

# BAHRAIN

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

## Can dictators become democrats?

It has always been the conviction of the Bahraini opposition that time would betray the deception of the Al Khalifa tribal rule. Deception has been the name of the game since the present ruler, Sheikh Hamad, assumed power more than four years ago. It is the policy of deception that has enabled the ruler to put into action his destructive political programme that centres on implementing a fundamental demographic change in the country. Today, there is no government in the real sense in the country; there is the Al Khalifa ruling family, which had occupied the islands back in 1783, and a bunch of employees acting as a government. The real issues and decisions are decided by the Al Khalifa while the country, from the ministers down to the ordinary employees are forced to implement them. It is thus a futile exercise to debate the notions of democracy, government, collective decision-making or the rule of law. The ruler has effectively employed a policy of deception that has turned Bahrain, in the minds of many, to a model democracy in an otherwise despotic region. For the past two years, there have been three main developments that the Al Khalifa have consistently referred to in order to prove their democracy; release of political prisoners, allowing a degree of freedom of expression outside the media and elections of certain bodies. None of these developments represent a real transformation of the country into a democratic experiment, especially when they are taken within the context of the hidden agenda of the Al Khalifa, centring around the demographic change. First the ruler abrogated the contractual constitution of 1973 and imposed his own set of orders in the name of a constitution. Those set of orders have legalised the Al Khalifa dictatorship and despotism, and enabled the ruler to realise his life-long dream of becoming a king. Second, a process of containment and cooption was initiated to nullify the opposition through a corruption programme of bribery and what has now been officially termed "gracious acts" by the royal decrees. Many of the opposition figures thus became redundant and immobilised. Third, the ruler had embarked upon a programme of demographic change

through political naturalisation and the granting of Bahraini nationality to foreigners. Tens of thousands of Syrians, Yemenis, Jordanians, Saudis and Jordanians have been naturalised. The main attributes of the imported citizens are their religious background and their antipathy towards the religious denominations of the majority of the Bahraini natives. The Al Khalifa have always been accused of being a minority rule, propped up and defended by the British in line with the old regimes of South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Iraq. With all three regimes either defunct or facing collapse (as in the case of Iraq few years ago), Sheikh Hamad embarked on his central aim; transforming the minority into a majority through political naturalisation. Forth, the Al Khalifa have adopted an effective programme of deception, spending millions of the country's money on media, public relations companies and political campaigns. Many journalists, human rights activists, members of parliament and other religious and public figures from other countries, especially from the West, have been invited and given high class treatment. The aim is to prevent a negative image of the ruling family in the media and political forums.

The essence of democracy is the ability to change government, hold its members to account for their policies and exercise self-determination as to the nature of the political regime. None of these have happened. First, Sheikh Hamad has re-packaged the old guards who are responsible for the most horrific of human rights crimes, and imposed them in higher positions. The prime minister, who has been in his post for the past thirty two years has remained the head of government. He, in turn, has maintained his old team of elderly Al Khalifa figures in the sovereign ministries as has been the case for the past three decades and promoted those elements accused of human rights abuses to higher ranks. Then the Al Khalifa embarked on their "democratic" process by creating a formidable shield between themselves and the people, consisting of powerless "elected" bodies for municipality and consultative functions. The purpose of these bodies is to become the new tools of oppression against the jority of the citizens, nullifying their claims of

dictatorship of the Al Khalifa and defending their policies and acting to enhance the public image of the family. Now, after more than a year, none of these bodies has proved to be able to act independently or change the sectarian policies of the rulers. The old guards have been re-appointed in senior positions, while the torturers are being shielded by the ruler who issued royal decrees to prevent any judicial process to hold them accountable for their crimes. At the same time, the social and political fabric of the Bahraini society has been changed through the process of political naturalisation that is viewed by the international law as another form of cultural genocide of the natives of this Gulf island.

Bahrain has, for the past two years, has been hailed by western politicians as a new evolving democracy. That is simply not true. It is a result of the programme of deception which has been funded by people's money while the chronic unemployment and poverty persists. The prime minister, who has been revamped and re-invigorated by those changes is now able to tour the world as the leader of this "evolving democracy" after more than three decades in his post in which financial corruption and human rights abuses have been the main features of his reign. For his recent visit to Ireland, the Al Khalifa deception machine has attempted to brush aside his dark era, and encouraged some Irish writers and organisations to believe them. The dark side of Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, as the head of a regime which was incarcerated by United Nations Commission for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the European Parliament for its dirty human rights record, is covered by the petro-dollars which are spent on their elaborate deception programme. The world community is urged to look beyond this deception and call for a real democracy in the region. The two-years old political experiment in Bahrain is not a positive one; it has merely re-packaged the old guards responsible for horrific human rights abuses and absolute dictatorship in new fashionable designs. But can despots and dictators become democrats?

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## Two conferences re-inforce the policy of deception

During the second half of September 2003, Bahrain hosted two seminars calling dealing with what seem to be opposing purposes, one promoting decency and other possibly just the other way around. One meeting stressed unity amongst Muslims while the other promoted tourism, which in effect in Bahrain refers to prostitution and unrestricted alcohol sale.

### Islamic assembly

The major meeting, the Islamic Sects Rapprochement Conference, brought together Sunni and Shiite scholars discussing ways to bring about unity amongst followers of different branches of Islam. The seven Islamic sects, the four Sunni sects of Hanafi, Maleki, Shafe'i and Hanbali plus the Shiites as well as Zaidi and Abadhi were represented in the conference. Bahrain's ruler, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa called for the meeting, which was held at the Sheraton Hotel. Sheikh Hamad and his brothers own the hotel.

The fact is that the al-Khalifa regime is the least qualified to host such a gathering; it practices outrageous forms of discrimination against its own Shiite population. Indeed, Shiites constitute at

least two thirds of the local population but are not holding posts commensurate with their representation. For example, there are only five ministers out of twenty. In addition to the post of prime minister, the Al Khalifa hold the "sovereign" ministries; foreign, interior, defence, oil, industry, finance and electricity.

However, a number of Islamic scholars turned down the request to take part in the meeting. These included Mohammed Hussein Fadallah of Lebanon, who was represented by his son. Clearly, the regime was looking for photo opportunity with leading Muslim scholars.

### Tourism gathering

The other conference dealt with promoting tourism in the Middle East. The 24th meeting of the World Tourism Conference for the Middle East brought together officials from a number of countries.

Unfortunately, tourism in Bahrain focuses on engaging in indecent practices. For example, some nationals of neighbouring countries notably Saudi Arabia visit Bahrain during the local weekend of Thursday and Friday partly to engage in extra marital affairs. Hotels

in Bahrain offer prostitutes from South-east Asia, Africa as well as Central Europe. To this effect, Bahrain is accused by the US State Department of engaging in human trafficking. In some cases, females are enticed to Bahrain for innocent work in the hotels but then forced to offer their bodies for sale.

In addition, alcohol is sold in Bahrain without restrictions regardless of age. Purchasers of liquor are not required to produce identification papers for proof of age. In fact, alcohol is sold in some 90 hotels and tens of nightspots and discothèques operating in the country. Regrettably, teenagers can purchase alcoholic drinks for their own consumption.

In some cases, youngsters can buy liquor from several outlets by claiming that the purchases concern their adult family members. Three companies, BMMI, African & Eastern and Gulf Cellar, openly sell liquor through several outlets in and around the Manama area.

Certainly, it is not ethical that Bahrain hosts two conferences having two contradictory messages at the same time. Maybe, inconsistency typically reflects the true nature of the al-Khalifa regime controlling Bahrain.

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## Torture Victims address UN delegate at Manama conference

The following is the text of the letter submitted by victims of torture to the American representative at the recent conference on judiciary held in Bahrain: Mrs. Sandra Day O'Conner Associate Justice, U.S. Supreme Court

We are pleased to welcome you in Bahrain, and wish you a pleasant stay and a successful mission.

We would like to introduce you to our committee "The National Committee for Martyrs & Torture Victims". This committee was elected by victims of torture and martyrs families, a large number of whom gathered in Al-Ouroba Club on December 2, 2002. They set the committee's objectives and principles, the most significant of which is to defend the rights of martyrs families and the victims of torture who sustained great damage in the past. This damage still persists due to their deprivation from education and employment throughout the long years of oppression, which affected many political prisoners for long periods.

Ever since its inception, the committee has adopted the peaceful and legal approach. It demanded the nullification of Decree Law 56 of 2002 which prevents the courts of law from hearing any complaints about torture and killing by the police apparatus in the past period, a practice which, as you are aware, was in violation of all international conventions, Constitution of Bahrain, and the National Action Charter. We held demonstrations, sit-ins and peaceful public gatherings demanding the nullification of this law, but to no avail. So, we were forced to contact Human Rights Committee in the House of Lords, Britain, in addition to other concerned legal organizations. We, then, prepared a petition demanding our rights, which was signed by about 30,000 citizens, many of whom had been oppressed and suffered in the past era.

Our demands made through the petition were as follows:

First : Investigations into the killing and torture by the national committee of judiciary bodies and representatives of

political and human rights societies. Second : Nullification of Decree Law No. 56 of 2002.

Third : Reinstatement of the Martyrs and to consider them as martyrs for the country and compensate their families.

Fourth : To present to a fair and just trial all members of the security forces, who had been involved in the torture and killing of citizens. Those trials shall be in accordance with the international standards and to compensate the victims of torture.

The petition was submitted to H. M. the king on 26/05/2003. We were promised by the Head of The Grievance Commission in the Royal Court that it had been handed to The King and that we will receive a reply. We also requested an audience with the King. However, we have not had any reply ever since.

Your Honor,

We hereby urge you and all the free people of the world to support us in our just cause.

Thank you and best regards.

**The National Committee For Martyrs & Torture Victims**

1<sup>st</sup> September 2003

## Shame on you!! Why Do You Protect Torturers?’

The National Committee for Martyrs & Torture Victims in Bahrain has called for a Demonstration today 15<sup>th</sup> September 2003 at 4:30 pm, just two hours before the reception party for the Arab Judicial Forum 2003 held in Manama Bahrain. Around 500 people, mostly victims of torture in Bahrain, showed up in the demonstration under tight security, demanding the abolishment of the Royal Decree 56-2002 and calling for prosecution of torturers like Adel Flaifel, Khalid Al Wazan, Mahmood Akoori, and A.Rahman bin Saqar Al Khalifa.

A day before the demonstration, a delegate from the Committee submitted a letter to the US Supreme Court Judge O’connor, who is attending the Forum, through the American Embassy in Bahrain (see below for the letter). In this letter, the Committee asked Ms. O’connor to support their demand for abolishment of Royal Decree 56-2002 that prevents Courts in Bahrain to accept any

hearings or to bring to justice any past incidents of torture and unlawful killings by the police. The Committee also demanded prosecuting torturers and compensating the victims.

It is important to remark that two days back, the Committee, through a team of lawyers, filed three criminal cases to the Public Prosecutor, against police officers whom had committed torture against political prisoners in the past years. Previously, the Committee filed 8 cases of victims of torture in Bahrain, but it was rejected by the Public Prosecutor under the Royal Decree 56-2002 with which torturers can leave with impunity.

Leading legal specialists from around the world will attend the Arab Judicial Forum which is co-sponsored by the US State Department and Bahrain. Among the leading specialist are US Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’connor, and Wife of British Prime Minister (Lawyer) Cherie Blair. The objective of the Forum

is to look at the workings of the judiciary in the region. Most important topics will be: Judicial Selection, ethics and training – focusing on how to preserve judges’ independence; the improvement of judicial procedures, the role of the judiciary in protecting human rights and the importance of equal rights before the law.

Different banners and cardboards were raised, among them were:

‘I am a victim of torture; Why I cannot prosecute torturers?’

‘Royal Decree 56-2002 is unconstitutional’

‘Royal Decree 56-2002 is against international treaties’

‘We demand Truth & Reconciliation in Bahrain’

‘No stability without justice’

Torturers = Criminals; Why the Law protects them?

‘Shame on Bahrain!! Why do you protect torturers?’

### Victims call for the abrogation of decree 56

On Monday 15th September 2003, hundreds of former political detainees marched in the streets of the Diplomatic Area in Manama, the capital of Bahrain to voice their anger to the Arab Ministers of Justice convening at the Diplomat Hotel for a three day conference.

The demonstrators started their march from Ras Ruman mosque and intended to stop at the Diplomat Hotel. But the riot police prevented the marchers from reaching the end point .

The demonstrators had clear demands which they reiterated in the banners they Raised. The basic and rightful demands are :

To abrogate decree 56, which protects torturers and human rights violators .

To bring those responsible for torture to a fair trial . To compensate the victims of torture for the ordeals they had been through during the rein of terror in the second half of the nineties, and to reform the judicial system .

The torturers are now protected against any possible inquiry or conviction by a royal decree which confiscated the right of the victims to seek a judicial inquiry and a trial and gave the torturers the freedom to act as they wished in the country. The call of the victims of torture for the abrogation of the notorious royal decree number 56 marks the first step towards regaining their rights .

The agony of the victims of torture and the families of those martyred during the

pro-democracy demonstrations of the nineties is another major concern. The Government has taken no action to alleviate the consequences of such sufferings.

Many have lost their jobs or economic interests as a result of either being detained or simply blacklisted after imprisonment. The loss of income to many families who lost their sons by gun shots or under severe torture in prisons also has not been looked into. The demonstrators raised banners asking for compensation for undergoing such difficult circumstances .

It is surprising how a gathering of the Ministers Justice takes place only few hundred metres away form screams expressing anger at the great injustice that is being practiced in Bahrain. The Government of Bahrain has failed to recognize that the democracy it proclaims to have introduced hinges on justice and on lifting the agony of those who suffered for decades under the brutality of the regime .

The Ministers of Justice and international dignitaries present in Bahrain should bear these facts in mind. While the Government of Bahrain refuses to listen to grievances of its people, responsibility rests on their shoulders to raise such issues with the Government of Bahrain and to convey the screams of those demonstrators to the rest of the world .

### Police face off with anti-torture marchers

MANAMA, Sept 15 (Reuters) - Bahraini police pushed back anti-torture demonstrators on Monday who tried to force their way into a judicial conference hosted by the Gulf state.

Organisers of the march helped stop stone-throwing by some

of the some 500 marchers demanding the abrogation of an amnesty for officials accused of torturing political prisoners during

past unrest, witnesses said. There appeared to be no injuries.

Protesters had tried to enter a hotel hosting the conference of Arab justice ministers and international guests including Cherie Blair, wife of the British prime minister.

The protesters demanded the abrogation of the 2002 law which prevents victims from suing their alleged torturers.

King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa issued the law by decree following landmark political reforms in the pro-Western conservative country that included pardoning political prisoners and exiled activists and abolishing emergency laws.

An activist group, the National Committee for Martyrs and Torture Victims, has said at least 3,500 people were tortured while in jail for opposition activity during unrest in the 1980s and 1990s.

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## London seminar exposes cracks in al-Khalifa regime

The al-Khalifa regime ruling over Bahrain has reacted angrily, if disorderly, to the opposition seminar held in London on August 22nd. The gathering brought together activists concerned with promoting democracy in Bahrain. They included Lord Avebury, the Vice-Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group, Hassan Mushaime' of Al Wafaq National Islamic Society and Ali Rabi'a of the National Democratic Action Society. Participants discussed topics of significance to everyday life in Bahrain notably the constitutional crisis and deliberate demographic change. The ruler, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, caused unprecedented political crisis in the country when in February 2002, he unilaterally enacted a new constitution. Bahrain's original constitution dates back to 1973, which had emerged following the independence from Britain. Sheikh Hamad, who by then had declared himself king, lacked the mandate to impose a new document, developed secretly by foreign experts. Amongst its many shortcomings, the new "constitution" states that the national assembly consists of two chambers, with the appointed consultative or Shura council

enjoying similar powers extended to the elected body. The October 2002 parliamentary elections failed to resolve the political problems, and if any, had only deepened the crisis.

Additionally, the seminar discussed the implications of the on-going political naturalisation. It is believed that the authorities have undertaken serious steps to alter Bahrain's demographic structure. Concerned Bahrainis have succeeded in producing a tape filmed in the Dammam area of Saudi Arabia for members of al-Dowaser tribe. The extraordinary film reveals that the government of Bahrain has been encouraging these Saudi nationals to apply for Bahraini citizenship. It is believed that over the last few years the authorities have naturalised thousands of people from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Yemen and Pakistan. The opposition argues that a small country like Bahrain, with 716 square kilometer with an estimated population of 670,000 and a growth rate of 3 per cent per annum could not absorb additional incomers. The figure includes some 210,000 expatriates who are already working in the country.

Rather than responding directly to the charges, the government called on some of its mercenary writers to publish commentaries critical to the seminar. They criticised the opposition for holding the function in London, thereby rekindling memories of the colonial period. In fact, the blame should be fixed on the regime for regularly imposing roadblocks on opposition gatherings dealing with sensitive issues. For example, the six-group coalition was forced to hold its July 16th event concerning political naturalization in open air.

The London's seminar coincided with Bahrain's independence, a worthy date in the country's history. However, al-Khalifa regime refuses to celebrate the independence anniversary in mid August. Instead, Bahrain's national day is celebrated on December 16th marking the date that the late Sheikh Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa assumed power in 1961 during the British rule.

The government's attitude to the event has demonstrated its intolerance to democratic practices. In short, the al-Khalifa regime must engage in real rather than pseudo democratic practices.

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## When reforms turn into a mirage

The over-publicised political openness has now come to an end, and the honey moon between the people of Bahrain and the Al Khalifa family is virtually over. A quick glance at the unauthorized websites will reveal, beyond any doubt, the extent of public displeasure at the Al Khalifa performance over the past two years. There is a public outcry at what the people see as a stab in the back by a regime which has adopted deception as a core policy of its destructive political programme. Apart from the enormous budgets spent on enhancing the public image of a regime notorious for its flagrant human rights violations, the people are now counting the cost of treachery and broken promises. They have now realized that the long-standing demands for their contractual constitution, the upholding of the rule of law, the improvement of the people welfare and tacking the unemployment crisis, have remained unfulfilled. There is now a real worry that the situation may return to the status quo, with the possibility of a flare-up of public anger in forms of demonstrations and civil disobedience. The core of Sheikh Hamad's political programme has been the elections held

for municipality councils and representatives council. Both have now proven to be powerless. They are marginal entities, with real power remaining in the hands of the old guards, who are accused of committing serious crimes and embezzling the wealth of the country. These people are either in their old positions or have been promoted to higher posts. The Al Khalifa are aware of the fact that if these people are ever brought to justice they will pull many of their seniors down with them. The torture and corruption regime that had existed in the country in the past thirty years was propped up by these elements. The talk of reform has become void of real meaning, as the old guards maintain their grip on power. It is ironic to see the torturers raising the banner of reform and democracy, while their blood-stained hands speak of incalculable crimes against the people. The prime minister who has occupied his post for more than thirty years must be held to account for the crimes he committed against the people of Bahrain, and the wealth that he has unlawfully accumulated must be returned to the public purse.

The gloomy picture of the situation is

likely to become more dominant as the people realise the extent of the damage to the fabric of their society especially as the political naturalisation takes root. There is now an increase in the anti-government activities and sentiments, and a tendency to reject the tribal rule in its totality. The Al Khalifa have not helped their cause by trying to alienate the natives through the process of political naturalisation. A new crusade for the people has now become a rallying point for opposition, with incalculable consequences. They view the demographic change as the most serious threat to their cultural and religious identity and heritage, and they are striving to prevent this cultural genocide. The Al Khalifa must not be allowed to perpetrate their crime. It is the duty of the world community to preserve the heritage and the cultural identity of our country.

For the reforms to be meaningful, courageous steps must be taken, starting with the removal from office of those who were instrumental in the suffering of the people, and those who blundered the wealth of the country. The prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa is at the top of the list; if he is removed and tried, then a more positive image may emerge.