

BAHRAIN

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

War is rejected, real democracy is demanded

Despite the unanimous popular verdict against the war in the Arab world, there are great expectations and hopes that an improved political environment would follow. The Arab world has long suffered from dictatorship and despotism that have led to the eminence of regimes like that of Saddam Hussain's, and it is time that more representative governments emerged from the ashes of war. If this is achieved, then some good would have resulted from an ugly political reality of fighting. Within the Gulf region, both governments and people are anxious for the conflict to end peacefully. The Governments have been less forthcoming in their condemnation of the war efforts initiated by the United States and Britain. On the contrary, they have made their lands available to the American and British forces and are likely to finance war efforts. It is expected that air, land and sea bases in the Gulf countries will be heavily used in the war against Iraq with the hope that the ruling tribal regimes will be spared the need to change and adapt to the international norms on democracy, openness and human rights. The extent of the anticipated change will depend on many factors; the popular movements in these countries, the extent of change in Iraq and the truthfulness of the US to its proclaimed motto for a "democratic partnership" with the world.

The Gulf states governments have been instrumental in the making of Saddam's power and intransigence. They supported him in his war against Iran, offering him financial, military and political assistance, in the same way the Americans and the British did. The ruling tribes have adopted similar political systems, at a lesser scale of severity and oppression than the one that reigned in Baghdad. Today, they view the American war and its aims with suspicious eyes. After Saddam's debacle in Kuwait, he became a spent force, able to exercise power over the powerless people of Iraq, while being restrained by international political and military pressures. The inspection regime has been a source of unease in Baghdad, while the international community sought to stave off the American threats to wage war against Iraq. The weakness of the Gulf rulers has been exposed to a great extent, their disunity becoming even more apparent during the last summit in Doha which was boycotted by the Saudi and Bahraini monarchs. They are less able to influence both the American belligerency and the outcome of the war. In fact, they are now facing the prospect of humiliating demands from the international community to open up and modernise. The least the Iraqi people expect from the war is a positive change in their political situation leading to a more democratic and pluralistic society. Much depends on themselves, their ability to work with each other and their resolve to achieve a democratic transformation. The Americans, on the other hand, will have difficult decisions to make especially on the issue of

democracy, not only in Iraq, but in the region in general. Reforming the ancient political regimes of the Gulf is of paramount importance both to the people of the Gulf and the international community.

For the past eighty years, the British have defended minority rule in Iraq and the Gulf states. Now it has become clear that this policy should come to an end. A move towards democracy in Iraq must be based on "one man one vote" basis. The minority rule in South Africa was supported by the West especially Britain, but the Apartheid regime could not be sustained indefinitely. The regime in Baghdad has become a liability to the West, and Britain which ruled Iraq was instrumental in propping up the minority rule. The downfall of this regime will herald a wind of change that will sweep the whole region. The British also propped up minority rule in Bahrain, whose ruler had anticipated the eventual need to change and rushed to change the demography of the country. Instead of effecting a real democratic transformation, Sheikh Hamad has sought to change the reality by offering Bahraini nationality to tens of thousands of non-Bahrainis in order to tilt the balance in his favour. That must be resisted both by the people of Bahrain and the international community. If the Americans are serious in changing the government in Baghdad they have to appear more even-handedly, call for real democracy in the Gulf states and oppose dictatorships and totalitarian systems ruling in the Gulf. Minority rule must be brought to an end and modern form of government based on "one man one vote" basis be established. That will be the real test of the seriousness of those purporting to defend democracy and human rights.

The war, if carried out without United Nations approval, would be morally and politically wrong. If it is launched with a UN mandate, it may lead to a regime change in Baghdad with less opposition from the rest of the world. Saddam Hussain has no real friends either in the region or in the world. Opposition to the war must not be seen as a support of the Ba'athist regime. It is due to the double standards of the US policies, its selectivity and lack of credibility especially in terms of human rights and democracy. However, if it led to the downfall of Saddam Hussain and his regime, and the establishment of a democratic system in Iraq a new era would have dawned on the region. If the US abandons its principles and continues its long-established policy of supporting dictatorship and military rule, it will have betrayed its principles, the people and the world. If democracy, pluralism and the rule of law is established in Iraq and the Gulf, some good will have emerged from the ashes of war. If, however, Washington shows a flagrant disregard to peoples sufferings and lack of democratic and human rights, and stronger keenness on oil and other selfish interests, the world will have entered an era of evil, bigotry and transgression.

Debt is Bahrain's new economic problem

Debt could emerge as Bahrain's most challenging economic problems in the years ahead. As it is the case with unemployment, the most daunting economic malaise, the growing debt problem can be attributed to economic mismanagement. In January, crown prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa publicly acknowledged presence of 15% jobless rate.

A story goes that in early 2002, Bahrain's ruler, king Hamad bin Salman Al-Khalifa has told officials from the ministry of finance & national economy that Bahrain's debt level is too low compared to regional countries. With a debt level of around 35% or so, the king felt that Bahrain has the opportunity to increase outstanding loans. True, debt level represents nearly 100% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. But it is not fair to compare Bahrain with these two Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia has sufficient oil to generate economic wealth. Qatar has a developed gas industry, which serves a caution.

Bahrain lacks resources of strategic significance to provide support at times of economic crisis. In fact, Bahrain's proven crude reserve is projected to last until 2015 unless new reserves of commercial quantity are found. Worse yet, Bahrain has deep rooted political problems that remain unresolved that affect the country's economic prospects. The opposition has boycotted the parliamentary elections staged in October 2002 on the grounds that the ruler unilaterally amended the country's constitution in February 2002 by granting legislative rights to the appointed consultative council.

Rising debt

Bahrain's total debt amounted to US\$2.81bn in 1999. This represented 41% of the GDP. It is estimated the debt reached \$3.37bn or 45% of the GDP in 2002. The debt is projected to increase sharply to \$5.76bn in 2003, representing 68% of the GDP and still higher at \$6.2bn in 2004 comprising 75% of the GDP.

Bahrain's debt level increased substantially over the last few months alone. Last summer, the government mandated six regional and international banks to arrange for a \$600m facility. Then at the start of 2003, BNP Paribas and Schroder Salmon Smith Barney, an affiliate of Citibank, jointly arranged for a \$500m bond. The Eurubond, the first sovereign bond for Bahrain, was

issued on 24th January and mature on 24th January 2008, offering a yield of 4.154%.

The government has proven its ill intention in the way the \$500m was presented to the so-called National Assembly. The assembly consists of the elected chamber of deputies and the appointed Shura council. Strangely enough, the appointed has equal legislative rights with the appointed this very point proved unpopular with the opposition and led to boycott the parliamentary elections in late last year. Suffice to say, the government urged the chamber of deputies or parliament to vote on the facility on February 4th, or some ten days after issuing the bond. Clearly, there was no connection between obtaining the fund and the parliamentary vote. However, much to the dismay of the regime, the parliament voted down the motion. Most members complained of not having sufficient time to study the matter and of lack of details and economic studies on usage of the fund. Still, others with more Islamic tendencies were displeased with the government for not employing the services of Islamic financial houses in emerging the facility. Bahrain is home to Islamic banking—some 24 Islamic financial institutions operate in the country.

Of the \$500m some \$200m was allocated for the construction of the new Formula One racing track south of Mamma. Also, \$85m was meant to finance an ambiguous resort town in the Seef district of Manama. Islamists, who control the elected chamber considered these two projects as potential sources for arrival of prostitutes in Bahrain. However, the authorities were displeased with the parliamentary vote. Then the government turned to the Shura council, whose members were appointed by the king. The coun-

cil proved loyal and served its purpose by unanimously voting in favor of the \$500m bond. The matter became talk of the town that not even a single member voted against the measure. The legislative piece was then returned to the parliament for a second round of voting and eventual approval.

Bahrain is overrated

Positive ratings from leading international rating agencies provided the means for the authorities to rush for obtaining facilities. For example, in July 2002, Standard & Poor's assigned "A" for Bahrain's long-term local currency rating, "A-2" for its short-term foreign currency and "A-1" for the short-term local currency debt. S&P partly attributed its ratings to reflect Bahrain's relatively low debt burden. However, the unreasonably high rating bestowed on Bahrain shocked many observers. The rating puts Bahrain on par with Qatar. S&P has ratings of BBB and A+ for Oman and Kuwait, respectively. This marked the first time S&P had rated Bahrain, and maybe the company wanted to be nice to its new client. It is suggested that S&P earned some \$80,000 for rating Bahrain. It remains to be seen whether the overrating of Bahrain would convince Saudi Arabia and the UAE to ask being rated by S&P.

Trouble is that Bahrain used the rating as a means to accumulate loans. Clearly then, S&P rating does not reflect the risk that Bahrain represents with the added debt. Clearly, the government benefited from the excellent rating together with low interest rates prevailing in the world to take more debt. One main problem with piling up debt is that it causes problems for future generations. Thus, the future generations might have to accept austerity measures for decisions that others have taken.

Certainly, the government has to pay interest on the debt. Interest on debt is estimated to have amounted to nearly \$100m in 2002 but projected to rise to more than \$200m in 2003 and nearly \$300m in 2004. Also, the government must repay the principal amount.

Accumulating debt is a risky matter. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) one lesson learned from Argentina's financial crisis is that countries should avoid letting the debt level get out of control.

Irrelevant window dressing

As the elected part of the Shura Council became more irrelevant, calls have been made for its members to resign. Mr Abdul Wahab Hussain, the charismatic political figure, issued a call for them to identify with the general mood of the people by abandoning the king's council, declare their opposition to his constitution and clear their conscience. Since its inception, the king's legislature has been undermined by both the government and the king who conducted their affairs ignoring the existence of any other authority.

Bahrain: Government unwilling to tackle unemployment

Justice and security in any country have their manifestations, and so does their absence. The citizens of Bahrain expect a comprehensive approach to the realisation of their rights. Economic rights represent a crucial factor of stability and justice.

Economic rights relate to the housing needs, employment, minimum pay and others. It is unfortunate that these elements have been, and still are the major cause of suffering and misery. The absence of a deep rooted strategy to resolve such issues further exacerbate the problem. The actions by the government are short-sighted and incomprehensive.

So far, little has been done in regards to the unemployed chemical engineers who have graduated locally and from other international universities. Despite the vacancies in major institutions in the country, these graduate engineers remain on an indefinite waiting list, with little known of what the future holds for them.

The persistence of the other un

employed citizens to demonstrate daily in front of the Ministry of Labour is motivated by the apparent reluctance of the government to seriously look into their problems.

The present magnitude of the problem of poverty, as caused by high unemployment, low basic pay, sectarian policies in recruitment and promotions and unbalanced expenditure of public money has characterised certain areas of the country with acute poverty and underdevelopment. While these are the remains of the old system, the same policies are being practiced by this government, which give no hope for the removal of the agony.

Combating poverty and unemployment requires long term planning and serious policies that consider the citizens the centre of concern. For now, poverty remains a daily companion to many citizens and many areas of Bahrain continue to be deprived of basic services. The government can only prove the contrary to this if it introduces a positive change in its policies of recruitment, expenditure of public money and a fair response to the thousands of unemployed demonstrating daily for their rights.

The Right to Form Unions

Since the issuing of the decree that legitimizes the formation of unions in Bahrain, employees of a number of private and public sector organizations started to organize themselves in attempts to launch their own unions.

The pace with which the employees of the private and public sector organizations in the country tried to establish these entities is a clear reflection of their awareness of unfair treatment and the need to establish a balance between the authority of employers and the rights and protection of employees. These people feel that their efforts to offer the best productivity need to receive the recognition it deserves from their employers. The recent circular from the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) that prohibits the formation of unions for public sector organizations is in clear violation of international laws and agreements that Bahrain has signed and pledged to adhere to. The international Labour Organisation (ILO) is one such organization that has its declarations and standards for workers rights. These clearly state the freedom of workers to establish their own unions, without having to take permission from anybody. The circular is also in clear violation of the Bahrain Constitution.

The regulations and mandates of these international organizations were developed to offer the required protection for workers and encourage creative and productive work environments.

According to the ILO, decent work means productive work in which rights are protected, which generates an adequate income with adequate social protection. It is through social dialogue that these rights can be achieved and development realized, but the Civil Service Bureau, representing the government seems to be haunted by the state security means and methodologies. The ILO clearly states that Engaging in dialogue, the social partners also fortify democratic governance, building vigorous and resilient labour market institutions that contribute to long-term social and economic stability and peace. It also needs individuals and entities that have the capacity and will to engage in the process responsibly, and the strength and flexibility to adjust to contemporary circumstances and exploit new opportunities.

The ILO further states that the State has an important role in enabling and fostering all forms of social dialogue. It needs to create an affirming environment in which the contributions of employers, workers and other groups are solicited and valued. A precondition for this is respect for freedom of association and facilitation of collective bargaining. It is ironic that the Ministry of Labour granted permission to the employees of the Directorate of Post and was in the process of granting permission to the employees of the Ministry of Labour. The CSB came very late its attempt to deprive employees of government organizations to form their unions. The prevailing culture amongst government officials are far from being compliant with the requirements of the mandates of the ILO or even the decrees they are supposed to implement. However, the public sector employees insist on their right to form their own unions and shall continue their efforts in pursuit of this basic right.

U.S. urged to look for missing Bahrainis before attacking Iraq†

Shereen Bushehri, dpa
German News Agency†
12th February 2003

Manama (dpa) - A group of human rights activists in Bahrain has called on† the United States government to look for eleven Bahraini students missing in Iraq for a decade, before hunting down Iraqi President Saddam HusseinÆ Adel Abbasi, head of the human rights committee at the influential Shiite political society Al Wefaq, told Deutsche Presse-Agentur, dpa that 11† Bahraini students, completing their higher education in Iraq, have been† missing since 1991.

We have not heard from the students since 1991. There is talk that they are alive in Iraqi prisons, however, there is no official confirmation," he† saidÆ
¢We urge the U.S. to look for

prisoners before looking for Saddam and urge† the Iraqi regime to free all prisoners, including Bahrainis before any† attack happens," he added. The human rights activists have already given the missing people's names to†the Red CrescentÆ
¢If they are still alive, this would be a joy to the families. If they are dead we would like to know who killed them and how they were killed," Abbasi saidÆ

These families live in a paradoxical state of mind. They would love to see† their children again, but they also don't want to hear that their children† are being tortured in Iraqi jails for the past 12 years," he added. The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights sent a message to the Bahraini King,† Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, last November, demanding government help in† getting Iraq to disclose the fate of the missing persons.

Is Bahrain's security agency up to old tricks?

On Eid al-Adha, Feb. 11, rumors spread in Bahrain that the National Security Agency had uncovered a dormant Al-Qaeda cell. Journalists were summoned to NSA headquarters where a small arms cache – four AK-47s, two pistols and ammunition – was displayed. Later that day, reporters were instructed to hold the story until the return of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa from a trip overseas.

The dramatic news of the arrest of all five alleged members of a "terrorist cell" was made public three days later. They were detained at dawn by a Special Forces commando unit, which also confiscated laptops, CDs and diskettes. Relatives complained about the behavior of the troops, which was likened to something out of "Arnold Schwarzenegger movies."

An official statement accused the five Bahraini males, aged between 31 and 41, of plotting to commit acts of terrorism and "endanger the lives of innocent people." All local media published their photographs, names and other details.

During a visit to army headquarters on Feb. 17, King Hamad praised the security forces for their vigilance "in protecting national security and the safety and freedom of all citizens in the face of any threat." He also tried to play down the affair. While voicing distress at the idea of Bahrainis being involved in terrorism, he said he hoped the suspects would turn out to be innocent, and described the case as "an isolated incident."

The official announcement of the "smashing of the terrorist ring" quickly set the Bahraini rumor mills buzzing. Some claimed the suspects belonged to a Salafi group and were planning attacks on American military personnel in Bahrain similar to those carried out by like-minded groups in Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet, there is an abundance of highly visible American "soft targets" in Bahrain, where a large part of the entertainment sector, including sex-bars, caters to US servicemen on leave from base stations in Saudi Arabia or US warships in the Gulf.

Talk of a possible link to Al-Qaeda was meanwhile fueled by the release of information that some of the suspects had visited Afghanistan during the 1980s, and one may have joined Arab volunteers in the jihad, or holy war, against Soviet forces.

The families of the accused were clearly shocked by their arrest and the heavy-handedness of the security forces, which was reminiscent of the treatment accorded to Shiite opponents of the regime during the decades before King Hamad began his political reforms two years ago. Human rights activists and the detainees' lawyers urged the authorities not to revert to another old habit of extracting self-incriminating "confessions" by force and intimidation. But this is unlikely to happen.

All five men hail from well-connected families, and are politically related to some fundamentalist members of Parliament. Moreover, local human rights groups are keeping a watchful eye on the case. The Bahrain Human Rights Society has already been given private access to each of the five – a move applauded by rights activists, though they

Highlights

The feelings of despair have been reinforced by the re-appointment by the king of Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman as the prime minister together with at least four other senior ministers who have been in these posts for more than thirty years. The question that is often asked is: If Sheikh Khalifa is responsible for the black era (1975-2001), how could he head a government again if there is a serious intention to reform? How could an evil man become a reformist? Several demonstrations took place last month. The people continued their protests against Law 56 that shields the torturers from prosecution giving them immunity from any judicial process for their crimes of torture against thousands of Bahrainis. The return of the notorious Adel Flaifel from Australia has angered the people who have accused the king and his family of violating international laws and the constitution by their insistence on sheltering the torturers. The unemployed, on their part, have taken to the streets several times demanding jobs.

The government has failed to change its policy of employing foreigners at the expense of the citizens. The prime minister was quick to silence one of his ministers who wanted to tackle the problem. Another demonstration by the families of those convicted for rioting on New Year's eve took place in Manama. The families considered the sentences muted out against their sons harsh and out of proportion while the real perpetrators of the disturbances remain at large.

criticized the authorities for publishing the names and photos of the accused before even presenting them to an examining judge.

Yet in many quarters, the revelation that the NSA had uncovered a sleeper cell generated a familiar sense of skepticism. It sounded suspiciously similar to a number of previous announcements made by Bahrain's various security agencies over the course of the past three decades. Many of the comparable "feats" they proclaimed in the past were baseless, while others were exaggerated to justify the imposition of emergency rule in the island state.

Skeptics were quick to draw comparisons with the government's portrayal of the street brawls that broke out in Bahrain on New Year's Eve as politically motivated riots orchestrated by the opposition. Only nine youngsters, aged 16 to 19, were convicted for taking part in the

disturbances. They received jail terms ranging from one to two years.

Many thought these sentences too harsh, and saw them as a sop to senior officials who played up the seriousness of the incident and opted for an "iron fist" approach to teach the unruly youths a lesson.

They include Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, who while reluctantly going along with the king's reforms, has seen to it that in spite of minor changes, key features of the old regime remain firmly in place.

It is highly likely that the "terrorist cell" may prove to be just another one of the over-exaggerated "security" cases. Indeed, most of the five men may be released, as they are friends and acquaintances of one of the detainees, who allegedly confessed that he bought the AK-47 from a known arms dealer in Saudi Arabia.

If that happens, experienced observers expect the NSA to continue searching for good cases to justify its existence and the burden it puts on the state purse. They believe the head of the NSA, Sheikh Abdulaziz Atiyatullah al-Khalifa, also needs grounds to justify persistent calls for a new security law to replace the one abrogated by King Hamad when he launched his political reforms process.

Until now, the monarch seems either unconvinced, or undecided.

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