

BAHRAIN

Time to end Al Khalifa dictatorship by world community

The failures of the Al Khalifa ruling family to stem the political tension in Bahrain is leading to more repressive measures which could gradually lead to a serious escalation of the political crisis. We say crisis, because this is what it is. Four years after what had been hoped to be one of the most elaborate political transformations in the Gulf region, the programme adopted by the ruling family has all but evaporated. This is due to the tampering by the ruling family with the mechanisms of democracy and their eventual refusal to abide by its tenets. The Al Khalifa thought they could get away with slogans and claims, and that with generous spending on public relations, media and image making, they would delay the public anger until their programme is completed.

It has now transpired that when Sheikh Hamad was forced to change course, following his ascendance to the throne in 1999, he ensured that whatever openness took place, it would not jeopardise the future of his family, who had ruled as a minority since they occupied the islands in 1783. His advisors drew a satanic plan by which the composition of the population would be permanently changed to ensure that the Shia/Sunni ratio is reversed. In order to achieve this, Sheikh Hamad was advised to tolerate a degree of hollow freedom, which would allow people to talk but without the ability to alter the political course of the Al Khalifa.

It is now feared that the Shia may have become a minority in Bahrain after 1400 centuries of numerical dominance. He managed to woo some figures of the opposition, while co-opting the rest by encouraging them to register their existence as societies. At the time the various political factions rushed to do exactly that. Now they have realised that they are governed by the Societies Law which binds them with rules and regulations that force them to work within the Al Khalifa political domain. Infact, those who refused to abide by those rules were outlawed, as was the case with the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. The largest political society, Al Wefaq, now finds itself unable to prac-

tice opposition without breaking the Al Khalifa rules and risk their wrath. However, more social and political formations are now opting to work outside the Al Khalifa realm and are ready to face their cruel treatment. They found that the only way to make a change is to revert to old opposition tactics, including working underground. With the promotion of former torturers, especially those from the Al Khalifa, people are counting the days before Sheikh Hamad gives green light to them to attack civil liberties and practice their skills in torture and maltreatment.

Over the past few weeks, several pickets and demonstrations took place in the heart of the capital, Manama by courageous men and women who have decided to raise their voices against the oppression and crimes of the Al Khalifa. The Committee of the unemployed organised such a picket, while the Al Wefaq held the largest one despite warnings from the Al Khalifa. As the dimensions of the demographic change become more apparent, public anger becomes more serious, and the country is now threatened with a slide to anarchy and political discontent. At the same time, victims of torture are taking their case to the UN Commission Against Torture which is holding its meeting in Geneva this month. They have filed their shadow report to challenge the lies contained in the Al Khalifa state report which claims that they had honoured their commitments under the Convention Against Torture that they had signed in 1998. The victims are hopeful that their shadow report would repudiate the false claims of their torturers and that they would get a sympathetic ear from torture experts in Geneva. In March, the Al Khalifa suffered one of their most devastating defeats when the Commission Against Racial Discrimination discredited the Al Khalifa report and called on the Government either to abide by international laws or face the wrath of the world community.

In the coming months, the confrontations between the people of Bahrain and the Al Khalifa are expected to increase. In their attempts to curtail the activities of the op-

position outside the country, the Al Khalifa have now issued a decree making it a capital offence to inform the world of their crimes, and labelling the Bahraini people's genuine cries for help from this evil dictatorship as espionage and betrayal. This in addition to the earlier decree ostensibly to fight terrorism, while in reality, it aims at curtailing the activities of the opposition inside and outside the country. The Al Khalifa have punished a political activist who ventured to visit Washington and London to expose the Al Khalifa crimes, by demoting him from his university post as head of a department at the Mechanical Engineering Department. The situation is thus likely to deteriorate further if the opposition maintains its stands vis-à-vis the various critical issues, and if it succeeds in presenting its case to the outside world. Internationalising the political crisis in Bahrain is thus viewed by the Al Khalifa as probably the most devastating development to their political programme. This is evident from the harsh revenge exacted on Dr Abdul Jalil Al Singace, the university lecturer who was summarily demoted by the president of the University of Bahrain, who is of course from the Al Khalifa, for presenting the case of the people of Bahrain to some American officials during a trip to Washington. The Al Khalifa have sustained immense damage to their image abroad especially in Geneva when, in March, they were sanctioned for their discriminatory and racist policies by the UN Commission. Further embarrassments are likely this month when the victims of torture present their case in Geneva. The Al Khalifa have a lot to answer for especially after they have promoted one of the most notorious torturers in Bahrain's history (Dr Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifah) to a ministerial status. The American and British officials are thus reminded that their pro-democracy slogans and programmes will fall into disrepute if they continue supporting the Al Khalifa dictatorship. Actions need to be taken by the world community to end the black era initiated by Sheikh Hamad.

American media silent over mass protest in Bahrain

By Bill Van Auken
29 March 2005

The hypocrisy of Washington's self-proclaimed crusade for democracy in the Middle East found damning expression this week in the nearly total silence of the US government and the American media over a demonstration that brought tens of thousands of protesters into the streets of Bahrain last Friday demanding democratic reforms.

The contrast between the reaction to this popular upsurge against a dictatorial monarch in the Persian Gulf and the attention lavished on the so-called "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon could not have been starker.

The *New York Times* was among the few to print anything at all, limiting its coverage to a 13-line Reuters dispatch placed at the bottom of page 6 in its international briefs column. The *Washington Post*, the other paper of record of the US ruling elite, published nothing at all, and the major broadcast media remained completely silent.

Apparently, the US corporate media's only interest in Bahrain is the preparations for a Grand Prix motor race to be held there on April 3. The aspirations and the oppression of the country's population are a matter of indifference.

Friday's peaceful march saw an estimated 80,000 people—roughly 12 percent of the Gulf state's total population—demanding constitutional reforms. They called for greater power for the elected lower house of parliament, which currently is subordinated to a handpicked upper chamber, the consultative council—an arrangement that leaves all real legislative power in the hands of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. They also demanded a constitution ratified by elected representatives, rather than the current charter, which was imposed by royal decree in 2002.

This action signaled the refusal of the Al-Khalifa dynasty to relinquish the absolute power it has exercised since declaring its independence from Britain in 1971. As a consequence, the opposition parties boycotted an election held that year.

The monarchy denied organizers of the march—principally the main Shia opposition movement, the Islamic National Accord Association (INAA)—a legal permit for the protest, citing "tension and regional threats." Also participating in the march were the left-wing National Democratic Action Association, the National Democratic Rally—a pan-Arabist group—and the Islamic Action Association, another Shia opposition movement. Political parties remain banned in Bahrain.

On Saturday, the daily newspaper *Al-Ayyam* quoted a senior minister in the Bahrain regime declaring that the INAA "will face legal measures after it organized an unlawful demonstration yesterday."

Opposition leaders are threatened with arrest. The regime has increasingly cracked down on dissent. In the past month alone, it jailed three young men for running an online discussion forum (Bahrainonline.org) that posted comments critical of the regime. It accused them of "defamation...inciting hatred against the regime and spreading rumors and lies that could cause disorder."

Also arrested March 9 were three members of a recently formed Committee of the Unemployed for distributing leaflets urging participation in a picket on behalf of the jobless. It is estimated that as much as 25 percent of the country's population are unemployed. An opposition group reported that the three were subjected to physical abuse and harsh interrogations.

Last September, Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, vice-president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested for violating royal decrees restricting freedom of speech and association. The rights group was also proscribed.

Al-Khawaja earned the monarchy's wrath by speaking at a public forum on poverty and social inequality in Bahrain, blaming the policies of Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa—the king's uncle. The regime is a family affair, with al-Khalifas occupying 10 of the 21 ministries, including all those most important to the exercise of state power.

While the Shia community represents an estimated 70 percent of the country's population, there are only five Shia ministers in the government, all of them occupying relatively unimportant posts. In the last elections, the ruling family shamelessly gerrymandered electoral districts to dilute the Shia vote.

Given the Bush administration's incessant proclamations of its dedication to the struggle for democracy and against tyranny, one might anticipate the administration embracing the demonstration in Bahrain as an indication of a democratic wave sweeping the Middle East.

After all, here were tens of thousands openly defying a regime that suppresses freedom of speech and assembly, discriminates against the majority of the population and routinely locks up those who criticize it.

But George Bush did not take to the airwaves proclaiming his desire for the liberation of the people of the Bahrain—as he has done in relation to Iran and Lebanon—nor did he suggest sanctions against the tyrannical monarchy, as he has implemented against the Syrian regime.

Rather, there was an embarrassed silence, both in Washington and the media. The

events in Bahrain cannot be reported because they expose US policy as a lie. Washington is not condemning this tyrant, because he is a pliant and valued instrument of US imperialist policy in the region. The small gulf emirate he rules serves as the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. Some 4,500 US military personnel are deployed there, occupying a 79-acre base. The Navy and Marine components of the US Central Command are also based there, and the royal family allowed the use of its territory for carrying out military attacks on Iraq.

Economically, the autocratic regime has likewise subordinated itself to Washington, signing a free trade pact last year that effectively abrogated an existing customs union joining it with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. US firms dominate the oil sector.

With a population and landmass that are both approximately equivalent to those of Indianapolis, Indiana, Bahrain has been designated as a "major non-NATO ally."

Last November, when King Hamad flew to the US, the White House celebrated him as "the first Arab leader to meet President George W. Bush since his re-election as US president."

During the visit, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell lauded the King for sharing the US commitment to "help the Iraqis have their election." That the election staged in his own country was so blatantly rigged that political organizations representing the majority of the population boycotted them went unmentioned.

King Hamad's regime in Bahrain, the Saudi royal family, Egypt's Mubarak, General Musharraf of Pakistan and ex-Stalinist dictators like Karimov of Uzbekistan—these are the regimes that Washington props up and depends upon in the Middle East and Central Asia. They are the real face of the supposedly democratic goals of US imperialism in the region.

The reaction to the Bahrain protests serves to expose the obvious. In its pretense of a worldwide crusade for democracy and against tyranny, US imperialism designates who is a democrat and who is a tyrant based entirely upon its own strategic interests. Thus, protests in Lebanon that are seen as a means of strengthening both US and Israeli dominance in the region are celebrated by the US government and given massive coverage in the media, while a demonstration in Bahrain that threatens to undermine a US-backed regime is censored from the news.

Far from democracy in the Gulf Bahrain: the royals rule

The following is an article published in the March Issue of the French Magazine Le Monde Diplomatique in March 2005

President George Bush has hailed Bahrain's progress towards democracy. Yet Bahrain's emir proclaimed himself king three years ago, promulgated a constitution giving him full powers and has attacked the few remaining civil liberties. Arbitrary imprisonment is commonplace and one of the main human rights organisations has been closed.

By Marc Pellas

THE police officer who took Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, vice-president and executive director of the Bahraini Centre for Human Rights (BHRC), into custody in the middle of the night, cautioned him with these words: "You have accused the prime minister of corruption. You are charged with fomenting hate of the regime and broadcasting misleading news. You are under arrest." There was every likelihood he would spend several years behind bars.

The Bahraini police arrested Khawaja on 24 September 2004. Two days earlier, speaking at a symposium on poverty and economic rights, he had linked Bahrain's bankrupt economy, increasingly unequal distribution of wealth, government corruption and the predicament of 80,000 people struggling to survive below the poverty line.

Five years ago things seemed quite promising. On 15 February 2001 the new emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, organised a referendum to approve a National Action Charter, which affirmed the political system's democratic basis, the separation of powers and the supremacy of popular sovereignty. It seemed to mark the end of 25 years of oppression (1) in Bahrain, reputedly one of the Gulf's worst dictatorships. Security forces had tortured adults and children with impunity, and had fired on unarmed demonstrators with live rounds.

Hundreds of intellectuals and executives had to go into exile. About 1% of the population was in prison; constitutional rights had been suspended since the dissolution of the first elected parliament in 1975.

In an apparent change of course, the new ruler discussed the spirit and terms of the charter with opposition parties. They accepted the monarchy and the hereditary dynasty in power, as well as its far-reaching executive powers. In exchange they obtained guarantees that genuine legislative democracy would be restored. The referendum proved an unexpected success, with 98.4% of the 198,000 voters endorsing the charter.

The purpose of this political opening was to start a virtuous circle in society and government, boosting confidence and foreign investment, give a new impulse to a stagnant service economy and reduce lower-and-middle-class unemployment (15% of the workforce). Restoring constitutional rights had two key aims: to restrict the concentration of wealth, in particular property, in the hands of the ruling caste; and to halt widespread corruption. More than 200 years after invasion and conquest by the Khalifa family in 1783, many Bahrainis - 65%-70% of whom are Shia Muslims - still feel their country is occupied.

The excitement following the referendum coincided with the release of political prisoners, triumphant return of exiles, proclamation of an end to torture and repeal of the State Security Act (3). Then the government and opposition set about deciding how political parties would work within the limited framework of the 1973 constitution accepted by both sides.

Opposition movements were preparing to celebrate the first anniversary of the adoption of the charter when, on 14 February 2002, the emir proclaimed himself king. The next day, on opening their newspapers, they discovered he had promulgated a new constitution, which had been decided without prior consultation and came into force immediately.

There was no longer any social contract between the monarch and his sovereign people. The constitution set up a parliament, divided into an upper and lower chamber. The 40 members of the Council of Deputies (lower chamber) would be directly elected.

But the king would appoint the 40 members of the Shura Council (upper chamber), an advisory body originally set up in 1992. He would also name the prime minister and cabinet, members of the constitutional court and all judges.

If the two chambers disagreed, the Council of Deputies would not take precedence. In theory the king might require a two-thirds majority in parliament for a law to be passed, thwarting any attempt to introduce new legislation. Lest there be any doubt as to the seat of real power, the king can amend the constitution at will and pass laws by decree.

In the months after the constitutional coup, a series of royal decrees established the rules for future democratic process. They ranged from measures setting electoral boundaries to a ban on any examination by MPs of decisions by the previous government. One decree directly contradicted the UN convention against torture, ratified by Bahrain. It granted immunity from prosecution to police officers and

members of the internal security forces who operated torture chambers from 1975 to 1999, and protected them from any applications for compensation by victims or their families (4).

The opposition denounced the award of Bahraini nationality and voting rights to an increasing number of foreigners, especially Jordanian, Syrian, Egyptian and Pakistani judges, police officers and civil servants, and people from countries belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (5). It claimed that issuing tens of thousands of passports to grateful Sunnis might upset Bahrain's sociological and demographic balance (6).

No one was surprised when the two main opposition movements - the National Accord Association (Shia) and the National Democratic Action Society (secular) - and two smaller groups - the Nationalist Democratic Rally and the Islamic Action Association - announced they would not field candidates for the general election in October 2002. They hoped to highlight the constitutional crisis and limit turnout at the election (7).

When two pension funds under government management went bankrupt in April 2003, an official inquiry was set up. The committee issued a report of its findings, recommending that parliament hear evidence from the three ministers directly concerned. To counter any risk of the personal implication of Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa (the king's uncle, and prime minister since independence in 1971), the government donated \$45m and several plots of land in the capital to the two funds. But not before the speaker of the Council of Deputies and prime ministerial protege, Khalifa al-Dharani, had asked fellow MPs not to rock the boat.

This was a barely veiled reference to the dissolution of the first national parliament after its refusal to pass the State Security Act (8). Nor did the authorities relax their control of political life, maintaining severe restrictions on press freedom and the right of assembly.

Under the circumstances the four main opposition movements had little choice but to react. Encouraged by assurances from sources close to the king, they organised a conference, on the symbolic date of 14 February 2004, to present the work of Arab and European constitutional experts contradicting the official line. The aim of the conference was to attract international attention and frame proposals for restoring dialogue with the regime, in the hope of finding a way out of the constitutional crisis.

But events took a different turn. Only a few hours before the conference was due to start, the authorities announced it had been banned. Members of the dreaded

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National Security Agency met foreign guests - European lawyers and academics, MPs and representatives of NGOs - at Manama airport and sent them straight home.

With the conference centre no longer available, the 300 Bahraini participants fell back on the Oruba Club, a favourite venue for civic and cultural events over the past 60 years. After two days of discussion they published a declaration that criticised the political deadlock that had gripped Bahrain for two years.

Since the arrest of Khawaja, disbanding of the BHRC, temporary closure of the Oruba, and resumption of arrests during protest demonstrations, the pace of political life in Bahrain has changed. On 21 November a court sentenced Khawaja, considered a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, to a year in prison. But he was released the same day, thanks to a royal pardon.

The GCC summit in Bahrain in December was a flop, shunned by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah. He was furious about a free-trade agreement with the US (9) and in no mood to receive a lesson from the Khalifa family on how to stay on good terms with Washington. In January the king confirmed the appointment of 10 members of the Khalifa family as ministers (including the prime minister) of the 21 member cabinet.

Then the court opposed the opposition's traditional right of petition to the sovereign. Its refusal was understandable. The opposition had united and collected 70,000 signatures - a third of all registered voters - to demand that the constitutional law comply with the principles established in 1973.

Building on the success of this operation, the opposition organised a second constitutional conference, and announced it would boycott the next general election unless changes were made to the constitution and electoral boundaries. The government-sponsored press countered with accusations of systematic opposition and anarchy.

Under these conditions the only hope of restoring dialogue between the regime and the opposition is a new law on democratic rights, covering the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of association and the formation of political parties. Though political organisations are currently tolerated, they are denied the status of political parties.

Civil society hopes that the new law will strengthen individual and collective rights, but some people fear that the regime's old guard will seize the opportunity to make a mockery of King Hamad's democratic pretensions. No one really knows whether it is the king

or his uncle, the prime minister, who has the final word.

With the end of the second Gulf war in 2003 and the worsening crisis in Iraq, the Bush administration proclaimed the strategic necessity of promoting democracy in the Arab world. This initiative, floated by the neo-conservatives, would pave the way for a peaceful Middle East on good terms with the US and Israel. The Arab principalities, sultanates and kingdoms of the Gulf had to stop allowing nepotism, tribalism and sectarian values to govern the allocation of property, investment and jobs in the public or private sector.

Bahrain, the neo-cons argued, would be an ideal test for democratic transformation, its elected bodies exerting almost no real power. Here was a chance for Washington to show what could be achieved.

However, there was no question of upsetting the traditional balance of power, which would risk opening the door to nationalists, communists or Islamic fundamentalists. Nor was there any question of embarrassing the royal family, which had obligingly turned Bahrain into a base for the US navy (10), air force and special forces. The US Army Central Command, now responsible for "shaping the Central

Region for the 21st century" (11), is also based in Bahrain.

In September a report by the Defence Science Board (12) questioned this approach and said: "Today we reflexively compare Muslim 'masses' to those oppressed under Soviet rule. This is a strategic mistake . . . Muslims do not 'hate our freedom' but rather, they hate our policies."

The board argued that the challenge facing the US was not to put across the right message, but "a fundamental problem of credibility" in the eyes of Muslims. Every day in the media they could see that "American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has not led to democracy there, but only more chaos and suffering".

It will be difficult to convince public opinion in the Middle East of the sincerity - and the realism - of the Bush administration's plans to promote democracy, until it is seen to ask as much of its allies, particularly in the Gulf and Egypt, as it demands of Iraq or the Palestinian Authority.

Perhaps that is why the state department explained that talks between the former secretary of state Colin Powell and King Hamad on 29 November 2004 had stressed the importance of progressing with reforms and protecting individual freedom. If such were the case, it would mean the end of the road for Bahrain's political old

Democratic Alliance calls for a rally

The General Secretariat of the Constitutional Conference in collaboration with the National Democratic Action Society, Islamic Action Society, Nationalist Democratic Society and Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society are organizing a public sit-down under the motto "Constitutional Reform ...First". The sit-down will take place at the open ground opposite to AL-DANA Mall in Sanabis area on Friday 6th May 2005 at 4.00pm.

The Secretary General, Mrs. Jalila AL-Sayed (lawyer) stated that the forthcoming activity on 6th May, 2005 is part of the resolutions of the Second Constitutional Conference convened on the 10th February, 2005. The event aims at shedding on the Constitutional Crisis that is engulfing Bahrain. Al-Sayed also added; that this sit-down is intended to pinpoint that the constitutional matter is an essential hub and a priority by resolving it would be possible to deal with the other important issues on the national agenda; such as un-employment, discrimination, corruption, ...etc. Al-Sayed added that the General Secretariat will maintain the motto "the Constitutional ReformFirst" in all activities that are benign organized to increase the pressure for a solution.

Moreover Al-Sayed added that the General Secretariat calls upon the various civil societal organizations such as political, professional and general welfare to participate in the up-coming sit-down to

ascertain the people legitimate right for freedom of opinion and expression as granted by the Constitution and the National Action Chart as well as all international conventions relevant to human rights and democracy.

Al-Sayed indicated that the general measures and directives for participants in the sit-down, which are as follow:

1- Full compliance and co-operation with all directives and instructions issued by the organizing committee, which is the sole responsible body to encounter any incidental matters that might emerge during the sit-down.

2- Ascertaining the peaceful nature of the sit-down and abiding by all peaceful means at all times, during the sit-down. 3 - Strict adherence to the motto "Constitutional Reform ...First" and to the slogans chanted from the main stage to represent the sit-down objectives.

4- Absolutely raising no flag other than the flag of Bahrain.

5- No posters or banners other than the ones approved by the organizing committee in addition to the flag of the Kingdom of Bahrain are allowed to be raised during the event.

6- Ensuring full co-operation with the Traffic Police to ensure smooth and safe traffic, and adhering to parking instructions in the designated locations selected for the purpose.