

# BAHRAIN

*Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" to promote human and constitutional rights*

## A terrifying dream or a doomsday scenario?

The relentless attack by the ruling family on the seminar that was held last month is a clear indication of the psychological tension within the rank and files of this repressive family. The seminar was organised by Lord Avebury, the Vice-Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group to mark the 30th anniversary of the first coup against the people's will. Several Bahraini political and trade union activists attended the seminar. It was one of the most successful events organised outside Bahrain to expose the Al Khalifa absolute dictatorship and the huge blunder of the country's oil wealth and land. The ruling family orchestrated an unparalleled attack against the seminar and the participants. The regime's daily newspapers dedicated their columns for this purpose while groups loyal to the ruling family issued statements denouncing the seminar and calling for prosecution of the Bahraini participants. Some of the regime's claims were so outrageous that officials of the British Embassy in Manama were forced to distance the government from the seminar. The Foreign Office at first asked for permission to attend the seminar but later withdrew the request under what appeared to be an intense pressure from the hereditary dictatorship in Bahrain. The campaign against the seminar has continued until this the beginning of September. The Al Khalifa never felt so exposed to the outside world as they did this time.

What is the problem? No one knows for certain why the ruling family reacted in this foolish way. If anything, their reaction gave impetus to the organisers and the seminar became one of the most successful in the series of seminars held in London regularly over the past decade. It received good coverage in international media such as the BBC Arabic Service and Al Jazeera with interviews with the participants on the issue of democracy and dictatorship in the country. The corruption of the ruling family was exposed by Mr Ibrahim Sharif, the President of the National Democratic Action Society who presented a graphic account of the blundering by the Al Khalifa of the oil revenues and the lands of Bahrain. He estimated the value of the misappropriated land by the ruler, the prime minister and

other senior figures to be excess of \$50 billion. It is one of the largest robberies in the region in history. After the natural land of the islands has been almost completely misappropriated, the ruling family, over the past three decades, extended their daylight robbery to the sealand along the stretch of the coasts. Mr Sharif, who was a professional banker before his retirement, said that the whole coastal area comprising the 12 miles national waters have either been or will be misappropriated by the Al Khalifa rulers whose greed has no limits.

The deep corruption of this ruling family is at the heart of the political crisis in the country. Soon after the British withdrew from Bahrain in 1971, they had made up their mind to turn the country into a private fiefdom. They may have been forced into agreeing initially to accept the contractual constitution of 1973, but they revoked that agreement soon afterward. In 1975 they suspended that constitution and aborted the first and last experiment in a very limited form of democracy. After a national struggle that lasted 25 years, Sheikh Hamad decided to turn the clock backwards; he abrogated the only binding document in the form of the 1973 constitution that legitimised the Al Khalifa rule, imposed his own constitution and undertook to change the country in a fundamental way. He now owns whole islands including Umm Al Na'ssan which is larger than the island Muharraq which is inhabited by a quarter of the population, the islands of Hawar, whose ownership was contested with Qatar at the International Court of Justice and other islands. This is in addition to ownership of a large proportion of the main island. Furthermore, he has blundered the coastline and distributed reclaimed sea land (totalling 60 square kilometres) to members of his family. In order to complete his absolute rule, he ordered mass naturalisation of foreigners who would become the main line of defence against the native population, and instituted dictatorship comouflaged in democratic appearance. Oil wealth has enabled Sheikh Hamad to recruit local

and foreign mercenaries to put his policies in place.

Today, as the people of Bahrain commemorated their ill-fated experiment in democratic practice, they feel miles apart from this oppressive regime. They no longer hide their hate to Sheikh Hamad's dictatorship and policies of corruption and blunder. With the imposition of the Societies Law that renders the local groups completely ineffective and requires them to become submissive to the Al Khalifa's policies, Sheikh Hamad believes he is about to complete the encirclement of what had been once, one of the most formidable opposition in the Arab world. The London seminar has suddenly exposed parts of his policies and provided the steadfast opposition an opportunity to present the case of Bahrain to the outside world. The ruling family has long hoped that opposition would remain within the large prison in the islands of Bahrain, and has allowed them to speak their grievances within the brick walls of the country. They consider any activity outside Bahrain to be a treason that merits severe punishment. The notorious Societies Law prevents local groups from contacting the outside world. Such contacts could lead to severe punishment. The ruling family has incited about 20 of their loyal groups to issue a statement calling for severe punishment to those who participated in the House of Lords seminar. Bahrain is now in the midst of the bleakest period of its history, more bleak than the period when the country was ruled by the State Security Law under the prime minister and Henderson.

The crisis is deepening, thanks to the unlimited support by those who have pledged to "democratise" the Middle East. They have hailed the Bahraini experiment as a beacon of democracy and the rule of law. The law, however, is that which is designed by the ruling family to safeguard its interests and ensures a total submission by the Bahraini people to its evil designs. While Washington and London consider this legalised hereditary dictatorship to be the long-awaited dream for the people of the region, the people of Bahrain view it as the beginning of the doomsday scenario.

# Lord Avebury: our criticisms are based on genuine anxiety

*Remarks by Lord Avebury, Vice-Chair of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group, at the Bahrain Seminar held in 1 Abbet Gardens, London SW1 August 25, 2005*

Its always a pleasure to welcome those who come to our seminars on Bahrain, which have been held regularly over the years on the occasions of Bahrain's Independence Day in August, and the National Day in December.

On this occasion our deliberations have attracted unusual attention, and it is particularly gratifying that we have caught the ear of the establishment in Bahrain, and their friends in London. It will be useful for them to hear some things which can't be said at home. But some commentators have challenged the right to hold any discussion of the affairs of Bahrain outside the boundaries of the kingdom itself. It has even been suggested that the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, should intervene to prevent this meeting, a proposal which shows a lamentable ignorance of the way things work in a free country.

I thought we had left behind in the last century the days when communist and fascist states used to repeat the mantra that human rights were matters for the exclusive jurisdiction of sovereign states. Bahrain has indeed signed various international instruments which allow for scrutiny of its human rights performance: the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1990; the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992; the Convention Against Torture in 1998, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 2002. True, they were eight years late with the first report on racial discrimination; six years late on the rights of the child; five years late on torture, and have yet to submit the first report on women two years after it was due. But at least it is established, that no objection is taken to some adverse comments made on human rights in Bahrain from abroad. Nor is it only these UN bodies that pronounce on these issues. Many others do so routinely, either ad hoc or on an annual basis, much quicker after the events they concern than the UN. Let me give you an example:

"The Al-Khalifa extended family has ruled the country since the late 18th century and continues to dominate all facets of society and government. The King, Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa, governs the country with the assistance of his uncle, the Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa Al-Khalifa; his son, the Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad; and an appointed cabinet of ministers. Members of the Al-Khalifa family hold 8 out of 23 cabinet positions, including all strategic ministries. The 2002 Constitution provides that the King is head of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the Government. The King also chairs the Higher Judicial Council, which appoints members of the Constitutional

Court. The bicameral National Assembly consists of the elected Council of Representatives and the appointed Shura (Consultative) Council. The Constitution gives the Council of Representatives a role in considering legislation, but most legislative authority still resides with the King, and he appoints members of the Shura Council. The Constitution provides for a nominally independent judiciary; however, the judiciary was not independent because courts were subject to government pressure regarding verdicts, sentencing, and appeals"

## Hopeful Signs

*The following is the text of the intervention of the National Committee of Martyrs and Torture Victims at House of Lords Seminar*

13th of May 2005 is a new delightful date for the victims of torture in Bahrain as Decree 56 that gives impunity to torturers was denounced in Geneva:

This year, our participating in this valuable seminar is quite different than in the past and that is so because we are here after we attended the Geneva 34th session of the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) were Bahrain's initial and periodic report was discussed in order to monitor the implementation of the Convention against torture and other Cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

We attended the discussions in Geneva as a non-governmental organization along with the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. We submitted our shadow report attached with documents, petition contained 33,000 signatures against Decree 56, international reports on Bahrain, victims testimonies, lists of those who were killed out of law and names of officers accused of perpetrating torture. The UN experts asked the government delegation more than 70 critical questions.

Today we have international recommendations that were recommended by the UN CAT and most of them were similar to (NCMVT) demands. However, the most important recommendation was the one about Decree 56, the committee demanded the state to:

Item 6- d: "Consider steps to amend Decree 56 of 2002 to ensure there is no impunity to officials who have perpetrated or acquiesced in torture or other cruel and inhuman or degrading treatment"

After what had happened in Geneva, we were hopeful that the government is going to fulfill its international obligations and is going to put an end to the suffering of hundreds of victims, but unfortunately we passed 90 days after the CAT recommendations and there is no indication that the government is going to execute the CAT recommendations.

Other recommendations by CAT were related to rehabilitation, compensation, and investigations into the hundreds of allegations of torture.

I would like here to represent our recommendations which are:

To execution of the CAT recommendations.

To bring to justice those accused of torture.

Victims of torture and their family members should be entitled to bring civil claims for the physical and psychological harm they suffered as a result of torture and ill treatment, and should be entitled to, among any other remedies, compensation and rehabilitative care.

To form a national committee for truth and reconciliation.

We hope the above be implemented.

These are not the words of some radical or extremist group; they come from the US State Department. In their 2005 report they are careful to avoid use of the term 'constitutional monarchy' by which Bahrain describes itself. According to the definition in a well-known free internet encyclopedia, in a constitutional monarchy, and I quote: "Though the king or queen may be regarded as the head of state, it is the Prime Minister, whose power derives directly or indirectly from elections, who actually governs the country".

But in Bahrain, the Prime Minister was appointed by the late Amir 34 years ago and has occupied the post ever since. And as the State Department pointed out, when the four opposition political societies held a 2-day conference under the heading "Towards a Contractual Constitution for a Constitutional Monarchy" in February 2004 the Government barred 15 international speakers and participants from entering Bahrain, including a prominent MP and former Parliamentary Chairman from Kuwait. The guests also included two distinguished members of the Bar from the UK, who were detained at the airport and sent back on the next available flight. The Government said that the organisers hadn't obtained permission for the event, but the law only obliged them to give notice to the authorities, which the four opposition societies had done. The Minister of Information justified the participation restrictions by stating that it would not allow foreigners to interfere in internal affairs.

It is that kind of approach to the rights of freedom of expression which makes it all the more desirable that from time to time we hold seminars abroad, where participants can say what they like, for instance on the legacy of torture.

When Bahrain did finally submit its initial report to the UN Committee Against Torture, the Committee, while commending the state on reports that systematic torture no longer occurs following the 2001 reforms, criticised the blanket amnesty granted to the alleged victims and the lack of redress available to them. The Committee recorded the large number of allegations of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of detainees committed prior to 2001; the failure to investigate those allegations promptly, impartially and fully, and the inadequate availability in practice of civil compensation and rehabilitation for pre-2001 victims of torture. And of course, Bahrain hasn't signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention, which would allow a right of individual petition to the Committee, and there appear to be no penalties for the continuing violation of treaty obligations inherent in Decree Law 56.

Today we will talk about the exoneration of torturers including Adel Flaifel and Ian Henderson. We will break some other taboos as well, by speaking of the

*Continued on Page 3*

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## EOHR review of free expression situation in Bahrain

*The following is a 17 August 2005 capsule report issued by the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR).*

During the past year, Bahrain has witnessed a notable escalation in the public demand for political and social reform. Public protests, rallies, publications and internet-based forums (blogs) have been the clearest manifestation of this movement.

Government tolerance of criticism has worn increasingly thin, with violent incidents on the rise. The past year put this to the test several times, with journalists, bloggers, NGOs and opposition groups often falling prey to tighter government restrictions, and more worrying still, increasingly aggressive measures, including the use of force against protesters.

The earliest incident was the dissolution of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) in September 2004 following allegations it had violated Bahrain's associations' law. According to Abdul Hadi Khawaja, director of BCHR, the centre was dissolved following allegations it had "interfered in political affairs" and "[interfered] in the affairs of a neighbouring country" as it had taken part in a petition calling for Kuwaiti women's political rights. Under Bahrain's associations' law, NGOs may not take part in such activities. Khawaja attributes the dissolution of the BCHR to a panel discussion on the economic situation in Bahrain and the spread of corruption in which he criticised the Bahraini Prime Minister, after which he was arrested and detained for eight weeks, and the BCHR dissolved. A complaint filed by the BCHR board is still being heard in their attempt to alleviate the authorities' administrative decision dissolving the centre.

More recently, the escalation of protests and rallies in Bahrain has unleashed a strong response from the authorities and security forces. Several protests and sit-ins were organised by the Association for Suitable Housing and the Committee for the Unemployed in June and July (2005). The harshest response was on 15 July when 30 out of 50 protesters were arrested and several others wounded and hospitalised. BCHR's Nabeel Rajab was amongst those arrested, while Khawaja was beaten. According to protesters, the authorities exercised excessive use of force against the 15 July protestors because it was organised to end in a sit-in at Manama's Al-Refa' district, where the royal family and the king reside. According to Bahraini activists, the excessive use of violence was a direct message to the other political associations which organise much larger rallies yet enjoy a wider margin of manoeuvre. Khawaja says it was a "clear message to the Bahraini people, opposition groups and civil society."

Protests and rallies organised by Bahrain's four major political associations, the Islamic National Accord Association (INAA), National Democratic Action Association (NDAA), Nationalist Democratic Rally (NDR) and the Islamic Action Association (IAA) have, according to analysts, been relatively immune to the use of force due to the large number of participants and the blessing of Bahrain's clergymen. However, the organisers are put under immense pressure to bring an end to public rallies demanding constitutional reforms. Bahraini Information Minister and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Muhammad Abdul Ghaffar publicly stated that the organisers of rallies and protests will face legal measures for organising "an unlawful demonstration."

While making allegations of "causing harm to people" and organising events that "lead to conflicts, sectarianism and sedition in society," the government of Bahrain has moved to restrict the right to express political, social and economic opinions through peaceful assembly. The government recently imposed a ban on rallies and protests during the upcoming US-sponsored "Forum of the Future" held in Bahrain, which brings together the G8 group with delegations from the region to discuss reforms in the Greater Middle East in November.

"Such activities are against the spirit of the forum itself . . . which is focused on issues

of the greater Middle East, and is not a forum for local issues" was foreign minister Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Mubarak al-Khalifa's explanation of why the ban was imposed. The ban follows a dispute which broke out between the authorities and the country's political associations, the latter claiming Bahraini law requires prior notification of rallies and protests while the authorities assert the need to apply for, and be granted, permission for such events.

Violations of media freedom also persist in Bahrain. Journalists, newspapers and internet-based forum moderators and bloggers faced mounting restrictions both from the authorities and from various sectors of the society itself.

Such violations during the past six months have included the detention and arrest of journalists and bloggers. This included, amongst others, the arrest of Ali Abdul Imam, moderator of Bahrain Online (<http://www.bahrainonline.org>), its webmasters Mohammed Al-Musavi, and Hussein Yousef, who have been arrested several times during the past six months. International concern mounted when they staged a hunger-strike in March 2005, demanding better prison conditions in Manama's notorious Al Hooraa police station and reclassification as prisoners of conscience rather than ordinary prisoners.

This was followed by a decree from the Ministry of Information instructing Bahraini website and blog moderators to register their sites with the Ministry and assume responsibility for materials published on them within a period of three months. This was deemed "a violation of freedom of opinion and restriction of freedom of expression" according to Bahraini activists. Khawaja claimed this was a way to censor internet-based forums and discussions even if run by Bahrain nationals from abroad.

This follows the passing of Press Law 47 [2002], which provided the framework for the arrest of dozens of journalists and editors-in-chief, which triggered a culture of self-censorship amongst Bahraini newspapers and magazines. In interviews with EOHR, journalists also expressed anger at what they called "direct orders" they and their editors-in-chief allegedly receive from the Ministry of Information in the form of written letters and phone calls guiding them on what to publish and what to censor.

Bahrain's Press Law 47 amended previous laws -- adding more restrictions on freedom of expression including prohibiting "defamation of the person of the king", which has been used, according to activists in Bahrain, to censor all forms of criticism addressing the king and the royal family. The law also introduced harsher penalties on press crimes.

### **Lord Avebury:** *Continued from P 2*

hereditary dictatorship; of the increase in corruption noted by Transparency International last year – though TI are careful to avoid pointing the finger at the principal culprits; of the continued demographic engineering; of the relentless harassment of human rights activists and of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights; of the sectarian challenge, recently documented by the International Crisis Group; and of the attacks on peaceful demonstrators by foreign mercenaries.

We will acknowledge, as we always do, that Bahrain made progress with the reforms of 2001, but its now time to move on. The essence of the process must be that people can see a way forward, towards a set of longer-term objectives and the means of getting there through peaceful debate. But if there is no vision, no movement, no willingness to listen to popular demands, and no dialogue with the street and the village, faith in the whole idea of reform will be undermined. The government of Bahrain must understand that our criticisms are based on genuine anxiety over the failure to maintain the momentum of 2001, and the lost opportunity to create a model for the whole region. I hope there is some political will, and some time, to put this right.

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## Political Outlook

*A new assessment by the Business Monitor International on the economic risks in Bahrain resulting from government policies, issued mid August*

**New Restrictions On Political Societies**  
*The government has tightened restrictions on political societies, and some are likely to be dissolved as a result. BMI View: The administration presumably hopes to weaken some of its more vocal opponents, but the new restrictions are likely to add to dissent.*

A new law on political societies has tightened restrictions on political campaigning. The key provision of the new law, which was passed on July 23, is its apparent ban on campaigning for constitutional change. Yet calls for such change have been a major rallying point for some of the most popular opposition groups, including the key Shi'a-based society, al-Wefaq. Societies who do not comply with the law within 90 days of July 23 will be liable to be dissolved by the minister of justice. As a result, al-Wefaq – and probably other societies which call for constitutional change – is now likely to be dissolved in late October. This will rid the government of a group that has organised increasingly vocal protests in recent months, but the root causes of opposition will not go away. Reducing the possibilities of peaceful and legal political expression is likely to increase the risk that some dissidents will turn to violence, as happened in the 1990s before the country initiated democratic reforms. In particular, there will be a high risk of unrest when G8 leaders meet for a forum in Manama in November.

At present, parties are banned, but political societies perform many of the same functions as a traditional political party, organising campaigns and – in many cases – fielding MPs. Four of these political societies, including al-Wefaq (which reports its membership to be around 65,000), boycott parliament in protest against restrictions on the elected chamber's power. These groups say the 2002 constitution was a step backwards for democracy because it gave less power to elected representatives than the previous

constitution, which was written in 1973 (but subsequently suspended). This is a popular complaint: in March, thousands marched in Manama in support of constitutional reform, in an unusually large demonstration organised by a number of political societies including al-Wefaq.

This pressure for greater political representation is intensified by sectarian tensions. The majority of Bahrainis are Shi'a, while the ruling family is Sunni. Calls for greater democracy and human rights are by no means exclusive to any one religious group, but Bahrain's Shi'a are particularly keen to have more of a say in politics: they face higher unemployment than their Sunni counterparts and have traditionally been excluded from many senior government positions. For its part, the ruling family, which is already very wary of Iran, is also likely to be concerned about the rise of a new Shi'a democracy in Iraq. While the government has allowed some political opening in the past three years, it now seems to be backtracking on some of these provisions. There is, however, some speculation that the King may step in to modify the law over the next three months, as he is

said to have favoured dialogue with opposition groups in the past. King Hamad has also sometimes used his royal prerogative to pardon activists whose expressions of political opinion had been deemed illegal.

So far, the opposition has used strictly peaceful means of expression. But there is a danger that if space for peaceful political expression is squeezed, some critics of the government – especially the young and unemployed – will turn to violence instead. In the 1990s, when there was no parliament whatsoever, there was a spate of bombings and arson attacks by Shi'a militants. Al-Wefaq's spokesman, Abduljalil al-Singace, told BMI 'The country faces crisis. I fear that the level of frustration will rise, and no one will listen to logical people any more.'

We envisage a particularly high risk of unrest when the G8 plans to hold its second Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Forum in Bahrain this November. Given the security concerns surrounding any G8 meeting – which will be even higher since London was bombed by militants while the G8 held its summit in the UK in July – protests are likely to be given short shrift by police, who have reportedly beaten peaceful demonstrators with sticks on at least two occasions this year. But the risk of more violent dissent cannot be ruled out.

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## Bahrain's economy suffers from declining growth

Figures released by the ministry of finance point to declining growth rate of Bahrain's gross domestic product in 2004. The adverse development has occurred despite the rise of oil prices worldwide.

According to the National Accounts of 2004, the GDP grew at 5.4 per cent in 2004, down from 7.2 per cent in 2003. The figures relate to constant prices after adjusting for inflation. Bahrain's economy suffers from inflationary pressures of around 8 per cent due to continued increases in property prices and rents.

The declining growth level meant that the GDP stood at BD3.2 billion or around US\$8.5 billion. The figure translates into per capita income standing at BD4,578 or just above \$12,1000. The per capita income looks marvelous if it was truly reflective of the country's situation. The figure is merely an average reflecting GDP amount divided on total population. Private studies suggest that many in Bahrain have difficulty generating half of this amount because of salary problems. More than half of the workforce could not earn BD200 per month (or BD2,400 annually).

The Bahraini people were shocked to learn of declining economic growth level. It was widely expected the GDP would register a stronger growth rate on the back of strengthened oil prices in the market. The petroleum sector is vital for Bahrain's economy because it constitutes more than two thirds of treasury income and exports.

Strangely enough, statistics released by the ministry of finance assert that crude oil & natural gas sector contributed merely 13.1 per cent of the GDP. In effect, this meant a negative growth of nearly 12 per cent in a span of a very special year for oil prices. The year 2004 was marked with firm oil prices, crossing the 50 dollar per barrel mark. A statement by the said ministry has argued that oil production accounted for Bahrain has declined by nearly 13 per cent in 2004. However, the statement has failed to provide details other than a drop of 11.2 million barrels for the entire 2004. Throughout 2004, the regime denied reports that the country's oil production capacity had dropped.

It is believed that Saudi Arabia has decided to reduce oil grants extended to Bahrain after learning of mishandling of public funds. For example, the ministry of finance has confirmed in a report that every minister with a portfolio receives an annual bonus of BD50,000 on top of their salaries and other allowances and benefits.

The adverse GDP progress of 2004 is indicative of mismanagement of economic resources. Clearly, the regime lacks the ability to make the best of the country's capabilities. The solution requires the so-called "ruling family" making way for more qualified people running the economic show of Bahrain.

### Their fantasy world

The ruling family asked the societies to condemn the London seminar as a show of support to the regime. Only a handful of groups ventured out to speak against the seminar and those who had participated in its debate. The Al Khalifa had also put pressure on the British government to take measures against this activity, and went as far as claiming in their media that Tony Blair had threatened Lord Avebury for taking the lead in organising the event. It was nothing but a joke and a sign of despair of a throttled dictatorship.