

# BAHRAIN

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

## Ahead of GCC Summit: Signs of political flare-up worries the Al Khalifa

The stalemate in the case of Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja who was arrested for his peaceful expression of opinion is consolidating the status quo that had prevailed in the past thirty years, and threatening the stability of the political system. The situation has become polarized in a way that could undermine the position of the Al Khalifa family which had occupied the islands in 1783. Mr Al Khawaja had called for the resignation of the prime minister who had occupied this post for more than three decades and has led a regime of corruption, cronyism and absolute dictatorship. He was speaking at a seminar dedicated to the issue of poverty among the people of Bahrain and had to relate this phenomena to the main person behind the developments of the past thirty years. The Al Khalifa family reacted swiftly by arresting Mr Al Khawaja, dissolving the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and closing for 45 days the Al Oruba Club which had organized the function.

Several weeks on and the Al Khalifa are no where near to achieving their goal of silencing the opposition or ending the political strife that has befallen the country for the previous three decades.

The world community has reacted favourably with Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, considered him a prisoner of conscience, and called on the Government of Bahrain to release him un-conditionally and apologise to his family. It is the first time in four years that there has been so much anti-Al Khalifa international statements, and is seen as heralding a new chapter of struggle with international dimension. It is up to the international community to ensure that dictatorship is eradicated from the face of earth, that oppressed people be supported in their struggle against tyranny and that freedom be propped up especially in regions where it has been lacking. The anger arose from the nature of the case in which a citizens is held behind bars for 45 days for calling on the prime minister to resign after 35 years of dictatorship under his rule. It is happening in a country which has spent millions of dollars propping its image as

a beacon for democracy in the Gulf, a claim that had already been refuted by other events. When the cabinet which had reigned over the country for more than three decades is given a new life in government with a huge propaganda machine supported by the wealth of the nation, then dictatorship is only a mild description of the state of affairs. When torturers who had committed heinous acts against innocent civilians are promoted and offered honorary medals, while their victims remain invalid and incapacitated, then the façade of democracy must be destroyed.

Over the past month, Mr Al Khawaja had been forced to remain behind bars while the people were pondering their line of action to get his unconditional release. The activities of the committee which had been form in his support has been overwhelming. Pickets, demonstrations and congregations were formed to highlight his case, while his wife, Khadeeja Al Mousawi, did a brave job facing the press, answering questions and reaffirming the statements of her husband that call for the sacking of the prime minister. It is an act of bravery by a Bahraini woman who has a noble cause to pursue. The Al Khalifa have remained, as ever, secluded from the population while the masses were carrying posters of the prisoner of conscience in every corner of the country. The Court room which was presided over by an Egyptian judge, Mohammad Kafrawi, became a place of indictment of the regime, while Mr Al Khawaja acted as the prosecution. He landed a barrage of criticism of the totalitarian regime of the Al Khalifa, especially the prime minister, while protesters filled the Court halls. At some point, the foreign-staffed riot police fired teargas in the crowded chambers, to the horror of the judge himself. It was sheer mayhem. It is now clear that the Al regime has become hostage to this unique prisoner. It is unable to act with a degree of rationalism. Any line of action could land the Al Khalifa into more trouble. Mr Al Khawaja is a man known for his steadfastness, sharp observation and deep calcula-

tions. His aim is to topple the ugly face of dictatorship, at any cost. He is doing it in the most civilized way, emulating great men like Mahatma Ghandi and Neslon Mandela whose great personalities and steadfastness led to the eventual end of the British rule in India and the apartheid regime in South Africa. In Bahrain, the end of Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa will signify the end of the most vicious dictatorship in the region. The Al Khalifa are still holding out in anticipation of a miraculous exit from the quagmire they had created for themselves. But this time, it could well be that their time is up and that unless real political reforms take place, the crisis could undermine the foundation of the hereditary rule of the Al Khalifa. The next few weeks will be crucial to the long-term survival of that brutal and backward dictatorship. If it reacts fiercely as it did ten years earlier, then the crisis could be compounded.

As the Al Khalifa wait anxiously for an exit strategy, their eyes are fixed on the forthcoming GCC summit in Manama scheduled for December. It is a grim reminder of the events of 1994 when the popular uprising provided the main material for the journalists who had been invited by the regime to cover the summit. If they do not find a quick face-saving solution, a repeat of the events that had taken place ten years earlier could well be repeated. For Mr Al Khawaja, he is not in a hurry to leave his prison cell. He is a dedicated struggler with a brave and noble message of freedom, truth and humanity. His captors have become imprisoned by their own stupidity and foolishness. The GCC summit could be shadowed, once again by the internal strife in the host country. That is not a good note for Sheikh Hamad to have. He has only one choice: to release Mr Al Khawaja unconditionally, apologise to him and his family, repeal the draconian laws and constitution you had imposed on the people, re-instate the contractual constitution and start a meaningful dialogue with the people of Bahrain. Without these, you will become the prisoner.

## Return of State Security Act Practices

Government actions over the past few weeks demonstrate without doubt that the authorities have already fallen back on the promises of "political reforms". Among the ill-intentioned practices are:

- 1) Imprisonment of a human rights activist,
- 2) Closure of a centre advocating spread of human rights in Bahrain,
- 3) The temporary closure of a cultural club, and
- 4) postponement of planned dialogue session between the government and political societies.

At the height of so-called "political reforms" that started in late 2001 Sheikh Hamad, the ruler, had repealed the notorious State Security Act. The act dates back to 1974 when majority MPs had refused to adopt it, a step that led to the eventual dissolution of the parliament in

### Crackdown on a peaceful 'Car Parade' protest

A prominent human rights activist, Abdul-Raouf Al-Shayeb and Mahmood Ramadan were arrested during a 'Car Parade' protest that was organized on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2004 at around 8 pm by the committee Abdul-Raouf is the Spokesperson and Mahmood Ramadan is board member for the National Committee for Martyrs & Victims of Torture in Bahrain.

Abdul Raouf and 10 other protesters were surrounded by 30 anti-riot police in a highway for about three hours before being arrested. People from around Bahrain went to protest and to negotiate with the police for their release. All negotiation attempts failed. Around 8,00 people gathered at the site and started to chant pro Abdul-Hadi slogans while flagging his pictures and the Bahraini flags.

There were around 200 anti-riot police at the site standing in ready positions to attack, while around 30 of them were surrounding the 11 surrounded protesters including Abdul-Raouf Al-Shayeb.

Police could not tolerate the growing crowd. At around 11:30 pm the police started firing teargas extensively towards the crowd and arrested the 11 surrounded protesters and many others in the crowd, estimated 30 people. Several people were seen wounded and police prevented people from taking at least one man to hospital. In general, the protest was peaceful and did not need the harsh crackdown and these severe measures.

There were three other 'Car Parades' organized at the same time in different areas of Bahrain, but all ended peacefully except the above one where the police officer responsible for the area is said to be very harsh and did not want to negotiate with the organizers of the parade.

1975. Elected MPs opposed the document on the grounds of violating basic human rights, and that it gave the regime the right to imprison any person on suspicion of being a threat for up to three years subject to renewal.

Three recent developments suggest that the regime had already reinstated the infamous act. First, in late September, a noted human rights activist, Abdul Hadi Al-Khawaja was arrested for 45 days by an order issued by the Prosecutor General, who, himself was the President of the notorious State Security Court. Strangely, the justice ministry does not regulate the prosecution entity, but it reports directly to the ruler.

Lately, the case was adjourned until November 3rd, which coincides with the near completion of the 45 days custody. Abdul Hadi Al-Khawaja had lived as an exile in Denmark in the 1990s and was amongst the first nationals to return home at the start of the "political reforms". He enjoys widespread respect in the country for spreading the culture of human rights as well as speaking his mind. In short, he was unjustly imprisoned for a speech he had made on 24th September during a popular gathering to discuss poverty in Bahrain.

### Hundreds of organizations call for Al Khawaja's release

Over the past month, many human rights organizations and civil society institutions around the world expressed their condemnation of the arrest of Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja and demanded his unconditional release. The following is a statement issued by several Egyptian organizations.

#### Abdel Hady Al-Khawaja Must be Released Immediately

The undersigned organizations argue the Bahraini government to rescind its order to close one of the leading Arab human rights organizations, The Bahraini Center for Human Rights, and release its executive director Abdel Hady Al-Khawaja.

The undersigned organizations assert that the arrest of Al-Khawaja and the closure of the BHRC for criticizing the Prime Minister contradicts with the basic democratic rules and the freedom of expression, without which the talk about civil society's elements is nothing but claims.

Egyptian human rights organizations argue the Bahraini authorities to be able to accept censure and to work on correcting the wrong practices instead of attempting to silence the voices of those who try to unveil them.

Abdul Hadi blamed the policies of prime minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa for prevalent suffering of some 80,000 Bahrainis (or 20 percent of the nationals) who live below poverty line. Certainly, as a citizen, Abdul Hadi had the right to express his views peacefully, which in no way promoted violent means. Second, the regime, through the ministry of labour & social affairs rather than the ministry of justice ordered the dissolution and closure of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. Such an order must be issued by the ministry of justice but not in Bahrain where exception is the rule.

Third, the famous Al Oruba Club was closed for 45 days in connection with the extraordinary poverty meeting. But the authorities cut short the closure order to 28 days after the Club's board issued an apology to the premier (who by the way is Bahrain's only prime minister since independence from Britain in 1971). This marks the first time that Al Oruba Club was closed in its 60-years history.

Fourth, the regime suddenly decided to indefinitely postpone a planned meeting involving officials from the labour & social affairs ministry and four political groups discussing constitutional reforms by citing a unique charge. The story says that opposition officials had held a

*Continued on Page 3*

To immediately release Abdel Hady al-Khawaja and to allow the BHRC to resume its activity without restrictions, except for those provided by real democratic rules, are steps required to prove wrong what is said about the setback witnessed by Bahrain. These practices recall the Henderson's age, who had been torturing many Bahraini political and human rights activists for more than 22 years, during which the Bahraini government kept denying these violations till they have been discovered few years ago. Real democracy means the existence of different opinions, criticize, problems as well as the existence of dialogues and discussions to solve these problems, not to silence voices and limit the civil society's activities.

#### The Signing Organizations:

*Association for Human Rights*

*Legal Aid*

*Egyptian Association Against Torture*

*Egyptian Center for the Rights of the Child*

*Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights*

*Habib Center for Environmental Rights*

*Hisham Mubarak Law Center National*

*Association for Human Rights and Human Development*

*South Center for Human Rights*

*The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information*

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## Al Khawaja's case revived people's struggle

**The following are some of the news dispatches by news agencies on the case of Abdul Khawaja which has revived the popular struggle for democracy.**

### **Bahraini Activist's Jailing Sparks Protest**

*AP, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2004*

MANAMA, Bahrain: Supporters of a Bahraini human rights worker scuffled with police and shouted slogans against the prime minister outside the court Wednesday as a judge denied bail to the activist, who is being prosecuted after criticizing the Gulf nation's leadership.

Police fired tear gas to disperse the crowd of about 100 supporters of Abdul-Hadi al-Khawajah, executive director of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, who was detained Sept. 25 after publicly calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Sheik Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa.

Al-Khawajah, who arrived in court in hand-cuffs, pleaded not guilty to charges of inciting hatred against the government and circulating false information about government officials.

Judge Syed Mohammed Kafrawi asked al-Khawajah if in his speech last month he had made any personal comments about the prime minister. The defendant replied "No," and said he expressed only his "political beliefs and thoughts."

Defense lawyer Mohammed Ahmed told the judge that the detention of al-Khawaja was "unconstitutional because it restricts the right of freedom of speech." But the judge refused the request to release al-Khawajah on bail.

The judge adjourned the trial to Monday to give the defense more time to prepare its case.

The crowd outside the court building held banners reading "PM: time for you to go" and chanted "Death to Khalifa," referring to the prime minister.

Police scuffled with the protesters as the crowd tried to force its way into the courtroom.

One protester managed to squeeze past the police and rushed into the court shouting, "Long live Abdul-Hadi!"

The judge stopped proceedings as police hustled the protester out of the court and arrested him.

When police fired tear gas, it dispersed the crowd temporarily, but the gas drifted into the court building and caused choking in the corridors. One police officer was overwhelmed by tear gas fumes.

Other police officers carried him away for medical attention.

Last month Al-Khawajah called at a symposium for the prime minister to step down, blaming him for economic failures and human rights violations.

Bahrain is one of the few states in the Gulf where peaceful protests are tolerated. But public criticism of a member of the ruling family is rare. After al-Khawajah's arrest last month, his supporters have launched an unprecedented series of demonstrations targeting the prime minister.

Bahrain's king, Sheik Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, has warned clubs and societies against holding meetings that criticize the country's leadership. He has also expressed confidence in the longtime prime minister, who is his uncle.

Since taking office in 1999, the king has taken bold steps to move Bahrain from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one. He pardoned more than 1,000 political prisoners and allowed exiles to return. In 2002, Bahrain held its first parliamentary elections in three decades. But critics charge his reforms do not go far enough toward freedom of expression and democracy.

### **Massive protest in Bahrain for the release of jailed reformist**

*AP, 23 October 2004*

In an intensifying protest campaign, 2,500 demonstrators marched through Manama on Thursday, calling for the release of a jailed human rights activist and for the resignation of the prime minister, who has been in office for more than 30 years.

The demonstrators were protesting the arrest last month of Abdul-Hadi Al Khawajah, executive director of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights.

Al Khawajah was detained after he called at a symposium for the resignation of Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Sulman Al Khalifa, blaming him for economic failures and human rights violations. Al Khawajah has pleaded innocent to charges of inciting hatred against the government and circulating false information about top officials. "Live, Live Abdul-Hadi," chanted the crowd. "Khalifa ... the nation doesn't want you."

The crowd dispersed after 90 minutes. Police were barely in sight. Traffic police helped divert traffic, which was bumper-to-bumper as the crowd marched on the highway adjacent to the

prime minister's office.

"I am overwhelmed," said Al Khawajah's wife, Khadija Al Mousawi. "I think people are not scared anymore and have begun to understand their rights. This is what my husband wanted."

### **Trial of Bahraini rights activist adjourned amid protests**

*AFP, 25 October 2004*

The trial of a leading Bahraini rights activist charged with inciting hatred against the regime was adjourned Monday until November 3 while the judge refused to release the defendant on bail.

Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja appeared in court as dozens of supporters protested outside the justice ministry where the trial was held amid tight security.

Protestors demanded his immediate release and called for the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa.

Khawaja, vice president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was arrested in September and his organisation closed down on the grounds that its activities violated the Gulf state's associations law. Khawaja's lawyer charged in a memorandum to the judge that the trial was a "breach of the constitution" and demanded that the defendant be released on bail, saying it was unfair to try him under state security laws.

Prior to his arrest, Khawaja had addressed a poverty symposium at which he made remarks critical of the government's management of the national economy.

The activist is also accused of "propagation of rumors accusing government officials and the government of abuse of power." He pleaded not guilty at the start of his trial last Saturday.

Khawaja's arrest and the shutdown of his centre have triggered other protests in and outside Bahrain.

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**State Security Act, Continued from P 2** meeting with the British ambassador to Bahrain, Robin Lamb, to discuss local matters.

The regime claims that this amounted to involving a foreign party in local matters. The regime issued no proof to this effect. Indeed, Bahrain authorities have a reputation for blaming foreign parties for their policy failures. In short, the four practices are indicative that the state security act is now in operation in the country, thanks to Sheikh Hamad's reforms.

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# Trial of Bahrain human rights activist overshadows reforms

By William Wallis  
*Financial Times, October 19*

The trial in Bahrain of a prominent rights activist and closure of his organisation has cast a shadow on a political transition held up by the US as a possible model for the Gulf's dynastic autocracies.

The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights was closed late last month following the arrest of Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, its vice-president. Mr Khawaja was arrested after he launched what was by most accounts a vitriolic attack on Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the long-serving prime minister who is also the king's uncle, blaming him for holding up reforms.

In doing so Mr Khawaja may have overstepped the law, as well as a taboo inhibiting criticism of the royal family. He went on trial on Saturday on charges of defamation and spreading false information that could damage public interests. It is the first such case since Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa released political prisoners and embarked on gradual liberalisation after inheriting power in 1999, and comes when most Gulf states are under pressure to allow greater political and social freedom, while containing the threat from militant Islamists.

In Bahrain the pressure for change comes not so much from militant Islam as from a Shia majority dissatisfied with the degree to which the Sunni ruling family has been prepared so far to share wealth and power. Bahrain has a population of only 430,000, of which 65 per cent are

thought to be Shias.

The kingdom - home to the US navy's fifth fleet - has made progress towards reducing its dependence on dwindling oil and the generosity of neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

But new skyscrapers and luxury resorts sit uncomfortably close to dilapidated villages in Manama's suburbs where living standards are in decline.

Income disparities coincide roughly with the sectarian divide. In the mid-1990s this proved a volatile mix. Pro-democracy demonstrations turned violent and a wave of repression only ended when the former ruler died.

There has been a dramatic change in the political climate since then and Bahrainis are now, by Gulf standards, relatively free to speak their mind. But both Sunni and Shia activists argue that change has depended more on the good will of the king than on institutional checks to the power of the royal family.

In 2002 partial elections for a legislative assembly were boycotted by the mainly Shia opposition because the constitutional changes were less ambitious than they thought had been agreed.

In a region where guns and bombs have often become vehicles for thwarted ambitions, Sheikh Ali Selman, the youthful Shia cleric who heads the main opposition El Wafaq society (political parties have not been legalised), comes across as a voice of moderation.

He is sensitive to the danger of upheavals in Iraq raising tensions across the Middle East between followers of the

two main forms of Islam and plays down the sectarian aspect of Bahraini politics. Nor does he question the authority of the king. But he believes in the need for an elected assembly with power to legislate in place of the existing one where control is with appointees.

Other opposition activists argue more minor reforms might help restore confidence in the transition: the repeal of a mostly dormant but draconian press law or freer distribution of land monopolised by royals.

"If Bahrain is already a model as George Bush has said it is, then what incentives are there for them to go further?" asks one reform-minded academic who spent time in jail in the 1990s.

"So far political reforms have been handed out like goodies. Khawaja's arrest has rekindled fears that the old instincts are still alive."

Some pro-democracy activists believe Mr Khawaja's speech was counter-productive and may have played into the hands of entrenched interest groups who argue that the monarchy itself is under attack.

Mr Khawaja's continued detention may also damage efforts by opposition politicians who want to reach a compromise on constitutional issues so they can take part in elections scheduled for 2006.

"There is growing disenchantment and mistrust. The fear is that if the government cannot strike a deal with the moderates now, hardliners will begin taking over," says one local journalist.

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## Unemployment state climbs to dangerous levels

Further to the seminar on poverty which led to the arrest of Abdul Haid Al Khawaja, a new study has confirmed the extent of sufferings of the Bahraini people as a direct result of the Al Khalifa policies.

An uncertain future awaits new entrants to the job market in Bahrain. According to a highly respected report, the jobless rate could increase from 16 percent in 2002 to 35 percent in 2013. Undoubtedly, if there is one party that deserves the blame, it is the government of Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa for failing to carry out its job properly. A commissioned study conducted by Dubai office of McKinsey & Company of the US has demonstrated that some 20,000 Bahrainis were jobless as of 2002. Accordingly, the jobless rate amounted to 16 percent of the local workforce.

Worse, the study has warned that the number of unemployed could reach as high as 70,000 by 2013 or 35 percent of

the Bahraini workforce.

Likewise, the study revealed that some 15 percent of new jobs entrants accepted jobs below their capabilities in the period 1990-2002.

People throughout the country could see graduates with degrees working in petrol stations or any jobs that could earn them money to sustain their living. More importantly, the McKinsey report suggests that by 2013 as high as 70 of new job entrants could end up accepting jobs below their skill level. As to salaries, the study found that the monthly wages averaged BD420 in 1990 only to decline to BD352 in 2002. Thus, the salaries dropped by 16 percent in the period 1990-2002. Yet, based on existing market variables, the monthly wages could drop by a further 11 percent to BD315 by 2013.

In perspective, some 20,000 locals were jobless in 2002 at a time when the workforce stood at merely 108,000 (the figure does not include those working for secu-

rity services such as defence, interior and national guards). Still, by 2013, the workforce should reach 208,000 but out these some 70,000 could end up being jobless. The study has assumed that the Bahraini economy should create as many as 100,000 jobs in a span of ten years. A professional establishment, not the opposition, has released such disturbing statistics.

In fact, for years opposition sources have voiced their concerns about the unemployment but to no avail.

However, the regime had accused its opponents of exaggerating the economic woes notably the unemployment debacle. In the light of these facts, the least that the government should do is to submit its resignation

So is the case because undoubtedly the statistics confirm the failure of government policies. Clearly, with Khalifa bin Salman remaining in charge, the unemployment would mostly stay put. Strangely enough, Khalifa bin Salman has served as the state's sole premier ever since Britain granted Bahrain its independence in August 1971