

BAHRAIN

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To end the mischief, sack the mischievous prime minister

The collapse of Saddam Hussain's regime is still echoing in the various corners of the region while a policy of silence is maintained as to how to avert a repetition of the Iraqi tragedy. For three decades, the people of that country were subjected to the worst savagery perpetrated by a government against its own people in modern times. When the Iraqi dictator gassed his own Kurdish people in March 1988, the Arab governments and most Arab people did not raise an eyebrow. In that crime itself, more than 4000 Kurds were killed. Then followed the Anfal operation in which tens of thousands of Kurds were either killed or forcibly transferred to other regions. At that time, Saddam had embarked on a policy of fundamental demographic change of the country. To compliment his crimes against the Kurds, he did two other things: first he drained the marshes in the South, thereby destroying a complete way of life for hundreds of thousands of Shia Muslims. Second, he brought into the country more than four millions Egyptians in order to change the delicate balance in the religious composition of the Iraqi society. The setbacks on the war fronts were the main factor that led to the failure of that policy. Saddam was becoming a hero to many; while only few ventured to express rejection of these policies.

Although he has now gone, the tragedy of his people has continued. Several mass graves have been discovered in various parts of the country, containing the remains of up to 300,000 people who were massacred over a period of two decades. None of the 600 Kuwaiti POWs has been found alive by the forces occupying Iraq. The natives began to face the grim reality of Saddam's era as families began counting their human cost. Those who had clung to the hope of finding their loved ones alive were greatly disappointed and bereaved when they were asked to identify their remains. When he declared a general amnesty few weeks before the war that toppled him, it was not much of a consolation to families whose sons had disappeared many years earlier. Even those who had been arrested in the preceding months for political reasons were liquidated. The only consolation for the Iraqis is that the dictator has gone. No tears were shed on him.

On the other hand, it is hard to believe that the powers supporting Saddam's regime, both Arab and Western, did not know the extent of his barbarism. The Americans have been spying on Iraq for the past twelve years and they must have been aware of the human movement among Iraqi cities and the likelihood that atrocities could be committed by the notorious regime. The Gulf sheikhs had subsidized Saddam's war against Iran for eight years, offered him the political support he needed and emulated to an extent his despotism. The Gulf rulers were largely un-enthusiastic about the introduction of any reform in their societies, and the totalitarian rule has remained the order of the day. The existence of

Saddam had offered them a shelter from international criticism for the way they ruled their societies. Now that the shelter has been blown away, they have become exposed more than ever before. The Gulf countries, in particular, have been ruled by absolute monarchies with hereditary dictatorships unknown in any other part of the world. Even when some of them were forced to modify their policies, their response has been of contempt or deception. The Al Khalifa of Bahrain for example have failed to live up to their promises to the people of Bahrain. They still retain a great degree of suspicion and feeling of alienation, having conquered the country by force and subjugated its people.

The fall of Saddam Hussain is a grim reminder to them and to others that despotism and extreme repression could not succeed. The ruler, Sheikh Hamad, had raised the hopes of an imminent openness in line with what the people had demanded for the previous quarter of a century. But his plan faltered on the political side. He has so far maintained self-restraint with regards to human rights, but he has retained the most notorious elements of the SIS which had been created, administered and run by the British notorious officer, Ian Henderson. Last year he issued decree No 56 sheltering those accused of gross violations of human rights from prosecution. Chief among those are Adel Flaifel and Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah, the present minister of security. Moreover, the main figure behind the black era has been re-installed at the head of the government. Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa has held the office of prime minister since the independence in 1971. He is known for his pro-Saddam stands, especially in relation to crushing the Shia majority in Iraq. The demise of Iraq's dictator has shocked the Al Khalifa establishment to the core. Bahrain remains one of the very few countries in the world where the minority rule prevails. For decades the people of Bahrain have aired their grievances and called for the reinstatement of the only binding document between the two sides. The ruling family has refused to abide by any contractual agreement with the people and has sought to sweeten the sour environment with gracious acts that have no political significance.

The people of Bahrain, who have maintained their vigorous opposition to Saddam Hussain's dictatorship, are overjoyed by the demise of his regime. They are now contemplating a major political move to force the Al Khalifa to abide by the rule of law, abandon their repressive policies, adopt the contractual constitution, uphold the rule of law by allowing the trial of the torturers and abandon their mischievous steps including Sheikh's Hamad's constitution and councils. Without these, the people will insist on retaining the right to self-determination in accordance with international laws and the UN conventions and standards. The Al Khalifa despotism must come to an end if political stability is to be achieved in the country and the region.

Extravaganza for the king's servants

By MAZEN MAHDI

Spending on Bahrain's Shura Council is to soar by more than BD2.5 million - with much of the money going on members' expenses. The council approved a revised budget for this and next year totalling BD6,425,000, up from an original BD3,834,000.

Total budget for this year will be BD3,141,000, an increase of BD1,224,000 on the original BD1,917,000. Total budget for next year will be BD3,284,000, up BD1,367,000 on the original BD1,917,000. An extra BD1,188,000 will be spent over the two years on council members' expenses.

Members voted to approve increasing allowances for their "awards" by BD594,000, to BD1,590,000 a year - up from BD996,000 a year.

This meant the 40 council members will receive BD3,180,000 between them over the next two years, if the new budget is ratified by the government. This is to cover expenses for each council member's office, estimated at BD750 a month, plus car expenses estimated at BD500 a month.

Council members also approved extra

spending to cover travel expenses for delegations of up to six Shura members at a time to travel abroad on official business.

On each trip, each delegate will get BD1,000 for air travel, plus BD150 a day living expenses. At least six official visits abroad are expected each year, at an annual cost of BD69,000.

Non-Bahraini employees are expected to cost the council BD60,000 this year, less than the BD81,000 originally estimated. But this is expected to rise to BD81,000 next year, with the recruitment of more expatriate advisory staff. Some members argued that a legal department should be set up at the council, with several advisers instead of the current one. None of the council members holds a degree in law, said member Mansour bin Rajab.

Member Faisal Fulad said that the Kuwaiti parliament had a legal adviser for each committee. Both suggestions were rejected and the council decided to stick to the original plan of recruiting an additional expatriate legal adviser.

Security expenses at the Shura Council are expected to cost BD200,000 for 2003/2004, while maintenance of the

microphone system used by the council members in the National Assembly chamber is expected to cost BD10,000 over the two years. Council members voted to cut costs by cutting the number of new Bahraini recruits due to be employed by the council from 30 to 25 over the next two years. This will save the council BD22,897 this year and BD7,314 next year. Fire-safety system maintenance for the National Assembly building is expected to cost at least

Real change is needed

Following the collapse of Saddam's regime in Iraq, the King of Bahrain called for the Iraqis to be given the right to determine their destiny, and that they should shape the form of the new Government of Iraq. He also said he would be more than happy to host a conference for the Iraqi opposition leaders in Bahrain so they can discuss freely the future of their country.

Our people reacted with amazement to this call, arguing that if he believes that the people of Iraq should have the right to decide the future of their country why doesn't he let his own people (the Bahraini citizens) decide their own future and choose their own Government. Why is he imposing his uncle, the prime minister, on the people of Bahrain despite the fact that he is accused of reigning over the bleakest era of Bahrain's history? The despotic approach of the Al Khalifa ruling tribe to the affairs of the country remains a source of tension among the people. When Al-Wefaq Society, the largest political group in the country, wanted to organise their general meeting two months ago, they had to struggle at every level to overcome the endless obstacles orchestrated by the ruling family. It is ironic that the ruler should issue his call to the Iraqi opposition. Furthermore, the new democratic experiment in the neighbouring Qatar, has dwarfed the pseudo-democracy of the Al Khalifa in Bahrain. While Sheikh Hamad personally abrogated the 1975 legal constitution and imposed his own constitution, the Qataris were given the right to approve or disapprove their new constitution. What happened in Bahrain took the country back to more than thirty years. There is a need for real change in the country if further political tension is to be avoided.

The policy of deception continues

The policy of deception has become a pillar of the Al Khalifa system of government. Its aim is to create a fragmented society that cannot unite in opposition to any of their policies. For example, the ruler has never accepted to meet a delegation representing all factions of society. He would see representatives of each faction separately and would oppose a unified approach by the people. Even when petitions signed by members of all the communities is presented, it is often rejected while the ruler may accept a letter signed from one particular faction. This has been the case throughout the troubled history of this island under the Al Khalifa rule, and has continued on the same line. The ruler would also speak differently to different factions, and would exploit religious or ideological differences to deepen divisions. To the Al Khalifa, a unified society is the last thing they want. When they sense indications of a serious unity among the opposition groups they would use any means to undermine it. The latest in this context is the flirtation by the government with the personal civil code. It has long been aware of the sensitivities of the tradi-

tional religious groups to this codification and the enthusiasm of the liberal groups to it. They threw it as a bait to create discord among the people, and they almost won the day. Only the sensibilities of these groups that led to a temporary truce between the traditionalists and the liberals.

Another problem that has been a source of irritation of the ruling family is its feeling of alienation from the rest of the people. To compensate for this, it has embarked on the most daring programme of ethnic cleansing utilising a deceptive language. For the past three years, Sheikh Hamad has given Bahraini citizenship to tens of thousands of non-Bahrainis in order to change the demographic composition of the society. With this programme, which amounts to a cultural genocide of native inhabitants, it aims to achieve several results: first a change in the religious balance in the country that will remove the tag of a minority rule. Second, the creation of a situation in which the various factions would look to the Al Khalifa as their main protectors from other factions. This is the behaviour of dictatorial regimes such as that of Saddam Hussain.

Threat to open the gates of torture cells again

The ruling Al Khalifa family has reacted angrily to a petition calling for the prosecution of torturers, threatening to put back into prisons those who were released two years ago. Salman Siyadi, one of the old guards of the black era, spoke on behalf of the Legal Department at the Cabinet, insisting that Decree No 10/2001 that offered General Amnesty to political prisoners also applies to those who had committed crimes of torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners. He said if people insisted on excluding those criminals from the amnesty the ruling family may take back to prisons all those who were released. It was viewed with contempt and dismay by the families of the thousands of prisoners of conscience whose detention had become a liability to the Al Khalifa ruling family.

Siyadi's statement came in response to a popular petition signed by more than 33,000 citizens calling on the government to repeal Decree No 56/2002 extending the amnesty to the torturers and human rights abusers such as Adel Flai-fel, Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa, Abdul Rahman bin Sager Al Khalifa and others. International human rights organisations have extensive dossiers on the crimes of those torturers and have viewed their protection from prosecution as a serious setback in Sheikh Hamad's political programme. It is also likely to provoke public anger at what is perceived as unlawful denial of the victims rights to pursue their torturers and executioners. My Siyadi is known for being a mouthpiece for the pillars of the black era, and was notorious for his defence of

the State Security Law and State Security Court while campaigning for the ruling family in Geneva.

For the past two years, the released prisoners have lived in a constant state of fear that their torturers are enjoying the protection of the ruling family while the lives of the victims have been ruined by years of incarceration and torture. They view Sheikh Hamad's steps as full of rhetoric and empty of substance as they see their plight becoming more gloomy. They had hoped that a collective petition

Largest ever petition

On 26th May 2003, the National Committee for Martyrs & Victims of Torture submitted a petition to the King of Bahrain, Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa, through the Royal Court - Complaint Department, calling for the repeal of Royal Decree 56-2002. The decree offers protection and immunity to torturers. The petition also calls for compensation to victims of torture and to take steps towards a national reconciliation. The petition was signed by around 33,000 Bahraini of different sects and regions in Bahrain. It was submitted with a letter to the Sheikh Hamad. The Chairman of the Committee, S. Jaffer Al Alawi (ex political prisoner) submitted the petition in the presence of around 15 individuals, representing different political and human rights societies, and clergy. Representatives from Al-Wafaq National Islamic Society, National Action Democratic Society, Islamic Action Society, and Pan-Arab Society were among the group.

The Committee later held a press conference at the Bahraini Engineers Society to discuss the progress of this important subject.

signed by tens of thousands of citizens would convince the ruling family that it was not in their interest to continue sheltering those accused of gross violations of human rights. It is now expected that more angry responses may evolve in response to the Siyadi's threat to open the gates of prisons to the victims of the ruling family. It is also expected that international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch would condemn his statements and insist on prosecution of torturers.

The petition was handed on 26 May to the royal court by Sayyed Jaffar Al Alawi, who had spent 18 years behind bar and subjected to horrific torture. Salman Al Dosari, th head of the complaints section at the royal court. The petition called for the formation of a national committee to investigate acts of extra-judicial killing and torture, rehabilitation of victims and paying compensations to their families. Mr Dosari was also handed a CD disc containing details of 3500 cases involving victims of torture and rape by the Al Khalifa torturers. The National Committee of Torture Victims also held a press conference to highlight the petition and to create awareness to the significance of the establishment of the rule of law in the country. The torture cases have been compiled after extensive work for almost a year, including interviews with the victims. The Committee has threatened to take legal action outside the country if the Al Khalifa ruling family failed to heed the call to abolish Decree No 56.

Costly Desires of a King

In established democracies, the public sector allocates funds for infrastructure projects that represent a direct and real response to the needs of the people and contribute to their social welfare and development. Democratic practices also call for debate on the viability and economics of such projects. This ensures that public funds are spent efficiently and directed toward the most important aspects of development.

The government of Bahrain has embarked on a dangerous adventure when it fiddled with priorities and interfered with the engineering aspects of projects. It seems that the driving criteria for major projects is politics alone rather than engineering judgement.

The recent change of alignment of the highway leading to the formula one racing circuit (known as the National

Loop Extension) is one such project. The change from the originally planned route has been in response to the King's desire to keep the highway far from his Rawda palace between Hamad Town and Riffa'a. Despite years of feasibility studies and engineering design works that have been put into the project, the decision comes as an abrupt termination of efforts for the definition of the best route and the improvement of the transportation network.

Professionals view this change with grave concerns. While the original design takes the highway along the east side of the most modern city in the country (Hamad Town), the new alignment results in a major, six lane highway, going through that city of over 60,000 population, in two places, tearing it apart into three areas.

It is certain that if this change takes place, it will have serious social implications as it will disrupt a stable social fabric in the town. The financial implications are also huge. The new alignment will necessitate extra costs for the protection or diversions of existing services. The longer route of the new alignment will make the cost of the project higher by many million of Dinars. It also represents a fundamental departure from established theories and practices that call for the reduction of traffic inside metropolitan areas. The major highway into the city raises concerns about safety as well as damage to the environment. Such personal desires and interests of the king are at odds with the interests of the country and are becoming costly to the economy of Bahrain.

Regime is in disarray over Iraq policy

The regime has failed to handle the Iraqi crisis in a professional manner. Thus far, the policy has proved harmful to Bahrain's interests. Amongst others, Bahrain lost the opportunity to host an Arab summit. Also, the case has reinforced the differences between the king and premier, who hold diverse positions towards the Iraqi leadership. Moreover, the government was rebuffed when it made a bold offer for hosting Saddam Hussein. Last but not least, the authorities had underestimated the public anger over the American-led invasion of Iraq.

First, the regime blundered the opportunity to host an Arab summit, which was due to take place in Bahrain for the first time in the country's history. The king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, announced the decision not to host the gathering during a trip to Washington in February. Many observers make a connection between the trip and the announcement and believe that the regime heeded an American request. The meeting was then held in the form of an emergency summit in Egypt though under Bahrain's chairmanship. But even here, king Hamad could not impress the world with his poor management skills of the summit. For example, he failed to intervene in the right time to avert verbal quarrel between heads of delegations of Saudi Arabia and Libya.

Second, prime minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa and king Hamad had revealed different positions with respect to dealing with the Iraqi leadership. The monarch has been making unfriendly comments towards the Iraqi regime notably during his visit to the US. He had censured the Iraqi leadership, charging it of failing to take concrete steps to avoid the crisis. The king's position contradicted the stance taken by the premier. While heading Bahrain's delegation for the non-aligned summit in Malaysia, Sheikh Khalifa met senior Iraqi officials. Sheikh Khalifa was photographed exchanging candid talks with Iraqi officials, notably vice-president Taha Ramadan. People close to the king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, say that the monarch was irritated with Sheikh Khalifa's behaviour during the summit. The episode has demonstrated one more time the presence of two foreign policy agen-

das for Bahrain, one held by the king and the other by the premier.

Third, in mid March, only days prior to outbreak of hostilities, the government offered to host Saddam Hussein as a way out of the crisis. However, the Iraqi leadership has not even responded to the Bahraini gesture. Some believe that the premier stands behind the offer. Traditionally, Sheikh Khalifa has maintained friendly ties with the Iraqi leadership, and had frequently visited Iraq in the past. Still, Bahrainis were stunned by the government move and asked whether the authorities were in position to refuse handing over Saddam Hussein to the US, if pressed. The public has not accepted the move mainly because the regime had not bothered consulting the political societies, let alone the so-called National Assembly. Overall, the US and fellow Gulf countries decided not to endorse the offer and many wondered of the regime's motives behind the move.

Fourth, the regime decided to send troops to Kuwait without consulting the concerned parties. In fact, the regime has endorsed the war without engaging in consultation with National Assembly, which would have voted favoured anyway. The government controls the assembly, as the main political societies notably al-Wefaq, boycotted the October 2002 elections. Voice of Bahrain has learned that some 1,200 troops were deployed in Kuwait, to help defend that country in case of Iraqi attacks. More importantly, this newsletter has learned that 98 soldiers refused to take part in the military deployment in Kuwait. The military establishment would most likely court martial the deserters after the war.

Military sources have disclosed to Voice of Bahrain that some soldiers refused to take part in the Kuwaiti deployment reflecting their belief, namely not being convinced in the war. Moreover, the military has sent al-Sabha, Bahrain's only frigate to Kuwait. But unconfirmed reports have suggested that the frigate has encountered a technical problem before reaching the Kuwaiti territorial waters, rendering it not useful. The US had sold this retired frigate to Bahrain at a special price. Furthermore, it has emerged that some 20 Bahraini soldiers had illegally left their camp in Kuwait and returned home without ap-

proval from the military establishment. These absconders run the risk of being court marshaled when the war is over. Worse yet, unconfirmed reports have suggested that Bahrain might eventually discontinue its military presence in Kuwait, as the deployment proves increasingly unpopular.

Fifth, the regime was stunned by the extent of public anger of the war, expressed mainly in the form of demonstrations. Hundreds of people, mostly youths, have staged frequent demonstrations outside the US embassy in Manama. And for the first time, demonstrators staged a rally outside the British embassy located opposite the government house. The protestors included students from the public and private schools as well as students of the University of Bahrain. Consequently, the American and British embassies decided to indefinitely close their diplomatic missions.

For their parts, security forces used rubber shots, tear gas as well as beating by batons for the purpose of dispersing the demonstrators. This led the authorities seeking assistance from influential figures rather than members of the National Assembly to help disperse the protesters. For example, Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of al-Wefaq political society, accepted to mediate and help calm the situation. In retrospect, al-Wefaq boycotted the parliamentary elections after the monarch unilaterally altered the 1973 constitution without referring to the constitutional mechanism. Amongst others, the king granted the appointed consultative council legislative rights on par with the elected body, which together comprise the National Assembly.

The experience in dealing with the Iraqi crisis has put on display the differences between the regime and the public. The authorities had not bothered consulting the National Assembly and opposition groups. Clearly, the regime opted for endorsing military intervention without taking into account the popular opposition for such a move. Strangely enough, the move was not even popular within the military establishment; additionally, the affair disclosed the differences between the king and the premier over the issue. All in all, the regime has failed to impress the Bahraini people in its handling of the Iraqi crisis.