

BAHRAIN

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Saddam's downfall: the inevitable end of despots

A new dawn in the region after the downfall of Baghdad's regime. The fall of the Ba'hist regime in Iraq headed by Saddam Hussain has been welcomed by the people of Bahrain, who have supported their Iraqi brothers and sisters in their struggle against the dictatorial regime for the past thirty years. This gigantic event will herald a new era in the region especially if the people grasp the opportunity to air their grievances and struggle to achieve their rights. The governments are putting a brave face on their predicament but their dismay at the toppling of Saddam Hussain could not go undetected. The Baghdad regime offered them a convenient shelter for their outdated political system and human rights violations.

Now the winds of change have blown apart that shelter exposing them to the outside world. The monarchical system in the Gulf states is becoming under close scrutiny, and the removal of Saddam's regime has intensified the pressure for change in line with internationally accepted standards of democracy and human rights. Of particular interest is the situation in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Governments of both countries felt the squeeze of the second Gulf war in Kuwait, and were forced to offer a token of change in the form of Shura Councils. They were attempting to forestall the calls for serious change which made both countries exposed to international condemnation for their ancient regimes. In both countries that gesture failed to fulfil the aspirations of their natives. In the case of Saudi Arabia, a wave of extremism spread among the Wahhabi religious establishment, leading to the rise of Al Qa'eda and the terrible consequences culminating in the events of 11 September 2001.

The calls for modernising the system have persisted while the regime stagnated, considering the Shura Council as the ultimate political solution. The opposition continued against the regime while the Saudi-American relations experienced a cool period due to disagreements on the extent of the American presence on and the use of Saudi soil. Now the pressure is mounting for a fundamental change in the Saudi political system if the lid is to be kept on the boiling political inferno. Whether the ageing leadership will heed the calls for reform and undertake an overhaul of the system remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that the undemocratic system cannot in Saudi Arabia has only two choices; to reform or meet a similar fate to that of Saddam Hussain. The ruling family in Bahrain is also becoming under the international spotlight. After two years of flirting with "political reforms" it has now been exposed as having failed to reform its despotic form of government and that the limited steps it has implemented has not satisfied the majority of the people. There is now a country-wide resentment of the basis of Sheikh Hamad's political programme. The National Charter on which he relied to change the country into a kingdom and concentrate absolute powers in his own hands, is now discredited by many people who question its legal status after Sheikh Hamad, himself, reneged on the promises he had given prior to the referendum of 14 February 2001. There is a growing feeling that his "reform programme" has stalled, and that the old mentality has taken a firm grip on the situation. Sheikh Hamad attempted to reconcile

the irreconcilable. He talked of "democratic" reforms but kept his uncle, the notorious Sheikh Khalifa in his post as prime minister despite the failings of his successive governments since 1971. He is viewed as a Saddam-like despot with no regards for human rights, public funds or political participation. Former pillars of his governments during the black era have retained their positions in the "reforms era". He has opposed any move to give the people the right to participate in forming the government or making important decisions. It was one of the biggest failures of Hamad's era to re-install his uncle at the top of government knowing the bad reputation he had accumulated among the people.

No political reform or stability is possible while pillars of the black era who are implicated in human rights abuses, such as the interior minister and the new head of the security apparatus, Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa, notorious for personally torturing detainees, is possible. On the contrary, corruption, political sectarianism, favouritism and despotism have become landmarks of the new regime. Furthermore, the end of Saddam regime has led to new expectations that a new political system in Iraq based on "One-man-one-vote" basis would emerge. Without it, the promised new dawn of democracy in Iraq could not take place. The people of Bahrain have long called for a more equitable form of government based on equality among citizens in running the affairs of the country. Bahrain has been under minority rule since the Al Khalifa family occupied the island in 1983. This is not conducive to long-term stability, in the same way that the Apartheid regime in either South Africa or Rhodesia failed to create stable situations. The people have called for the reinstatement of 1973 constitution as a minimum requirement for a stable political environment.

The failure of Sheikh Hamad to fulfil their aspirations and his attempts to impose his own constitution have given rise to suspicion and a new dynamism seeking to challenge these policies. Minority rule cannot continue. Sheikh Hamad has sought to counter this reality through his own way; changing the demographic composition of the country. This is perhaps his most cruel policy to date. The people are now aware of the policy of "tajnees" (giving Bahraini nationality to tens of thousands of non-Bahrainis for political purposes) and have called on the relevant international bodies to intervene. They view this policy as a form of cultural genocide. The people are becoming more politically charged as they are met with complete silence from the authorities, and have vowed to challenge these genocidal policies with all peaceful means at their disposals. In the eighties, Saddam Hussain attempted to implement a policy of demographic change in Iraq but the rising casualties among the four millions of Egyptians brought in to facilitate the demographic change defeated the purpose. The situation in the region is developing towards more democracy and observance of human rights. This trend has been enforced by the downfall of Saddam's dictatorship in Iraq. A domino effect in the region may not be discounted if the regimes fail to comprehend the lessons from the downfall of Saddam Hussain and his regime.

Iraq in Turmoil

Iraq, the cradle of civilizations and the land of knowledge, has passed through the most critical of times over the last three decades. Absolute tyranny and repression have resulted in the annihilation of total villages, tens of thousands of extra-judicial killings and executions, continued deprivation of people of the country's wealth and three wars that lead to hundreds of thousands of deaths and destruction of three countries in unprecedented proportions. The Iraqi people have given limitless sacrifices and suffered years or decades in exile. The totalitarian Ba'ath regime in Baghdad was backed by Western countries and Arab States, at least in its war with Iran and the oppression of its people.

The military occupation has left many hundreds dead and inflicted tremendous destruction of the country's infrastructure, thus requiring many billions of dollars in reconstruction work. The country is left without power, drinking water or medicine in many of its parts. Security is another major issue which concerns both the citizens of Iraq and human rights organizations alike. It also makes it difficult for relief and humanitarian work to start in the country.

The rapid deterioration of events in

Iraq has moved the country from total ruthlessness under the old regime into total anarchy and lawlessness under the invading military. The implications and damage of this lawlessness are ramified.

It is surprising that this happens in the presence of the occupying military force, whose only concern was to protect the oil fields. Looters have not spared banks, government buildings, museums and educational establishments, all of which contain important contents and historical artifacts.

The present situation, more than two weeks after the cessation of fighting, does not bring about enough hope of security. The occupying force has begun reinstating a number of figures that have track records of dealings with the deposed regime and the intentions have been made clear that a transitional government lead and administered by key American figures is to be established. In the meantime, the American forces have arrested and interrogated a number of figures from Iraq who have entered Iraq recently. America has also expressed its intention to maintain long term military presence in the country, thereby reinforcing the view that the Anglo-American forces have come as an occupation force rather than a liberation army.

Victims insist on justice

On Thursday 17th April 2003, the National Committee for Martyrs & Victim of Torture held its first General Meeting. The meeting was open for the public and was held in an open air area in Bilad Al Qadeem, a small village suburb of Manama the capital of Bahrain. Bilad Al Qadeem was one of the areas that suffered a lot during the repression era.

The head of the Committee, Sayed Jaffer Al Alawi presented the past activities and achievements of the Committee. He also spoke about the future plans. Among what he said was that in two weeks time, a petition signed by more than 30,000 Bahrainis will be sent to the King of Bahrain.

The petition is calling for compensating the families of martyrs and victims of torture in Bahrain and for banning the Royal Decree 56-2002 which gives an immunity to torturers.

There were many other presentations in the meeting for national figures and a representative of Parliament.

Victims and their families attended the meeting. There was a photo exhibition where pictures of martyrs and victims of torture were exhibited. The attendance was great and very supportive. Many of the attendance singed for joining different sub-committees. There also was a group that sang a nationalistic song for martyrs.

Jubilation at Saddam's downfall

The downfall of Saddam Hussain's regime was greeted with a sigh of relief and happiness by the majority of the Bahraini society. The people of Bahrain have long declared their enmity of the dictatorship that reigned in Baghdad. As early as 1975, following the execution of five religious scholars in Baghdad, they were sharing the agonies inflicted by that regime on their Iraqi brethren living under the torture of Saddam. When Ayatullah Mohammad Baqir Al Sadr and his sister, Bint Al Huda, were executed in April 1980, the people of Bahrain went on demonstrations in Manama, and one young man, Jamil Al Ali, was subsequently tortured to death.

The bloody hands of Sheikh Khalifa was thus stained with another martyr. Some Bahrainis even fought against the invading forces of Saddam Hussain both in Iran and Kuwait. Several were martyred at the war fronts. Now that the Iraqi dictator has been toppled, the people of Bahrain have a great cause for celebration. They view the policies of the Al Khalifa ruling

family as practiced and exemplified by the prime minister, as an imitation of those adopted by Saddam Hussain and his clique. They emulated him in his internal policies to the letter, including the extensive use of torture, banishment and persecuting the majority of the population through repression and sectarian policies. When Saddam attempted to change the demography of Iraq during the war with Iran by importing more than four million Egyptians, Sheikh Khalifa started a similar campaign. There is a worry that while Saddam failed in his attempt, the Al Khalifa are still pursuing that policy with rigour and determination.

The downfall of Saddam's regime is a good news for the people and a tragedy for the government. It is hoped that democracy in Iraq will flourish and become a beacon of hope for the millions in the Gulf living under absolute rule and hereditary dictatorship.

Curtailing free speech

The most apparent indicator of the degree of democratisation in any society is the ability of individuals in that society to express their opinions without fear of being intimidated. Since freedom of speech is the essence of democracy, it has thus been the slogan that most pro-democracy movements around the world adopted and fought for.

Recognising this fact, the government of Bahrain used this term to market its political programmes in an attempt to gain popularity and acceptability both amongst its own population and around the world. However, this policy of misinformation soon lost its credibility when all the promises the ruler gave to his people were broken.

Freedom of speech has suffered turmoil when the people of Bahrain were forced to retreat in the scope of coverage of critical issues. This retreat took many forms. The selective interviewing of pro-reforms figures, the closure of many Internet sites and legislation that curtail freedom of speech are stark examples that many have witnessed over the past year.

Major meeting of unemployed cancelled

A meeting scheduled to take place on Sunday 28 April at the headquarters of the Society of Engineers was cancelled at the last minute apparently on orders from the torture apparatus headed by the notorious torturer, Dr Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa. The meeting was called for by the Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Unemployed in liaison with the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. The Director of the Centre, Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, said that the Centre had been under immense pressures to abandon the case of the unemployed.

He said the Society of Engineers had "apologized" for being unable to host the meeting. The Alumni Club also retracted an earlier pledge to host the meeting. The Centre had no choice but to cancel it. In a statement issued on Sunday, Mr Al Khawaja said: "We apologise for the religious, social and political figures who had responded positively to the invitation, and declare in line with the tens of thousands of unemployed and dispossessed that time has now come for a move by those affected to put their act together, move forward and reject any pressures from anyone".

The crisis of unemployment is proving once again more serious than any other problem facing the youth. With figures

putting the number of the unemployed at more than 15 percent of the workforce, the government of Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa has failed to take notice of the problem or act to contain its disastrous consequences. For the past three decades, the crisis intensified as he continued to undermine the local workforce through his policies of flooding the market with foreign workforce. His strategy is based on two main considerations: first the system of "free visa" has earned him huge amounts of revenue. This is tantamount to a slave trade. He imported thousands of labourers from the Indian subcontinent on free visas, set them free into the market and demanded a portion of their income. Secondly, Sheikh Khalifa had aimed to undermine the power of the native workforce following several major strikes in the fifties, sixties and early seventies. Workers had taken part in the political campaigns against the Al Khalifa dictatorship since 1922 and their major strike in October 1953 marked the peak of the labour power. When he became prime minister in 1971 following the British withdrawal from the Gulf, one of his priorities was to shield his reign from the political pressures of the labour movement through a process of marginalizing the local work-

force. The foreign workers are now estimated to be in excess of half the total workforce. Despite calls for work opportunities to the natives, Sheikh Khalifa has continued his policies of encouraging expatriate workforce at the expense of the locals.

To make the situation even worse, Sheikh Khalifa has continued his sectarian policies in the labour market. Until today, he kept the gates of employment at the ministries of interior and defence closed for the Shia population. Despite the calls to end this divisive policy, the Al Khalifa have refused to abandon it and objected to any plans to ease the restrictions on the employment opportunities imposed on the Shia majority.

The unemployed have been active in recent months to highlight their case. They organized pickets, demonstrations and seminars to protest against Sheikh Khalifa's policies.

Last month's meeting was to be one of the high-profile activities of the unemployed, but Sheikh Khalifa, through the minister of torture, intervened to cancel it. The unemployed were expected to join forces to mark the International Labour Day demonstrations in Bahrain. They issued a statement calling for effective participation in this event.

Persecution of a religious society

The headquarters of the Islamic Enlightenment Society bears all the marks of a decaying political system that has ruled Bahrain with iron fist policies that include the use of torture, banishment and sectarianism. It is now almost twenty years since the building on the Budayya Road near Duraz, was closed down by orders from the ruling Al Khalifa family.

Although the society, which was the only religious institution for the majority Shia Muslim population, was allowed to function two years ago, they have been denied the right to claim compensation for the losses inflicted on the building in subsequent years during the black reign of Sheikh Khalifa. His secret service agents burnt the building on several occasions and the massive collections of valuable books was completely destroyed.

Since the reopening of the society, its new executive committee has been working hard to re-establish the society as the focal institution for a modern form of an Islamic entity with special

emphasis on morality, spirituality and intellect as the main pillars of a revamped Muslim society. Initially, the new executives of the society were encouraged by promises from high-ranking officials including Sheikh Hamad, that the ruling family would repair the damage it had inflicted with this institution that symbolized the religious identity of the majority of the population. Things have since become cold, and none of the promises has yet been fulfilled. Apparently, the ruling family is acting on the assumption that more pressure on the religious figures would force them to give pledges of allegiance to the rising dictatorship in the island, and in return, they would get a listening ear to some of their grievances. So far, the new executives of the society have refused to succumb to these pressures and maintained their unwillingness to give in to the pressures. Due to the absence of the rule of law and independent judiciary, the society could not settle the case in a court of law. They have continued their activities in

hired venues and available mosques and other religious halls.

There is a strong belief within the Islamic Enlightenment Society that it should remain independent and should get its rights through a process of law.

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Freedom of Speech-continued

The recent interrogation of leading journalists from Al Wasat newspaper comes as a climax of curbing freedom in Bahrain. Many have expressed their astonishment at the event, but many others viewed it as a natural and expected move that is the result of a prolonged, synchronized and systematic repression within the country, especially amongst writers and journalists.

The people of Bahrain remain steadfast in their fight for freedom and democracy, as they believe that these are values that should prevail in society as prerequisites for progress and prosperity. With such noble values and peaceful means, the people of Bahrain once again demonstrate that they have a better and more civilized attitude than that of their government.

Expatriate workers exploited by ruling family members

The presence of foreign nationals is beyond the needs of Bahrain. The regime is accused of attracting a large number of expatriates for no specific jobs. Relatively high unemployment amongst locals is partly blamed on the presence of too many expatriates in the country.

The number of foreign nationals residing and working in Bahrain has been increasing steadily over the last four decades. According to official census carried out by Central Statistics Organisation (CSO, a government institution), foreigners made up 18 percent of the population in 1971, rising to 32 percent in 1988, and then augmenting to 36.4 percent in 1999 and 37.6 percent in 2001. Based on the 2001 census, total population stood at 650,600, of which 244,625 were foreign nationals. The authorities have failed to provide explanation for the sharp growth of the expatriate population. Clearly, the statistics reveal lack of proper planning on the part of the government.

Expatriates represent the majority in the workforce. According to the 2001 census, foreign workers constituted 59 percent or 182,000 of the total 308,000 comprising the labour. Bahrainis numbered 126,000 representing the balance 41 percent of the workforce. Thus, locals making the minority in their own home country.

True, expatriates comprise the utmost majority of the work forces in other regional places notably the United Arab Emirates. But the comparison is not warranted, as Bahrain unlike Dubai, suffers from an acute unemployment problem. According to crown prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, the jobless rate stands at 15 percent. But others suggest that unemployment stands at a higher rate notably in the rural areas of Bahrain. The unemployment dilemma is at least partly attributed to the presence of a large expatriate community. Unfortunately, some employers exploit the expatriates.

Exploitation of expatriates

Free visa refers to the situation in which some people arrange for the arrival of foreign workers to Bahrain but for no specific jobs. In other words, these expatriates are then free to select any jobs they may seek, hence the term. Those profiteering from the free visa business include influential members of al-Khalifa fami-

ly. Traditionally, members of al-Khalifa who are businesspeople at the same time, use their connections to the royal court to get visas. Soon after arriving in Bahrain, these foreign workers have to seek employment in any position they may get, and then provide regular financial contribution to their sponsors.

There have been cases of some of these foreign workers engaging in activities they were not trained for whatsoever. Time and again, local dailies report of cases of some expatriates suffering severe injuries and fatalities by working as electricians, while knowing little about the profession.

Asians selling watches can be spotted on the Exhibition Avenue, Manama's fashionable red district. They particularly take positions adjacent to automatic teller machines or cash points. Upon insistence of some would be customers, some Asians acknowledged working for Sheikh Rashid al-Khalifa, the undersecretary at the interior ministry for passport and immigration affairs. This is person in charge of the immigration services with power to profiteer from such a position. Sheik Rashid is son in law of prime minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa. True, there remains the possibility that these free visa workers made up the story of being sponsored by Sheikh Rashid.

Worse yet, some expatriates are exposed to notorious exploitation. For example, some are not paid their salaries for several months. But, many of foreign workers avoid lodging complaints at the ministry of labour & social affairs. This reflects their fear of being potentially deported, in case of irregularities are found in their documents. Trouble is that the authorities are making no efforts educating foreign workers of their basic rights.

Bahrain: destination for trafficked persons

The US State Department considers Bahrain as a destination country for trafficked persons. Bahrain is placed in Tier 3, representing the worst possible category. The following statements are excerpts from the State Dept report about Bahrain published in 2002. "Trafficking victims who come to Bahrain in search of work are put into situations of coerced labor and sometimes slave-like conditions, including extreme working conditions, and physical or sexual abuse.

Many low-skilled foreign workers have their passports withheld, contracts altered, and suffer partial or short or long-term non-payment of salaries. Victims come primarily from India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka to work as domestic servants and in the construction industry. Moreover, the report charges "The Government of Bahrain does not fully comply with minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so." With respect to protection of victims, the report indicates, "the government has made only minimal efforts, although trafficked victims are not usually detained or jailed.

The government does not provide assistance to victims, and considers the victim's embassy responsible for assistance. In cases where mediation fails, the government does encourage victims to pursue legal action. In terms of prevention, the government has not yet taken any action.

Remittances sent abroad

Expatriates are sending to their home countries substantial amounts annually, causing problems for Bahrain's macroeconomic statistics. In April 2003, Abdullah Hassan Saif, minister of finance & national economy, admitted that foreign nationals remit home more than US1.3 billion annually. The amount is uniquely high notably when compared to the gross domestic product (GDP). Bahrain's GDP is estimated at just above \$9 billion in 2003. Funds leaving the country undermine Bahrain's balance of payments. The fact that a large amount of fund is leaving the country reflects government's failure in enticing the expatriates to invest the money in Bahrain. Indeed, Bahrain grants foreign nationals the right to collectively own up to 49 percent of shares of firms listed at Bahrain Stock Exchange. Also, foreign nationals are entitled to own property in selected areas of Bahrain, notably those designated as tourist sites. Undoubtedly, Bahrain always needs expatriates of all types, be they professionals or semi-skilled workers. However, what is happening cannot be related to the local economic development. Fact is that people associated with the regime are able to arrange for the arrival of some foreign nationals and then profiteer from their presence.