

BAHRAIN

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

A new year, more struggle for democracy

As the year 2003 ended, a new era in the Gulf had already dawned. Saddam Hussain is no longer there, and that means much. For the past 35 years, Baghdad's regime had adopted policies that created discord among the inhabitants of the region through his wars, and created an atmosphere of terror through intimidation and absolute dictatorship that became a reference to other regimes. He was the essential ingredient of all evil values; dictatorship and despotism, human rights violation, family favouritism and aggression. At the beginning of his reign, the Ba'thist regime of Baghdad was viewed as pro-Soviet, with leftist and anti-imperialist inclinations. In the seventies, the Gulf monarchies were presented by Iraq's media as western puppets whose removal would benefit the Arab nation. Revolutionaries, including communist elements, found safe havens in Baghdad while Moscow was a full-supportive ally. Internally, Saddam Hussain adopted iron-fist policy, purging anyone who would not tow the line of the Ba'th Party. Muslim activists, Kurds, communists and even disloyal Ba'thists were mercilessly purged.

The advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 led to a dramatic change in the region. Saddam Hussain became so furious that he led a white coup, removing Ahmad Hassan Al Bakr and declaring himself president. Iraq then entered the blackest era of its history. At the instigation of western powers, most notably the United States of America, he launched the war against Iran that would last for eight bloody years. It is estimated that it killed half a million from both sides with more than one million casualties, and caused damages to the two countries that exceeded the oil income of both countries since oil was produced five decades earlier. The Gulf states formed the Gulf Cooperation Council in order to protect themselves against the perceived threat of the revolution in Iran, and was instrumental in providing political and financial support to the Iraqi war efforts. At this stage Iraq was gradually becoming more allied with the West, and the United States appeared to have been

instrumental in fomenting the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran war. Towards the end of it, the US took an active role against the Iranian fleet before shooting down an Iranian civilian Airbus aircraft killing all 290 people on board. Saddam Hussain thus became a friend of the GCC countries only to become a menace few years later. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 marked the end of Saddam-GCC honeymoon. But it remained the tent under which they sheltered as they continued their dictatorships and human rights violation.

Now that Saddam Hussain has been captured and faces the prospect of a local or international war crimes tribunal, the question is whether the Gulf rulers have learnt the bitter lesson; that dictatorship cannot last, and that reliance on the others for protection cannot replace the need to have popular support. This support cannot be achieved in the absence of a minimum form of democracy and respect of human rights. Saudi Arabia is now under attack for several reasons among which is the lack of political reforms in the kingdom. For the Bahraini regime all these developments are bad news. For the past thirty years, the Al Khalifa had leaned on the severity of the situation in Iraq and Saudi Arabia in terms of the lack of democracy and human rights. They had anticipated that change was coming to Iraq, and that the Saudis would themselves be targeted by the US in the aftermath of 11th September attacks. They had thus attempted to present a different image to the world. Three years ago, Sheikh Hamad, who had remained silent for two years following the demise of his father and his rise to power, presented his programme that was flawed in every sense. The only point of strength has been its ability to fool many people in a short time. The Al Khalifa are anxious to avoid being linked to either Iraq or Saudi Arabia, and thought their marginal political steps would create a positive image in the world. For three years they have been blundering the wealth of the country to finance their media and public relations exercises, hoping it would calm down the situation.

Last month was, however, an exceptional period for the Al Khalifa. For the first time in three years, the people have proven their resilience and ability to mobilise in their opposition to the Al Khalifa dictatorship. The opposition, both inside and outside, were able to present their case to the outside world. In London, the opposition held several activities, including a press conference at the House of Lords, a picket outside the Dorchester Hotel where the Embassy was holding its annual reception party, several TV shows and other public relations exercises. Simultaneous with this, the torture victims organised a big demonstration in the streets of the capital, Manama, to protest the Al Khalifa's attempts to shelter the torturers. They were commemorating the Day of the Martyrs on 17th December, when in 1994, the Al Khalifa ordered their mercenaries to kill demonstrators and two Bahraini youth fell on that day. More young men and women were mercilessly killed in later demonstrations or under torture. The message to the world this time was clear; the Al Khalifa have failed to modernise their regime, and the people of Bahrain can no longer be deceived by their dismal reforms. It is now clear that the work by the Al Khalifa to improve their image for three years has been defeated, and that their programme of deception could be brought to a halt. That is certainly a big problem especially to the ruler and his son who have built a reputation of being reformist. The next few months are likely to witness an increase in anti-government activities calling for democratic reforms, and ending the honey moon enjoyed by the Al Khalifa for the past three years. The US is well-advised to distance itself from the deception programme of the rulers of Bahrain, and ensure a proper democratic regime be established in Iraq. If they succeed in Baghdad the Gulf dictatorships that have led to extremism and terrorism could be forced either to modernise or go. Meanwhile the people of Bahrain will continue their pro-democracy activities ignoring the deception of the Al Khalifa, and calling on the international community for help.