

BAHRAIN

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Time is running out for Hamad's Programme, can he salvage it?

The clock is turning back on the much-publicised political programme of the ruling family. Recent developments in the country have confirmed the suspicions of many observers and experts that the inflated claims by the official press could not be sustained for long, and that the truth behind the political agenda of the rulers would soon come to the open. The past month has seen an intensification of the public campaign to force the Al Khalifa ruling family to abandon their programme of deception, bring their hidden agenda out to the open and acquiesce to the demand that they rule with consensus, rather than with forceful imposition. Seminars were held to challenge the autocracy of the ruling family and its destructive political programme, rallies were held and slogans were raised in many parts of the country. The public mood is turning somber, while the elite is becoming more disillusioned. Whatever happens in the next few months will be crucial to the security and the long-term stability of Bahrain. Although Sheikh Hamad, in a recent speech, ruled out a return to the previous reign of terror adopted by his uncle, the prime minister, there is an increasing feeling that he and his closest advisers are approaching the end of their endurance, with daily attacks on the ruling family, their privileged positions and their endemic corruption. Many feel that an outburst of anger from both sides is now inevitable. The people feel betrayed and dismayed at the failure of the Al Khalifa to deliver on their promises, while the ruling family is becoming more sensitive to the criticism by the majority of the people. What has gone wrong?

The "democratic Spring" that Sheikh Hamad had promised the people suddenly turned into a nasty affair, with promises unfulfilled and the legal constitution abandoned. Apparently, the ruler had assumed that ruling through a process of "gracious acts" would open up the hearts of the people, thus enabling him to impose whatever shape of government he wished. This is borne out of the Al Khalifa's historical feeling of arrogance with regards to the people of Bahrain. They have always viewed them

as subjects who needed their charitable acts, rather than people with legitimate rights. The ruling family never accepted the notion of ruling in accordance with the principles of rights and duties. At no time in their history since they occupied the islands did they abandon the feeling of supremacy and belonging to a different race and blood. This feeling has reflected itself throughout the past two centuries in policies that are both discriminatory in practice and unjust in principle. The British withdrawal from the islands in 1971 forced them temporarily to accept the notion of contractual rule, but it was a short-lived experience after which the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa, took the law into his own hands and ruled the country with an iron fist. When Sheikh Hamad ascended to the throne following the demise of his father in March 1999, unreal expectations were presented and he reciprocated in kind, offering big hopes but little action. The reality of the Al Khalifa family soon came back to haunt the political process. Sheikh Hamad forfeited his obligations that he had undertaken under the Charter of 2001, and reneged on his promises that had convinced the people to approve his Charter. He single-handedly abandoned the Constitution and imposed what he wanted in the forms of laws and rules. The people expressed their anger in seminars and demonstrations, while the majority are now subjected to a testing period of hoping and waiting. There is a widespread conviction that the ruling family is, once again, resorting to its old policies of discrimination, injustice, deception and dictatorship. This tendency has now become the order of the day, and the youth are taking to the streets in their masses to protest against these practices. The Al Khalifa pretend to be enjoying the support of other countries, mainly the United States and Britain especially after they had allowed them to use the country as a launching pad in the recent war against Iraq. The people of Bahrain have never had affinity to the Iraqi dictator, and had paid dearly for expressing their views about him openly in Bahrain. But they also did not want the country to become embroiled in regional conflicts at a

time when the internal situation is as tense as ever. Now the feelings of the public have come to the open in several forms including demonstrations and anti-government propaganda. The ruling family, on its part, has decided to ignore the people's feeling of injustice and insecurity, and ordered the foreign-staffed riot police to attack demonstrators. Furthermore, it has refused the calls to stop the illegal political naturalization, and continued importing more foreign workforce to the country. A recently publicized authentication of the illegal naturalization was shown both in Bahrain and London, to the fury of the ruling family who reacted with utmost ferocity. As the people of Bahrain await the outcome of the US policy on democracy partnership, they hope that Washington would abandon its fraternal affairs with these despotic regimes, encourage democracy and stop supporting dictatorships. The ruling family in Bahrain must be aware of its obligation to respect the rule of law, abide by the only means of legitimacy; the 1973 contractual constitution and accept to reform itself. It is duty-bound to seek a public mandate to rule, especially now that the people have withdrawn their recognition of its charter, refused Sheikh Hamad's constitution and various political bodies he created to defend himself and his family. The Al Khalifa rule is now devoid of legality and legitimacy, and the longer they opposed the people's aspiration for a constitutional rule based on contractual agreement, the more they will sink into the political quagmire. Their policy of deception, clearly visible in their generous sponsorships of foreign politicians especially members of UK parliament, is unlikely to dramatically affect the outcome of the recent upsurge in the people's opposition to their dictatorship. They are better advised to declare their willingness to adhere to the spirit and letter of the 1973 contractual constitution, abandon their tailor-made rules and regulations and stop the illegal political naturalization. Without these steps, the situation is likely to develop into an open-ended conflict that could end the Al Khalifa dictatorship in these islands.

Mismanagement of the Sitra incident

The regime has demonstrated its inability to rule judging by the way it has reacted to the Sitra incident. The alleged event took place in early October and involved an assault on a security vehicle, which injured several policemen of foreign origin.

At the onset, the authorities had attributed the attack to emotional speeches made by religious scholars without producing evidence to substantiate their claim. In fact, only hours prior to the alleged attack on police vehicle, the area close to scene of the crime had witnessed a commemoration of the Palestinian uprising. The regime suggested a possible connection between the speeches during the function and the subsequent attack. But many observers doubted that the speeches could have such a quick effect. If the alleged attack had actually occurred, it must have been well organised and planned in advance. So is the case because the perpetrators had left no imprints to be traced.

Some commentators suspect that incident was possibly a set up, in turn aimed at curtailing the freedom of

speech. The security apparatus had been blamed for stage-managed acts especially during the years of political unrest in the 1990s. Civil unrest broke out in Bahrain in December 1994 with the aim of achieving political, economic and social reforms. In this incident, the state-controlled media had failed to produce interviews with the victims to provide detailed accounts of the assault, a clear shortcoming of public relations skills.

Overreaction

On the assumption that the attack on police had actually occurred, then the regime must be blamed for further causing harm to the country. Certainly the overreaction had sent a message that would be local and international investors that Bahrain is not the ripe place for investments because of political risk.

The incident revealed that the regime's priorities are confined to political rather than economic matters. For instance, the regime had called on its mercenary writers and columnists to publish critical articles of the concept of freedom

of; that these writings served to deepen the message that the country was experiencing political unrest. As far as ordinary people are concerned, unemployment remains the primary economic challenge facing the country. According to official figures, some 15,000 Bahrainis are unemployed but others put the number of jobless at 25,000. The government has always attempted to ignore these figures.

Another casualty of the government's reaction was that of social harmony. The attack was focused on the Shiite population, who in turn comprise the majority. At least two thirds of locals adhere to the Shiite faith of Islam. It is certainly to offend the minority let alone the majority of the inhabitants.

In summary, the regime's behaviour to the Sitra event has revealed its inability to manage a relatively simple problem, as such an incident could take anywhere in the world. The authorities issued their judgment by attacking political activism prior to making comprehensive investigations. The work could have been the work of ordinary criminals. By and large, the main loser of government's poor management has been Bahrain's reputation as a safe business centre.

Internal dissent on the increase

Several developments took place last month, as the situation becomes more tense. The feeling of betrayal is sinking deep into the minds of the people after almost three years of unfulfilled promises. The most significant of these activities was the seminar against the deeply-entrenched discrimination policies adopted by the ruling Al Khalifa family against the majority Shia population. The seminar was organized by the Bahrain Centre of Human Rights and attended by thousands of citizens who expressed support to the theme of countering this racism and sectarianism. The ruling family countered by massive attacks against the centre, and employed all sorts of abuse and criticisms mobilizing its various councils to attack it. The majority of the population has, however, stood by the centre and a state of political polarization became evident. Two members of the centre resigned as they could not face the wrath of the Al Khalifa, while many capable people especially among the youth, have expressed their willingness to serve in the Centre if it is going to face up to the challenges posed by the ruling family. It is now expected that more pressures will be brought against the Centre. The Ministry of Labour has already written to the Centre warning it of unspecified retributions, possibly including its clo-

sure, if it continued to criticize the discriminatory policies of the Al Khalifa family.

The victims of torture held a protest against the notorious torturer, Adel Flaifel. They gathered at the main road leading to his house, raised banners and slogans calling for his arrest and prosecution. They particularly attacked the notorious Law 56, issued by Sheikh Hamad to shield the torturers from prosecution. The mood of the victims is becoming more volatile as the Al Khalifa ruling family becomes more intransigent and more protective of the old guards and their torturers. They pin their hopes on a principled stand by the committee responsible for overseeing the observance by states of the Convention Against Torture (CAT). The Al Khalifa must be made to account for their failure to observe the principles attached to CAT which they had signed five years ago. They have continued their deception policies in their stands on the international arena, dispatching emissaries to important bodies to nullify the adverse publicity by the opposition.

On another level, the ruling family continued its attempts to sabotage the people's unity by adopting tactics that are divisive and evil. Despite their knowledge of the sensitivity of the people to practices that they believe to be

incompatible with their religious commitment, the Al Khalifa encouraged one of the hotels which is situated within a religious area to entertain singers and dancers at the very month of fasting, which is considered holy by all Muslims. There was a furious reaction to the event and the young people turned their demonstrations against the Al Khalifa dictatorship.

Meanwhile the youth resorted to writing on the walls reflecting their anger and frustration. Among the widely-written slogans are: Kill me, but don't discriminate against me, I'd rather be killed, than discriminated against, Discrimination is selfishness, Discrimination means absence of justice, Discrimination is heart of suppression, Discrimination = Repression, Give me death or equality, Equality = Liberty, Sectarianism = Racism, Sectarianism is Racism; down with Racism, Favouritism is Racism; down with Racism, We all bleed red, Peace is not only the absence of tension, but the presence of equality and justice, Justice and equality for all humanity, Stop Segregation and discrimination in Bahrain. Furthermore, some youths have already resorted to tactics reminiscent of those adopted during the uprising of the nineties, including exploding gas cylinders. This is a significant development indeed.

Segregation and discrimination in Bahrain

From Bahrain on line

The official discrimination among the citizen in Bahrain was the heart of the State Security Law and was used efficiently to crackdown political forces and redistribute their weights and hence their ability for actions and reforms. Based on policy of discrimination, enhancing the progress for some groups and hampering the progress of other groups have become the norm in the civil administration posts, resulting in administrative massacres for the dis-franchised groups.

Although different modes of official discrimination were very active in the political life of Bahrain, the widely practiced sectarian discrimination against the Shia' was colorful, harsh and humiliating. It didn't save communist, liberal, conservative, rich or poor;

religious or non-religious, its enough to be Shia' unless you are exceedingly exceptional.

As a direct consequence to the continuing official discrimination over successive decades in Bahrain, its clearly obvious now that there are administrative, political, economical and educational massacres among the Shia' population. Such official discrimination didn't only weaken the national unity, diminish the national pride of its victims, but it's likely, it will pave the road for a "Bahraini copy of mass graves". My guess is, the honest people of Bahrain wouldn't like to see such days come across our borders.

Acting as the nidus and prelude for the mass graves, the daily discriminative practices may readily convert into a real slaughter and mass graves when the

regime with its allies are locally challenged by national disharmony that usually co-exist with discrimination and lack of social justices; or whenever the regional or the international circumstances become permeable for such genocide to occur.

The mass graves in Bosnia Herzegovina, Rwanda and recently in Iraq, have occurred on backgrounds of social discriminative culture that overlooked the likely consequences of discrimination, and made its existence a tolerable norm by all parties including its victims.

By under-estimating the dangers hidden in the culture of discrimination, the victims may contribute to its growth, and hence the potential for mass graves, and may inherit its bitterness to our children.

Eliminating and incriminating the official sectarian as well as the other modes of ethnic, tribal or regional discriminations should be a national priority, as important as the release of the political prisoners and the return of the political activists in exile.

Dr Qasim Omran

Monarchy or ownership of a nation

Political change confined within rhetoric talk seldom leads to successful conclusions. Rather, it reinforces the continuity of an existing corrupt system. A genuine change or reform however reflects on almost all aspects of life and in particular the governing system. It offers a relationship between the government and its people moderated through rules and regulations and based on trust and confidence.

The derailed reforms project in Bahrain has failed to address this aspect. More precisely, it has chosen not address it. The political system continued with the same perceptions, attitudes and approaches to national issues, always perceiving the people as a competitor and a source of threat.

The alleged constitutional monarchy is now as far as it can ever be from a genuine constitutional monarchy known to people around the world. The term "reign but does not rule" that describes a royal family in such monarchies seems to be foreign to the culture of the family ruling Bahrain.

The recent public seminar that addresses the privileges of this family revealed astonishing figures implicating the members of the AL Khalifa family, and in particular the Primes Minister, of serious blundering of the country's wealth through strongly entrenched corruption circles.

What the seminar has shown is that the privileges enjoyed by the family and those associated with it are now part of

the law. It is a well established now that the laws enacted in the past bear significant discrimination against women and against the people in general, thus diminishing justice and equality amongst citizens. The figures showed that while women form 49% of the population, they occupy on 7% of managerial positions in the government.

The figures also spoke of outrageous discrimination practices against the people, where the majority of the sensitive positions in the government are held by members of the Al Khalifa family, depriving citizens of such positions even when possessing higher qualifications. The speakers also spoke of how the Al Khalifa family gradually increased their ownership of land through confiscation since the 19th century. Now the family owns more than half of the country. The Al Khalifa family has allocated large percentages of national income for its members since the beginning of the last century. This continues until today.

The political system designed by the AL Khalifa family hinges on sex and racial discrimination, complete grip on power, endless privileges for the family members and their associates and an impotent "democracy". Such policies and practices are in complete contradiction with the constitutional monarchy that Sh Hamad has been trying to market. On the ground, it is obvious that the family intends to own the country and the nation.

Attack on freedom and identity

The issue of political naturalisation is becoming one of the most explosive problem in the country. The ruling family is unwilling to be transparent about it, while the people fear aims at changing the fabrics of the society in an unprecedented way. The official media is not allowed to discuss it, while most of the people are still unaware of the extent of the problem. The ruling family has banned any discussion of it, and has, once again, adopted a policy of deception to blur the real picture of what is going on in this context. Some thinkers and religious scholars mention it occasionally, but what is at stake is more than a side issue or a marginal problem. The identity of the country is at stake as well as its 1400 years history.

On 19th October 2003, the authorities in Bahrain confiscated the new issue of *Al Mushahid Al Syasi* magazine (for the week 19-25th October 2003) that is published on a weekly basis in London. The magazine covered the issue of Political Naturalization in Bahrain in six pages 10-15.

This confiscation is a clear violation of basic rights including freedom of expression and the access to information and publications. It's also a censorship on freedom of expression and press in Bahrain.

Sectarian discrimination in Bahrain

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The Kingdom of Bahrain is situated in the Arabian Gulf, and is made up of small islands with a population of 715,000, of which the Muslim-Shiite forms over 70 percent[1] of the citizens. The Kingdom is hereditary ruled by the Al Khalifa[2] family. The king is head of the Executive, legislative and judicial powers[3]. Citizens do not have the right to change their government or political system. After the absence of democracy and parliament for more than 25 years, and after a period of security unrest[4], which escalated in the 90s, the King's ascension to the throne in 1999 brought about hope for reforms. Optimism escalated especially after the release of all political prisoners, abolition of state security law, return of exiles and re-employment of some of those who lost their jobs. Furthermore, the formation of civic societies was allowed, as well as marginal freedom of expression.

However, after a short period of time, people felt they were let down, due to several retractions. The same government remained in power, which has been there for over 30 years with widespread corruption and human rights violations. A decree was issued to grant such people immunity[5]. There has also been retraction in the freedom of expression, restriction on press and further discrimination against segments of society, particularly in government employment.

This paper focuses on aspects of discrimination in Bahrain and its adverse effects on all political, economical and security levels. Despite that the constitution defies against discrimination, and guarantees equality and equal job opportunities, the policy of discrimination based on sectarianism and family status has for decades been a common and institutionalized practice.

In spite that the Shiites are a majority exceeding 70%, they occupy less than 20%[6] of total top jobs in government establishments. In several government ministries and corporations no Shiite is appointed in leading jobs[7].

It is worth mentioning, that these percentages would have been even less if remaining establishments were added[8].

Unfortunately, employment in government bureaus does not follow a clear and specific standard, it is governed by family and sectarian connections. In light of the absence of mechanisms of monitoring these forms of discrimination, abandon harmony and social security among the people

Whilst article 16B, in the constitution says that (citizens are equal in taking up public jobs) we find that in reality, assuming jobs in the army and police are not based on qualification and capability, but on discriminatory appointment policy. Bahrain regretfully depends on foreign manpower for its internal and external security[9], while the Shiite citizens are forbidden from occupying such posts due to their sectar-

ian origins. This led to an increase in the number of unemployed Shiites, who form more than 95% of those unemployed in the kingdom. It must be pointed out that not all Muslim Sunnis can hold high positions in the army, even some of them do experience discrimination. Such jobs are specified for members of the ruling family and other families and tribes that share close relations with it.

Discrimination has also penetrated the elections of both the Representatives and the Municipal Councils. The Government divided the country into imbalanced sectarian constituencies. For example, in the southern governorate, which the many newly naturalized persons reside, a block of around 2000 voters hold a seat in parliament, whilst in the central and northern governorates, that are majority Shiite areas, block of around 7800 voters hold one. Until this very day, the government does not admit to the existence of discrimination. It has discredited every person and establishment that tried to relate these issues to discrimination, in order to deter them from attempting to highlight this defect in order to reform it.

The Bahrain Center for Human Rights took the initiative to raise the problem by organizing a huge public seminar where many papers were presented by members of parliament, religious figures and political activists. At the seminar the BCHR launched a report that contained shocking facts supported by statistics highlighting discrimination in high rank posts in the public sector.

Tribal and sectarian discrimination has exploded, making it a matter of concern due to the existing government policies based on favoritism and superiority.

The ruling family, which is made up of several thousand members, enjoys more benefits than the rest of the people, far from the principles of qualification and equality and in contradiction to any other constitutional monarchy which the king has promised.

The existing policy also depends on favoring some families and tribes, according to their political loyalty to the ruling family, at the expense of the rest of the people. They are given the remaining important posts and preference in employment and economic facilities, as well as grants and financial rewards, resulting in the stir up of hatred between these families and the rest of the citizens. On the other hand, in order to change the demographic structure of the country, and without taking into consideration the social damages to be caused, the Government secretly and by-passing the normal laws[10], resorted to naturalizing big numbers of tribes and their families, who were brought to the country to work in the army and the security force.

The Government has also allowed GCC citizens from tribes, historically loyal to the ruling family, to obtain the Bahraini citizenship, yet maintain their original citizenship, and without having to fulfill the criteria for residence in Bahrain[11].

Another, discriminatory segregation, is the

prohibition of Shiites and some Sunnis of Persian origins, from inhabiting one of Bahrain's largest district, that is Riffa which is more than 40% of Bahrain land[12], in which a majority of the members of ruling family reside. It is the only city that requires a permit from the Royal Court, to be allowed to live there; an area almost free of the above mentioned sect.

Recommendations: For a Better Future of the Kingdom of Bahrain:

First, to abolish the system of prerogative and exemption that distinguishes and favors members of specific families and those loyal to them, over the rest of the people. Family or sectarian preferences and inferiority thinking must be considered as socially wrong and should be condemned.

Second, there should be an immediate law, forbidding all forms of discrimination, and should consider discrimination as punishable act. Citizenship must be based on equal rights and duties. In this context, a democratic environment must be founded to achieve justice and equality.

Third, unofficial political sectarianism must be abolished and jobs in public establishments must be made available to all citizens, of different sects and origins, such as in the national guards and the police. Ministers and other officials must be held accountable for the discrimination taking place in their ministries. They should also be dismissed from their posts, if proven responsible, and victims of discrimination should be granted justice and compensated.

Fourth, the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, which had been signed by the Government of Bahrain, should be activated, as well as the principles of the Bahraini Constitution, which included justice and equal rights.

Fifth, Committees, Governmental and NGOs should be created, entrusting them with investigating into the implementation of justice, equal opportunities, opposing discrimination in State bureaus and institutions. Sixth, all forms of discrimination should be put to an end in employment, freedom of movement, housing, education, private[13] and public scholarships, government tenders and services rendered by the state bodies. Mechanisms for Monitoring on the aggravation of all forms of discrimination should be set up.

Seventh, political and random naturalization based on tribal and sectarianism should be stopped, naturalization of some segments should be reviewed in the light of consistency with the domestic and international law.

Eighth, NGOs, Religious leaders and civil societies should discuss this phenomenon, away from religious sensitivity and in an open and transparent manner, considering the fact that social harmony is threatened by it.

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