

BAHRAIN

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The hard choice confronting Al Khalifa: democracy or demise

The political experience over the past few years have confirmed the suspicions by the opposition that the main objective of Sheikh Hamad's initiative was to absorb the people's frustration and allow a new atmosphere in which they can vent it off. That initiative has now been exhausted and the frustration is once again becoming a major factor in rallying the opposition forces once more. There is almost a unanimous verdict that the long-awaited reforms have not materialised and that Sheikh Hamad has become an absolute ruler with ruthless tactics and policies. The events of the past few weeks have confirmed this view. In 1992, 1994 and 1995 the people signed petitions calling on the Amir to reinstate the legally-binding contractual constitution. No one was arrested despite the cruelty of the Khalifa-Henderson unholy alliance and their draconian State Security Law. However, when, few months ago, a similar petition was prepared for the people to sign, more than twenty citizens were arrested, maltreated and threatened with life imprisonment. This is happening in the "democratic kingdom of Bahrain". Twenty years ago, Sheikh Isa Qassim, who was then a senior religious leader, was accused of belonging to a clandestine movement whose aim was to overthrow the Al Khalifa rule by force. Due to his seniority, he was questioned for few hours and allowed to go home. But when, few weeks ago, he joined a peaceful march in protest against the attacks on the holy shrines in Iraq, he and other senior religious figures were attacked with tear gas and plastic bullets. They were knocked down to the point of unconsciousness. Once again, this is what Sheikh Hamad would do to bully anyone who opposes the Al Khalifa dictatorship.

The situation is moving steadily towards anarchy, instability and political tension. The scene is set for more political confrontations between the people of Bahrain and the Al Khalifa rulers. These rulers have refused to abide by the democratic rule and are adamant on continuing their unholy attacks on civil liberties and freedom. The councils created by the ruling family are failing. They have attracted no real attention and have become more of a symbolic nature than political entities. The failure of the "legislative" council has now made it easier for opponents to convince the people not to take part in any of the Al Khalifa political initiatives. There has been unease at the prospect of breaking the ranks of the national alliance by people who are keen on "not missing" the opportunity to take part in the political debate through these bodies. The danger has now ceded. The grassroots have become very much anti-Al Khalifa and would not budge to their demand to pursue a political line. The rulers have, so far, failed to address the grievances of the past decades, and insisted on sorting out the mess in "unconventional" methods. They resorted to policies of deception, cooption and containment. The past eighteen months have provided them with more than one billion dollars of extra cash in oil revenues the price of which have jumped. None of this extra revenue goes to the budget. The Al Khalifa have blundered the country's wealth with no fear from any

retribution from the people. They are now able to practice bribery in its worst forms, buying off journalists, human rights activists, lobbyists and public relations experts. The aim is to cover the evils of their rule. But have they succeeded?

More people are now disillusioned than ever. As the Al Khalifa insist on forcing on people their tailor-made "constitution" the frustration becomes more entrenched. With rising unemployment, the situation is becoming more polarised and is threatening to become more volatile. Those among the opposition who presented themselves as more moderate are now finding it difficult to justify to their constituencies what the Al Khalifa are doing especially in terms of political manoeuvring, wheeling and dealing. There is now more vigour, especially among the youth, to confront the ruling family at any necessary level. The regime is gradually becoming hostage to its own policies. Their predicament became even more serious after the arrest of a group of citizens on the suspicion that they belonged to Al Qa'da. The arrests created more tension in the region. Within 48 hours they were forced to release them on advice from certain quarters. The US Embassy in Manama, immediately asked American citizens to leave the country, because of the heightened threat. It was concluded by some experts that the Al Khalifa came face to face with the US on the issue. The Embassy requested all US citizens to leave Bahrain as a precaution. That was a big blow to the policy that aimed at creating the image of political and economic openness. Within two days the group was re-arrested. The Al Khalifa had sought to alter the demographic composition of the country through a process of political naturalisation. Tens of thousands of foreigners, mainly from areas where Al Qa'eda recruited its members, were given Bahraini nationality. It is possible that some of those "new Bahrainis" had already been members of Al Qa'eda. It is a predicament that the Al Khalifa policies created and which is now haunting its proponents.

Within a span of three years, Bahrain has made a complete circle, from absolute dictatorship, to what appeared to be a promising democracy, back to monarchical despotism. The opposition is now recovering from the initial trauma in which some of its members became prey to the hollow promises of the ruler. More of the dis-illusioned young citizens are turning to the opposition having lost faith in the ability of the Al Khalifa to modernise themselves to modern standards of modern governance and civility. The recent seminar at the House of Lords in London has sent clear messages to the Al Khalifa dictators that they have to choose between the survival of their ruling dynasty within an agreed framework of constitutional political system, or an eventual demise. Ancient regimes cannot be expected to last forever, and their survival is linked to their ability to adapt to modern political challenges. The Al Khalifa dictatorship has lasted much longer than the natural life span of similar earlier monarchies and the hour of choice is haunting them. They are well-advised to opt for real openness than insisting on their old methods that have now become futile.

Power outage confirms failure in policies

Never has there been in the recent history of Bahrain a complete blackout rendering the whole country inactive at all levels. The Monday event can be nothing less than a scandal. With the temperature soaring above 40 degrees, thousands of people rushed across the causeway to Saudi Arabia in search for cool air. Others spent their time along the shorelines to cool off in the sea, while the few gas stations that were operating on standby generators witnessed long queues of cars, where some drivers waited for 2 hours for 20 litres of fuel. The questions that many ask is why should this happen in this little oil rich country? Despite the many warnings that were sent to the government by many politicians and professionals, nothing has been done over the past years to overcome the problem.

The country has witnessed a number of power cuts during the summers of the past three years. These have worsened this year. The resentment of the people could be felt in the local press through the many articles and complaints filed by citizens. The systematic power cuts took place despite assurances on many occasions by the Minister of Electricity and Water that this summer would be different. And different it was on Monday.

The country has suffered huge losses as businesses closed down and communications cut off. Being a main banking centre in the region, the reputation of the country has also suffered. Hospitals were also in a great predicament as the lives of many depend on life support instruments which require electricity.

The Monday blackout reaffirms the government's deficient policies. The plan-

ning practices, if there are any, are not adequate and do not relate to a clear strategic plan for the country. Development in the country is confused and does not follow a structured national strategic plan which takes into account infrastructure services. Some observers think there is a 10 years gap between the present state of development and the existing level of infrastructure services.

The government's failure to provide reliable services to the people include also the sectors of water, roads and sewer systems, where many places are still not provided with these basic utilities.

Monday 23rd of August will be remembered for many years as it exposed the corruption and absence of planning that are deeply rooted in the country.

Annan: UN fundamental principles should be turned into practice for indigenous peoples

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in a message on the occasion of International Day of the World's Indigenous People (August 9), called on everyone to reaffirm their determination to broaden the circle of solidarity for indigenous peoples so that the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter -- peace, development and human rights -- are turned into practice for indigenous peoples everywhere.

Following is the full text of his message, as reprinted in a UN Information Center press release: "This year we commemorate the 10th anniversary of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People, launched by the United Nations General Assembly together with the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People.

"This commemoration is an opportunity to celebrate the richness of indigenous cultures and the contributions of indigenous peoples to the human family. But more importantly, it is a chance for men and women everywhere to take stock of the situation of indigenous peoples in our world today, and of how much more needs to be done to improve their lives. "For far too long, indigenous peoples' lands have been taken away, their cultures denigrated or directly attacked, their languages and customs suppressed, their wisdom and traditional knowledge overlooked or exploited, and their sustainable ways of developing natural resources dismissed.

Some have even faced the threat of extinction. "Indigenous peoples have been coming to United Nations fora for many years to appeal for the support of the whole UN family.

A dialogue and partnership with the UN has been launched in the context of the International Decade. That process needs to bear fruit through decisive action at the regional, national and local level, including to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

In those efforts, governments, inter-governmental organizations and civil society must work to empower indigenous peoples and ensure their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

"On this 10th anniversary of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People, let us remember the most fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter -- peace, development and human rights -- and reaffirm our determination to broaden the circle of solidarity for indigenous peoples so that these principles are turned into practice for indigenous peoples everywhere."

Jailed Briton to Sue Bahrain Government

A Gloucester man who served a prison sentence for stabbing to death an American in Bahrain said today he had begun the process of suing the Gulf kingdom's government, claiming he was falsely imprisoned.

Richard Mechan, 38, was released last August after serving three and a half years of a five-year sentence for killing Marshall Earl Emmons, 31, of Tucson, Arizona.

He was released after Foreign Secretary Jack Straw wrote to officials in Bahrain. Emmons died on January 6, 2000 from a deep chest wound. Mechan claims he acted in self defence and says he did not receive a fair trial.

Bahraini officials could not be reached for comment. "I have served a notice that I intend to sue the government of Bahrain for falsely imprisoning me and for tortur-

ing me physically and mentally," Mechan said in a telephone interview.

He said he had started the legal process in a London court by filing notice of his intent to sue.

"I was treated appallingly and I am not going to take this. Now I am a free man and I am using the rule of law in my country," Mechan said.

"I want my name cleared and I am seeking financial compensation from Bahrain," he said.

In his first trial, which ended in July 2000, Mechan was sentenced to 15 years. A year later, an appeal court reduced the sentence to seven years. Mechan's lawyer appealed again, arguing self-defence. In May 2002, the High Appeals Court reduced the sentence to five years and he was released last August.

International Seminar in support of Bahraini people

On 17th August 2004, a seminar was held at the House of Lords to mark the Independence Day (the 33rd anniversary of the British withdrawal from Bahrain on 15th August 1971) and the 29th anniversary of the dissolution of parliament. It was organised by the British Parliamentary Human Rights Committee and was chaired by Lord Avebury, its Deputy-Chairman.

It was addressed by: Ali Rabi'a, a member of the dissolved parliament, Hassan Mushaim'e, the Deputy-President of Al Wefaq Islamic Society, Abdul Ra'uf Al Shayeb and Adel Al Abbasi of the National Committee for Victims of Torture, Gabriel from Redress, Samantha Knight from the Bar Human Rights Committee, Dr Abdul Jalil Al Singace of Al Wefaq Islamic Society and Jeremy Corbyn, MP. A short film about the experience of a Bahraini prisoner was also shown.

The event was covered by several media outlets, including Al Jazeera.

The following is the text of the opening remarks by Lord Avebury.

We are here again, as we have been for some years past, to mark Bahrain's Independence Day, the anniversary of which fell on Sunday. Its becoming something of a tradition for us to hold some discussions on these occasions of the topics which are taboo in Bahrain itself, though of great interest and concern to the people: the inability of the people to change their government through the ballot box; the absence of any process leading to constitutional reform; corruption at the highest level; discrimination against the Shi'a; demographic engineering by manipulation of citizenship; restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, and the illegality of Decree Law 56, which granted an amnesty to past torturers. We have a distinguished panel of experts who I expect will touch on some of these matters, and we also have a message from our colleague Professor Abdulhadi Khalaf, copies of which are available.

May I welcome you all here, and particularly the representative of the Gulf Centre for Strategic Studies, the PR voice of Bahrain in the UK, who are regular attenders at our seminars. I am sure it would be of interest, not only to those present here, but to a wider audience in Bahrain, to know how much they get paid for their services, and perhaps they will enlighten us later.

I read in the Gulf Daily News the week before last that two of the Bahraini detainees in Guantanamo Bay are said to have been tortured by their US captors, and that the chairman of the Detainees Support Committee has said this is unacceptable. Torture is indeed seen as so heinous an offence, by all

right-thinking people, that it is treated as a crime of universal jurisdiction.

Persons who commit torture, whether in Guantanamo Bay, Baghdad, Kabul or Manama should be brought to trial and punished. According to the GDN, Bahrain asked US authorities more than two years ago for an investigation into injuries sustained by detainee Juma Muhammad al-Dawsari, allegedly in an attack by eight guards.

The injuries were discovered when the Ministry sent a delegation to Guantanamo Bay in April 2002. But they can hardly demand that the Americans put their torturers on trial, while at the same time exonerating Ian Henderson and Adel Flaifel for the tortures over which they presided in Bahrain over many years. The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights says that Bahrain and other Arab states should take up the ill-treatment of detainees by the Americans, and it will be interesting to see whether they get any reply.

Unfortunately, the authorities have regularly threatened to close down the BCHR over the last year, under the Societies Law of 1989, which gives a Minister power to shut down any NGO for a period of 45 days if, for instance, it engages in politics. This power is being used to restrict any discussion of constitutional change, as we saw when Samantha Knights form the Bar Human Rights Committee and her colleague were turned back at Manama airport when they were on the way to address a seminar on the subject.

The Sunday Times, August 01, 2004

**Don't call it a holiday,
call it a fact-finding mission...**

Nicholas Hellen, Social Affairs Editor

IT MUST be coincidence. Two senior Tory MPs keep finding themselves on the same important fact-finding trips in exotic locations and it so happens that they are also married.

Andrew Mackay, a senior backbencher, and his wife Julie Kirkbride, the party's culture spokesman, have been on a series of expenses-paid official visits together to hot countries, the latest register of MPs' interests has revealed.

The couple, who married in 1997, were both invited in their own right as MPs. They stayed in five-star beach hotels and safari lodges during part of their visits to Bahrain and Botswana. In Egypt they stayed at the Red Sea diving resort of Sharm el Sheikh.

Why is the constitution a matter of such sensitivity that Bahrainis were not even allowed to know what Ms Cherie Booth QC said when she addressed a closed door meeting in Manama about constitutions in general? The main reason, I believe, is that any discussion would have to begin with an analysis of the differences between the National Charter, for which the people voted in the referendum, and the present constitution, promulgated by Decree, and without the normal process which precedes the adoption of a new constitution in any country that doesn't already have a working legislature, of a constitutional convention or equivalent process for extensive participation by the people. There would be unfavourable comparison between what happened in Bahrain, where this constitution was foisted on the people by a three-card trick, and what is planned for Iraq, for example, if the security problems can be solved.

Clearly also, the extent of the executive power still held by the ruling hereditary oligarchy, and its compatibility with the principles of constitutional monarchy, would arise in any such discussion. Where the monarch has the absolute right to appoint Ministers, Ambassadors, Judges and Governors, and to dismiss the legislature, the system of government should perhaps be described as an executive monarchy. Nor can it be described as a democracy when, although people go through the motions of casting votes, they cannot change their government, or even talk about possible reforms. I did think, when I met the King at the beginning of 2003, that he agreed with me when I suggested that all democracies had one essential characteristic in common, whatever stage they had reached, and that was receptivity to further improvements. It is perhaps the lack of this property, more than any one particular grievance, which is causing dissatisfaction and concern in Bahrain today. There are no mechanisms by which fundamental changes can be promoted, because the existing settlement, handed down from on high, can only be amended by the monarch himself, and it has been made painfully clear, that he doesn't want the matter to be raised.

It is in these circumstances that I believe our seminars have a crucial function to perform. Although we are not reported in the mainstream media in Bahrain, a telling indicator of the lack of freedom of expression, what is said here is widely disseminated by alternative means, and we keep alive the hope of progress which was raised when the King embarked on a set of reforms which might have been the curtain raiser to a genuine political transition.

MP and his wife enjoy £80,000 free holidays

MP and his wife enjoy £80,000 free holidays Aug 15 2004 By Jeanette Oldham, Sunday Mercury 15th August 2004 A Midland MP and his wife have enjoyed £80,000 worth of free holidays at some of the world's most luxurious hotels over the last seven years.

Ken and Brenda Purchase have jetted out for no fewer than FIFTEEN breaks to the Gulf state of Bahrain - infamous for its human rights abuses - and Egypt. They have stayed in some of oil-rich Bahrain's finest hotels and have received gifts such as an expensive watch and jewellery.

The Labour MP and former trades union boss, who represents deprived Wolverhampton North East, claims that he was on legitimate 'fact-finding' trips. But he and his wife get the VIP treatment when they visit the Gulf.

Among the hotels they have stayed at is the Ritz Carlton in Manama, Bahrain. Owned by the King, its usual customers are world-leaders, Royals and the fabulously wealthy. But fury has erupted about the breaks, which have been paid for by the Egyptian government and a London-based lobby group with links to Saddam Hussein.

The Gulf Centre for Strategic Studies is run by Palestinian Omar Al Hassan, who lobbied for the Iraqi dictator in the late 1980s.

Last night Simon Jevon, a Tory councillor on Wolverhampton City Council, said: "This is appalling. I'm staggered and outraged by the amount of hospitality he has received. "What on earth have his constituents got out of all this? This is just blatant freeloading.

"Why would he take his wife on these trips if they're meant to be business trips, not summer holidays?" The lavish hospitality enjoyed by the MP and his wife were an insult to hard-up families in Wolverhampton, Mr Jevon said. "Some of us have been asking for years what Ken Purchase does for Wolverhampton," he added.

"Now his constituents will know - he's been staying at the Ritz Carlton in Bahrain." But Mr Purchase, 65, denied any wrongdoing - and insisted that he was working while he and his wife were staying at the hotel. "What do people expect me to do?" he asked. "We're guests of the King and the government.

We stay where they put us. "We only stay in ordinary rooms." When the Sunday Mercury pointed out that ordinary rooms at the hotel all had 'executive' status and cost £405 a night, he said: "I'm sick and tired of being asked about this.

"The only people who ever ask me about these trips are my Tory enemies and the Bahrain human rights bunch.

"I declare these trips and not one constituent has ever asked me about them." Asked what benefits the UK and his constituents had received from his trips, he said: "There is an American army base in Bahrain and we are allowed to keep a military presence there.

"When I am representing my country, I am representing my constituents." Mr Purchase has come under fire in the past because of his close relationship with Mr Al Hassan, who also administers the All-Party Bahrain Group in the House of Commons for which Mr Purchase acts as secretary.

Mr Purchase and Mr Al Hassan take MPs to oil-rich Bahrain every year. The country has had no democracy since 1975 and dissidents have been tortured and murdered. In 1983 Mr Al Hassan was dismissed from his job with the Arab League in London.

He later said his dismissal had been a 'political conspiracy' and said there was no shame in having lobbied for Iraq. Mr Purchase was forced to go public on his trips by House of Commons laws which require MPs to declare any free benefits.

The Register of MPs' Interests show that the Midland member went on eight 'factfinding' trips to Bahrain and seven to Egypt in the past seven years. His wife accompanied him on all of them. The Egyptian visits were paid for in full by the country's Government. The register does not require MPs to reveal any further details about foreign trips, such as the cost.

In 2001 he was criticised after he failed to declare one of his Bahrain visits during which he received free medical treatment for kidney stones.

A millionaire Gulf businessman who met Mr Purchase at a sumptuous dinner at the Bahrain Labour Minister's house during one of his many visits said political guests were given jewellery by their hosts.

"Even minor dignitaries get very expensive guests," he said. "Foreign politicians are routinely given \$12,000 watches, like Rolexes. "They're discreet about it.

Nobody comes up to you and says 'Please accept this gift as a thank you for coming.' Presents are left on guests' pillows." The businessman's identity is known to the Sunday Mercury but he has asked us not to disclose it.

Mr Purchase has previously declared an oriental rug from Egypt and a watch from Bahrain on the Register of Interests. Asked about claims that he had received more jewellery, he said indignantly: "I've never had any!" Then he reconsidered, and added: "Well, there was the watch. And my wife had a bangle.

But that's it." Mr Purchase confirmed that he had stayed at the Ritz Carlton several times and at other hotels. Sources in Bahrain confirmed these included the ultra-luxurious Regency Intercontinental.

With its own private beach, a selection of swimming pools and a world-class spa, the Ritz Carlton is Bahrain's finest hotel. Rates range from £405 a night for executive rooms to £868 for diplomatic suites. Reservations spokeswoman Asima Abduk said that British MPs who stayed at the hotel were always given diplomatic suites. Occasionally, a British politician stayed in the Royal suite at £1,851 a night, she added.

Lord Avebury, vice-chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group, said that Mr Purchase's trips could not be called anything other than 'junkets'. "It's appalling when you consider Bahrain's dire human rights record," he said. "If you're wined and dined by the King of Bahrain, and stay in luxury hotels and only visit palaces and attend sumptuous dinners, how can you know what life is like for those who have been abused, and for the thousands of people who live in poverty?" Dr Saeed Shehabi, of the Bahrain Freedom Movement, said: "Mr Purchase's trips have been the talk of certain circles in Bahrain for years. He's well-known. He and his wife and treated like royalty when they go.

"The itinerary for the MPs' trips he organises are always the same - going to palaces, meeting Royals and the Prime Minister, and going to business centres." When the Mercury challenged him on Friday night Mr Purchase remained unrepentant.

"What do you expect them to do? Put me up in a B&B?" he demanded. "If anyone thinks I am doing wrong they can report me. I imagine that you will write a report that is hostile.

I will just have to live with it." * The world-class hospitality lapped up by the MP and his wife for free would have cost paying holidaymakers up to £80,000. * The Register of MPs' Interests states that Mr Purchase usually stays in Bahrain for six days and has visited the state eight times in seven years.

* Eight six-night breaks in a £868-a-night diplomatic suite of the Ritz Carlton hotel - where visiting politicians are put up for free - would cost a paying customer £41,664.

* A similar standard of accommodation in Egypt would take the couple's total bill to more than £80,000 - and that's without flights, travel expenses or meals.

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