions to interfere into the situation. The official media attempted to impli-

cate the opposition groups and figures in the incident. Many of the leading articles and editorials directly or indirectly accused the opposition of undermining the relative stability of the country and instigating the events. It was not a surprise to observers that a government-controlled media makes such accusations even before any inquiry is made to explore the dimensions of the events and their real causes.

The interrogation of those arrested also raises suspicion. A number of the detainees confirmed that they were questioned about issues that are not relevant to the events of the Exhibition Avenue. They were interrogated about their relationships with previous political detainees, their views of the return of the notorious torturer Adel Falifel and their sectarian affiliation. The subsequent attempts by the government to organise a demonstration in Muharraq to denounce the events and accuse some opposition figures was foiled by the awareness of the people.

Some pro-government politicians and old guard officials have called for a stronger grip to be imposed, thus pav

### 14th February: A sad day

That ever-memorable day, the fourteenth of February, is the date of an unhappy war on the people's constitutional rights. It is the day when in 2002 the government of Bahrain aimed to enslave the people. A new constitution was established with restricted political rights and liberties.

The people of Bahrain were shocked to see the new laws to be founded on the basis of pure political interests rather than principles. The demands have not changed for the past thirty years. A proper, free and democratic state, governed by honest and wise leadership. Democracy cannot be obtained without real empowered parliament. Freedom and equity cannot be

achieved if the roots of corruption are still given power to rule the country. The prime minister must resign and apologize to the people of Bahrain for his abuse of constitutional powers.

When the people endorsed the National Charter in 2001, they did so only after they were given written guarantees that the 1973 Constitution would be respected and would have superiority over the Charter. These promises were given by Sheikh Hamad himself, the heir apparent and the minister of justice. These promises were later revoked when Sheikh Hamad imposed his new code to suit his ambitions and those of his family. The Charter has thus become null and void.

*Continued Page 3*

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## Opinion: Bahrain: A brawl begets a backlash

The year 2003 did not start auspiciously for Bahrain or its king, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa. New Year's Eve witnessed what local media described as "the most serious riots in the country" since the launch of political reforms by Sheikh Hamad after he assumed power in March 1999. Within a couple of hours, some 800 police were called out to deal with an estimated 1,000 youths who had congregated either as rioters or spectators. Eyewitnesses reported the whole thing started as a brawl among loitering small bands of youths, and could have been contained by the small police force that was present.

The police managed to restore order and arrested a number of youngsters. When the authorities released the identities of the first batch of 40 alleged "saboteurs," some of whom were from Saudi Arabia and Oman, it became clear that all were under 25 years old and some were as young as 15. It was also understood that more arrests would be made with the help of pictures taken of the unmasked agitated youth by TV cameras and media photographers. The entire affair could have ended there and then. But it did not. The Interior Ministry announced a "generous reward" for information leading to the arrest and conviction of

those who took part in the riots. It also set up a special office to receive tip-offs from the public that might assist police inquiries.

An op-ed in Manama's Gulf Daily News told of rumors that "the riots were initiated by political groups unhappy with the reforms in Bahrain and which apparently see destruction as the quickest route to change." This theme was echoed by a number of commentators in the government-controlled media. One voiced dismay that this is the gratitude the country's leadership gets for "its willingness to listen" and for its promise "to walk the road of change in partnership with the people, but at a measured pace." Another urged readers to learn from "the Brixton tragedy in London and the Rodney King rioting in Los Angeles," proclaiming "law and order cannot and will not be held to ransom by a few trying to destroy the civilized fabric and economic structure" of Bahrain.

Only a day after the riots, Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman branded those involved "saboteurs" and warned they would face the full force of the law, as there is "no place for such people in Bahraini society." Interior Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa bin Hamad, who has held his portfolio since 1973, raised the stakes further by declaring the youngsters' behavior "a crime against the nation and its people." The riots, he said, were organized and deliberate acts by people intent on causing "chaos and harm to the security and stability which the country enjoys."

Such attitudes were echoed by several senior members of the ruling family known for their conservative and anti-reform views, and by a number of local media commentators who decried lawlessness among the population, the laxity of the authorities, and the absence of pre-emptive measures. Some even blamed the riots on the abrogation of the state security law by Sheikh Hamad before he declared himself king in February last year.

Human rights groups were sufficiently alarmed to appeal to the authorities to "handle the issue with wisdom and transparency," and not allow the riots to have a negative impact on democratic reforms or provoke "measures that would undermine human rights" and the gains made by the Bahraini people under the reform program.

Opposition groups were also quick to dissociate themselves from the New

Year's Eve brawls, while calling for the root causes of the disturbances and the underlying social conditions to be investigated. Some demanded action to deal with the acute problems felt by young Bahrainis, including unemployment (which currently stands at 15 percent), discrimination, poverty, powerlessness and the lack of meaningful organized activities beyond football.

Like the rest of the Arab region, Bahrain is a young country, with nearly half its native population under 21. Yet the government agency responsible for youth affairs is allocated less than 5 million Bahraini dinars (\$ 18 .75 million) annually from a total budget of 675 million dinars (while combined defense and security expenditure exceeded 231 million dinars, or 34 percent of the state budget, in 2002).

While his uncle and cousins were promising crackdowns and accusing opposition groups of instigating the "riots," Sheikh Hamad was left with the task of mopping up the mess.

First, he flew to Riyadh, where he publicly apologized to King Fahd, Crown Prince Abdullah and the Saudi people for the distress caused to those Saudis caught up in the New Year rioting in Bahrain. Second, he ordered the government to compensate victims for their losses, reversing an earlier decision. More significantly, he sought to put an end to speculation that the riots were organized by political opposition groups or had a sectarian character. He wisely commanded "all concerned" not to inflate the New Year's Eve disturbances into more than what they were.

For all the prudence shown by Sheikh Hamad, the aftermath of that noisy Dec. 31 has shown Bahrainis how fragile the political reform process is, and how fractious the relationship between his camp within the ruling family and that of his uncle, the prime minister. Their two-year-old co-habitation is becoming counterproductive, even dangerous. The king may have saved the day for now, but Sheikh Khalifa, with over 30 years' experience at the helm, can show him and his supporters that introducing political reforms is not just a matter of will.

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*Continued from Page 2*

ing the way for the return of the notorious state security law. There are numerous indications of the role the ministry of interior played in creating a suitable environment for these incidents by relaxing the security situation and allowing the events to get worse. The ministry of interior bears the full responsibility what happened during the New Year's Eve. The media should have realized that their premature judgment, sectarian approach and unfounded accusations of the political groups are totally rejected by all figures and groups in Bahrain.

The government failed to shoulder the blame for its incompetence on others. It has failed to get down to the roots of the problems and address the real issues behind such events rather than view them from a security perspective only. The old guards are playing with fire as they see their fortunes waning. They have failed this time as they have done before. God is with the people of this troubled country.

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# Who is ruling Bahrain?

## The king and his son or the prime minister?

It is widely believed that there are at least two governments in Bahrain. King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and prime minister Khalifa bin Salman have their own separate administrations, agendas and groups. Individuals close to the king's court refer to the cabinet of Sheikh Khalifa as the Manama government. Certainly then the Riffa (to the south of the capital) is the government controlled by the king. This article provides several cases to support the claim of the presence of a two-government system in Bahrain with different goals, all of which are damaging to the country.

### New Year's disturbances

Celebrations of the New Year in Bahrain made headline at least in the Gulf region, but not for a good reason. Partying, primarily by teenagers in the fashionable Exhibition Avenue in Manama, turned into violence. The youths assaulted some forty cars, mostly carrying Saudi license plates. Sheikh Khalifa's seized the incidence to depict a negative image of the opposition at large. Newspaper columnists associated with Sheikh Khalifa considered the development a turning point in Bahrain's history, which must be faced with steadfastness. Writes like Hafedh al-Sheikh and Abdul-Monem Ibrahim lashed at the opposition notably al-Wefaq society, the main opposition group. It has been from the onset that Islamists were not involved in the Exhibition Avenue fiasco, as some of the rioters were intoxicated. In one ugly incidence, rioters forced a Filipino lady to become topless.

Yet, some two weeks after the incident, the king requested that newspapers stop their comments about the incident. The king considered what has happened at the Exhibition Avenue as a passing summer cloud. Clearly, Sheikh Khalifa was not impressed with the king's comments. From his vacation spot in Thailand, Sheikh Khalifa ordered an investigation into the matter. In fact, the General Organisation for Youths and Sports (GOYS), both of which are governmental entities, signed an agreement with Bahrain Centre for Studies and Research. The accord

calls on the research body to carry out a four-month research into the Exhibition Avenue matter. Cost of the deal was not disclosed to the public, which is against a government promise of having transparency. The research body was expected to bring in international consultants to help it carry out the assignment. What is funny about the matter is that Sheikh Fawaz bin Mohammed al-Khalifa and Dr. Mohammed al-Ghattam signed the accord for GOYS and the research institute, respectively, are least appreciative of research efforts. Sheikh Fawaz is the son of the hard-line interior minister. He has placed restrictions on sports clubs with regards to hosting political functions. GOYS forced al-Ahli sports club to cancel an agreement to host the first conference of al-Wefaq society in January 2003. Dr al-Ghattam, former education and president of the University of Bahrain had developed a tendency of undermining research. During his rein at the University of Bahrain that lasted for a few years in the 1990s, Dr al-Ghattam has not been known for encouraging independent academic research.

### Unemployment rate

In January 2003, crown prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa openly declared jobless rate of 15%. Sheikh Salman made the extraordinary admission at a time when Sheikh Khalifa was away in Asia. Sheikh Salman made the comment while hosting a meeting dealing with challenges facing economic development in Bahrain. Strangely enough, Sheikh Salman has been holding this meeting in his palace in Riffa rather than in Manama.

The ministry of labour & social affairs, which is controlled by Sheikh Khalifa, puts the unemployment at less than 6%, a marked contrast to the figure released by the crown prince.

Within the same context, Sheikh Salman has been shunning the weekly meeting since the cabinet reshuffles in November 2002. In the past, the press has been picturing Sheikh Salman sitting next to Sheikh Khalifa during the gathering. It is suggested that Sheikh Salman's unexplained absence is related to the latest govern-

mental change. Apparently, Sheikh Salman has been hoping for a more radical change of the cabinet, and that he wanted to see the departure of veteran ministers of interior and foreign affairs. It is suggested that Sheikh Salman has even promised some loyalists of ministerial jobs. Thus, his absence reflects his displeasure of a cabinet controlled by Sheikh Khalifa, who has been retaining the job since independence in 1971.

### Meeting with NGOs

In late January 2003, while Sheikh Khalifa was away, King Hamad invited lead leaders of the political societies to his palace in the Riffa area. The king urged heads of the political societies to engage in public issues. In a reference to government held by Sheikh Khalifa, the King called on the societies to help disclose cases of misuse of public funds. Sheikh Khalifa has developed the habit of courting members of the appointed Shura (Consultative) Council. The main political societies boycotted the October elections in order to protest changes made to the 1973 constitution that granted the appointed Shura council legislative rights on par with the elected body. The unilateral amendments were made in February 2002.

### War on Iraq

Sheikh Khalifa has gone on record censuring plans for military action Iraq. Sheikh Khalifa is a friend of the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein—the two men had met frequently in Baghdad in the 1980s. Sheikh Khalifa has traditionally considered Saddam Hussein as his model. For king Hamad, the model has always been the late king Hussein of Jordan. For their part the king and his crown prince are known to be supportive of a US-led military action against Iraq, at least privately and during their talks with American officials. The king was expected to lend support to the US war effort against Iraq during a visit to Washington in February. Bahrain serves as home for the US's Fifth Fleet, and is very unlikely to oppose American request for use of the facility.