

# BAHRAIN

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

## Civil Resistance takes roots as the silent crisis deepens

The facade of normality in the Gulf is turning into a mirage. The recent upsurge in anti-government activities and terrorist acts against western interests in the Arabian peninsula is an indication of the political turmoil that has been in process for the past three decades. The economic strength in the eighties provided a silencing catalyst in an otherwise volatile situation. The anti-government movements calling for a degree of openness and modernisation of the Saudi system were there but were neutralized by the relative economic relaxation of the people. Starting in 1979 with the uprising of Juhaiman Al Otaibi who, together with his followers, occupied the Kaaba, and remained for several weeks, the political skyline of the Saudi kingdom was increasingly becoming blurred. Then came the successive uprisings in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom calling for democratic reforms only to be confronted with a solid wall of refusal to modernize by the Saudi authorities. Those uprisings were sidelined by several factors: first the relaxed economic situation which was providing enough comfort to the people, thus preventing them from the political activism. Second, the flaring Iraq-Iran war that rendered any other affair insignificant in comparison. Third, the American and British politicians were acting to woo the Saudi monarchy which went on a shopping spree for military hardware, thus they turned a blind eye to the need for democratization and openness.

The situation has now changed in a fundamental way. The rise in unemployment, the downturn of the economic fortunes of the monarchies and the ever-increasing populations have become major factors contributing to the political instability in the region. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 also weakened these monarchies who had acquired what appeared to be a formidable military arsenal, but proved largely ineffective in either deterring Saddam Hussain prior to the invasion or defeating his forces afterwards. Furthermore the recent security developments including the 11 September atrocities have focused the attention of western leaders on the rulers of these sheikhdoms, and there are questions whether these outdated monarchies are capable of modernizing

their political systems. Saudi Arabia is now at the forefront in the regional political arena for its inability to reform. Riyadh's rulers have failed to understand the social and political dynamics of change, and are being targeted by their life-long allies in Washington. Despite the numerous uprisings against their tribal despotism they have failed to heed the calls for reforms. The country is now in a delicate balance and is threatened by instability, anarchy and even fragmentation on political, social, regional and tribal lines.

The Al Khalifa of Bahrain thought that their superficial "reforms" would silence the democratic movement, but they have now realized that their domestic problems are far from over. There is a growing form of civil resistance which is expressed in several formats. The electronic websites have become focal in fomenting anti-Al Khalifa feelings, despite the attempts by the ruling family to ban them. Civil disobedience is also taking shape in the face of new forms of governmental censorship and attempts to curtail freedom of expression. A month ago the Al Khalifa family asked the political societies to stop publishing views on in their publications and confine themselves to news. The political societies decided to disregard this directive and continued their criticism of the corruption of Al Khalifa members. The Al Wefaq society (the largest civil society institution) also took a decision to disobey an order from the Al Khalifa family not to show a socio-political play. It was scheduled to be presented on four nights after the end of Ramadhan at the Bahrain Society of Engineers. The society was ordered not to allow their main hall to be used for the show. Al Wefaq decided to conduct the show in an open area in one of the villages. Thousands of people bought tickets to attend the show. It was a public relations failure for the Al Khalifa family, and is likely to escalate into an open political confrontation in the coming months. There is a determination by the people to pursue civil disobedience in order to force real reforms in the country after thirty years of repression.

There are several catalysts that could lead to an eruption of public anger. The provocation by the Al Khalifa family is

causing unease among large sectors of society. It has attempted to buy off dissenting voices, but they had only a limited success. Provocation has taken many forms and is becoming an irritant to an already polarized society. The failure of the Al Khalifa to sort out the unemployment crisis is contributing to the public anger and has become a time bomb. Job opportunities have dwindled as the Al Khalifa continued the policy of importing larger numbers of foreign workforce. Despite protests by the unemployed over the past two years, the Al Khalifa have failed to produce a blue print for solving this crisis which is of their own design and making. Then there is the political naturalization which is one of the most serious attempts to deface the religious and cultural face of the country. While Sheikh Khalifa, the notorious prime minister raised the slogan of "Bahrainisation" of the workforce, Sheikh Hamad, the present ruler has put into effect his policy of "Bahrainising the foreigners", which is at the core of his political programme. His aim is to remove the taboo attached to the Al Khalifa rule since they occupied the islands in 1783, that they are a minority ruling over a majority. In the past five years, they have offered Bahraini nationality to countless number of people, drawn largely from areas known for the fanaticism of its inhabitants and their deep anti-Shia feelings. The aim is to provoke the majority Shia citizens into submission to the will of Al Khalifa.

The situation in the Gulf will remain volatile as long as despotism remains. As the Al Khalifa experiment sinks into deep troubles, the need for a transparent policy of democratization and political transparency becomes paramount. If the US continues its praise of the deceptive policies of the Al Khalifa, it will only discredit its slogans based on "democracy partnership" with the Middle East. Democracy and tribal rule are incompatible, and unless the people are allowed to take part in running their own affairs on the basis of a power sharing strategy, the situation may be subject to real political changes, as the status quo cannot be maintained for long. The failed Al Khalifa policy must serve as a reminder to the fragility of the situation.

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## Cultural Censorship: Banning a Political Comedian Play

On 25th November 2003, the authorities in Bahrain, through the Public Prosecutor, banned a political comedian play "Laish Ya bul-aish" [Why Abu-Aish?] just hours before playing in a rented hall at Bahrain Society of Engineers (BSE) in Juffair, suburb of Manama, the capital.

The play was supposed to be performed for four nights throughout the Eid Holiday by Abna Al-Quds Band in collaboration with Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society. Entry tickets for the first three nights were sold out and seats for the last night was almost full. All arrangements for the play were made including lightings, sounds, and the stage background . The Chairman of the BSE, Saeed Al-Asbool, was summoned twice by the Public Prosecutor; first time at 10:00 pm a day before (for two hours), and the second time was early in the morning 2:00 am. The Chairman was interrogated and threatened that the BSE will be closed down, even if it requires use of force, should the Society allows the play to be performed in its premises. The theme of the play was to convey

day-to-day life of Bahraini people, especially the lower class, in relation to the Government policies in the past few years. The play is supposed to be a critique of the Government policies and the parliament in a humorous manner. It is important to remark that banning and confiscating published materials by authorities has been increasing in the last couple of months. Just two weeks back, tens of books were confiscated from Al Ayam book fair and an issue (no. 397) of 'Al-Mushahid Al-Syasi' magazine (published BBC - London) was confiscated in the airport because it has an article about 'Political Naturalization in Bahrain'. The authorities have also taken three editors to the court for their writings. Two weeks back, the Ministry of Information has formally asked the political societies to restrict their regular publication to contain news only, rather than views.

We are concerned about the new trend (setback) in the Kingdom of Bahrain. We believe that the recent authorities interferences are clear violations of freedom of expression that was granted by the country's Constitution and interna-

tional conventions, in which people are given the right for freedom of expression in a peaceful manner. This may also lead to a confrontation, between the Government and people of Bahrain, which we have tried to avoid over past few years. We urge all human rights organizations and activists to call upon the authorities in Bahrain to put an end to such violations of basic human rights.

### Civil Resistance Relunched

December had been a period of political tension in Bahrain since 1975, when the Al Khalifa dissolved the only elected parliament in the history of the country. As it approached this year, the situation in the country appears to be heading for a similar political atmosphere with intimidation and repression in different forms. The opposition is rallying its forces for the launch of a new phase of struggle. It has now embarked on a programme of civil resistance that is likely to embarrass the ruling family.

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## Kingdom of Silence: Confiscation of books and magazines

The authorities in Bahrain, through Ministry of Information, have confiscated a new book written on Bahrain entitled "Bahrain: Min Al Emarah Ela Almalakah" (in Arabic) [Bahrain: From an Emirate to a Kingdom]. The book is written by Ahmed Manisi, and published by the Centre for Political & Strategic Studies (Al-Ahram) Egypt - 2003.

The book was on shelf for sale for the first few days in a book fair '11<sup>th</sup> Al-Ayam Cultural Festival' which is running during the month of Ramadhan at the International Exhibition Centre. The book had been confiscated by the Ministry of Information the moment it came to know about it.

The book was originally a thesis for a Master degree. It talks about the transition of Bahrain from an emirate state to a Kingdom. It presents the political experience and democratic development in the 90's, The National Action Charter, Constitutional amendments, and participation & boycott of parliamentary elections. Perhaps the most critical part of the book that the authorities in Bahrain did not like, was the writer's conclusion that there is an absence of balance between Legislative branch and the Execu-

tive branch in which the latter has more power. The writer also stated some weaknesses of the new Constitution such as the lack of supervision and legislative mechanism of the parliament.

According to a publisher in the book fair, there are many other books that have been confiscated in the last few days; most of them are related to Shia ideology and believes. I am trying to get the list of these books.

It is important to remark that this is the second time in less than a month when published materials are confiscated in Bahrain. About two weeks back, on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2003, the authorities in Bahrain confiscated *Al Mushahid Al Syasi* magazine (issue 19-25<sup>th</sup> October 2003) that is published by BBC - London. The magazine covered the issue of Political Naturalization in Bahrain in six pages 10-15.

These confiscations are clear violations of basic rights including freedom of expression and the access to information & publications. It's also a censorship on freedom of expression and press in Bahrain. It simply violates both Bahrain Constitution and international conventions.

## Protests Against Torturers

On Friday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2003, around 1000 Bahraini people from Sar village (5 miles North of Manama, the capital) demonstrated at the entrance of their village, demanding the torturer Adel Flaifel to leave the Village, where he resides now. The Colonel Adel Falifel is a well known official in the Bahrain Ministry of Interior and known for torturing political prisoners and violating human rights in the past. The demonstrators also demanded nullification of Royal Decree 56-2002, which gives torturers immunity from prosecution. They also called for prosecuting all torturers in Bahrain.

The residents of Sar Village are also preparing a petition that will be submitted to their Municipality representative, asking for expulsion of Falifel from the Village since he is a criminal who can be dangerous for the community.

By offering immunity to torturers, the Al Khalifa are forfeiting their responsibilities laid down by the Convention Against Torture which they had signed in 1998. They have, so far, failed to provide a logical explanation to the international community on why they want to shelter the torturers if they are serious in abandoning this evil.

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## A gloomy outlook for despots

The collapse of Saddam Hussain's regime has sent shock waves in the political hierarchies in most Arab countries. The lesson, however, is still not absorbed. The Iraqi dictator brought his own end through his dictatorial policies and inhumane practices. Instead of investing in the people, the wealth of Iraq, whose oil reserves are second only to Saudi Arabia, was blundered in establishing a ruthless regime that the people hated and the world loathed. Few may have been deceived by its rhetorics, but when the end came, not many tears were shed over its demise. It may appear only logical to expect the eventual collapse of dictatorships especially in modern times where democracies are systematically replacing totalitarian regimes, but it seems that the blind attachment to political power prevents logical thinking. It is difficult to convince dictators to give way to democratic practices; it is equally difficult to suppress people's aspirations for freedom.

Saddam Hussain may have been the most repressive dictator in the region, but the other regimes are in no better position. The demise of that evil system has now exposed other dictatorships. No wonder then that these regimes have

united in rejecting a political change in Iraq. They are now dangerously exposed. As long as Saddam Hussain's regime lasted, it was unimaginable to target the House of Saud for their dictatorship. Now that Baghdad's Ba'hist regime has been dismantled, it became possible to level criticism against the lack of democracy in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. These tribal regimes have refused to modernise, and proved themselves unwilling or unable to change their mental framework and accommodate modern political values. It is unimaginable for them to be asked to uphold the rule of law, establish a pluralistic society or give away part of their authority to the people. To them, they are not only rulers, but owners of the land and people. The mental framework that had made it possible to exercise the human-to-human relations on the basis of master/slave equation, is still the order of the day in these sheikhdoms. It is a futile exercise to ask them to change; they simply can't. Change is beyond their comprehension, and it is a total waste of time and effort to try to convince any of these hereditary dictatorships to give their people the right to determine their destiny. They will even drag their feet against any attempt to weaken their grip on power,

and will always view any democratic change with suspicion and mistrust.

Is it then possible to leave things as they are? Is it logical to expect the people of the Gulf to accept their situation as a fate accomplished and submit to the will of the few whose tribal links and interests are given preference to any other national, religious or human consideration?

Change is inevitable. It is a contradiction to expect dictators to exercise democracy, especially if they feel shielded by foreign powers against the anger of their people. A recently published book has argued that the recent ills that have befallen the American interests in the Middle East are rooted in the US backing of the coup of 1953 against the democratically-elected nationalist leader, Mohammad Mosaddeq. It was the CIA intervention in fomenting anti-Mosaddeq feelings that eventually led to the Islamic revolution and the toppling of the Shah's regime. Since then, the anti-American feelings have become obsessive with disastrous consequences to its reputation and stands in the Arab and Muslim world. It is in the interest of all to end the reign of despotism in the region, and introduced reasonable forms of democracy, ignoring the allegations by dictatorships that democracy is either alien to Islam or the regional cultures.

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## Sham of a democracy that bans cultural freedom

Central to the functioning of a democratic society is the right to communicate one's views freely and without fear of intimidation. This is a universally accepted concept. Once this right is abused, the whole integrity of the "democratic" system is undermined. Despite heavy criticism by a wide range of associations and dignitaries, the Government of Bahrain (or more accurately the ruling Al Khalifa family) has intentionally attempted to ban a locally written play that aimed to explore the shortfalls of the reforms programme.

The attempts took an escalating nature aimed at provoking the organisers in an approach reminiscent of the practices under the notorious State Security Law, thus emphasising the view that the so-called change or reform has only been superficial, keeping the mentalities and practices unchanged. The Government, represented by the Ministry of Information and the Municipal Council, used repressive measures and intimidating threats to the Bahrain society of Engineers, where the play was to be held. The organisers were told the Bahrain Society

of Engineers Hall was not available for them because of the threats.

The escalation grew as the organisers decided to hold the event in the open air,

### No views, only news,

On 6<sup>th</sup> November 2003, the political societies received a letter from the Directorate of Publication and Press (Bahrain Ministry of Information) demanding that their periodical publications should be of news in nature and banning any publication of views or addressing public issues.

This is violation of freedom of speech and explicit contradiction to the slogans raised by the national charter and constitution. It is an attempt of black-out and media censorship.

Recently, there have been many drawbacks in freedom of expression and press in Bahrain. The authorities have started to monitor and censor all press publications including foreign ones. Many books and magazines are confiscated by the Ministry of Information in the last few months.

when the Government again interfered on the ground that the organisers are holding an unpermitted event. The series of attempts by the Government gave the play an unprecedented popularity. Interested of boycotting, the viewers turned in their thousands for the first and only night of the show. Observers rated the play as highly successful despite the hectic arrangement of the stage and audience area in one of the villages. The development of the event is a clear indication that the ruling family does not tolerate freedom of expression.

The banning attempt was politically motivated as the play directed criticism to critical issues, policies and matters of public interests. The Government restriction on the flow of information as expressed by various political groups is at odds with the officially proclaimed constitutional monarchy and freedom of expression. Even if we presume that the event was not officially permitted, the banning attempt shows that the ruling family is selective in enforcing laws. While many cultural and political functions proceeded under similar conditions, opposition groups feel very much unjustly treated when the law suddenly becomes applicable only on them.

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## Psychological Preparation to accept minority status

Last month, one of the Government's cronies in the king's council of representatives, tabled a draft bill to ban religious ceremonies that take the form of marches in the streets. It was a clear move against the majority Shia population. There was an instant outburst of anger among the people, which was, of course expected. Two weeks later, the draft was withdrawn, but is it the end of the matter? Or is it part of a more serious policy against the majority of the population?

It has been suggested that the core issue of Sheikh Hamad's programme is the alteration of the demographic balance in the country in a way that relieves the Al Khalifa family from the stigma of minority rule. Long before the present ruler took up his post following the demise of his father in March 1999, he was known for his sectarian policies, favouring the extremist salafi elements among the population. When Hamad Town was built in mid-eighties, the intention was to make it home to then new settlers brought by the ruling family. The economic downturn at the time forced a freeze on the importation of the "new Bahrainis". The Al Khalifa family was forced to allow native Bahrainis to occupy the town. The idea of a fundamental demographic change became central to Sheikh Hamad's thinking. For the first two years of his reign, he was planning his moves carefully, without specifying any of his intended programmes. He did not take any step to stop the arbitrary arrests, torture or maltreatment of the people.

It now appears that Sheikh Hamad had planned his own agenda beforehand and did not rush to implement it after he took over. The demographic change constitutes the pillar of his programme. He is serious about it and has adopted effective ways to ensure its success. Instead of provoking the people into open revolt against this policy, he has adopted a low key approach, while preparing what he considers a legal ground for it. He issued his decree to offer citizens of other Gulf Cooperation Council member states the right to acquire Bahraini citizenship, while continuing his policy of "gracious acts". He dealt with the psyche of the people in a way that minimizes their resistance to most of his acts and policies. He also removed the tense security environment, thus removing the immediate motive for revolt. Many people have been taken in by these acts and policies, while leading political and religious figures have effectively been silenced by these marginal initiatives. Sheikh Hamad achieved core policies while compromising on the marginal

issues. He abrogated the country's legal constitution and forced his own laws and regulations, with little resistance from major figures of the society. He has implemented his core policy of demographic change among few outcries that have not hindered his efforts. It is amazing that he is allowed to get away with what amounts to be a cultural genocide of the native population. Little effective resistance has been offered by the opposition, while the country's identity is being reformulated by a clique that had originally occupied the islands and had no deep historical roots within its borders. Their piracy appeared to have paid off.

Sheikh Hamad is not in a haste to declare the outcome of his political naturalization programme. He, and his clique, have adopted a policy of repeated denials or total silence when asked about the extent of the demographic change. At the same time, they have based their programme on psychological studies that can only be seen by people who want to see them. One important method is forceful climatization of the people to the idea that they are a minority. He is not openly claiming that, but he is actively promoting it in the sub-consciousness. First came the municipality councils. He decided their date and other logistical matters on the day he abrogated the constitution. Almost everyone took part in these elections. The result was, for the first time in modern history of the country, the Shia won 46 percent of the seats, despite their overwhelming majority. The reaction of the people was furious but also muted. Many sought to explain them on the basis of unjust constituency boundaries. It was an artificial unequal distribution of seats, whereby large and small concentrations of people were given equal number of seats. That is the lesser evil. The reality is that it was a psychological preparation of the majority Shia population to accept a new situation in which they would have been turned into a minority. In future elections, the discrepancies in constituency human sizes may be overcome, but by then, the demographic change would have been implemented.

Form many years, the Shia of Bahrain have been treated as the underdogs of society. In a recent seminar organized by the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, shocking figures were presented for the number of Shias in senior positions, starting from ministerial posts down to departmental managers. The reaction of Sheikh Hamad and his clique was furious. They prefer to keep these figures

from the public at least for the time being. The UN Commission Against Discrimination has been deceived by the Al Khalifa family into believing that discrimination has ended. This is contrary to the reality of modern Bahrain. Sectarianism is rife in almost all sectors of public services. Out of 100 ambassadors and charge de affair there are no more than few Shia. The situation is worst in the ministries of the interior and defence in which Shia employees can hardly be found.

The Al Saeedi draft bill to ban the Shia public ceremonies was not meant to result in a new law. It is too early for that. But it was intended to be a template for the future. It is intended to serve several purposes. First to dishearten those who have refused to be drawn into the Al Khalifa arms and policies, by boycotting the elections of their councils and institutions. There will be many who would raise their voices against further boycotts on the premise that it leads to political losses. Second, it is yet another step in the psychological preparation of the Shia for the future which is being planned by Sheikh Hamad and his clique. It is likely that such draft bills will be presented several times in the future, before a decision is made to put them into practice. By then the Shia would have become a minority, and will have to abide by the wishes of the majority who will dominate the political and religious scenes. Thus any further delay in resisting Sheikh Hamad's programme will lead to catastrophic consequences. His political naturalization programme must be stopped if the cultural and religious identity of the country is to be preserved. The whole world must be made aware of this evil programme. Democracy is the wish of the people, and Sheikh Hamad and his clique must not be allowed to determine the destiny of Bahrain, its demographic composition or cultural and religious identity. Silence now will have disastrous consequences in the future. Those who are advising the Al Khalifa must be made aware of the wickedness of their advice, and that they are participating in the making of a crime against humanity. Cultural genocide is a recognized crime in accordance with the conventions against genocide adopted by the United Nations. The Al Khalifa have failed the people of Bahrain and are adamant to pursue their programmes of dictatorship and despotism. This must be stopped because it is unethical, inhumane and criminal.