

BAHRAIN

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Human Rights groups, journalists have discovered the reality in Bahrain When will the pro-democracy politicians wake up

Following the unprecedented wave of internal acrimony among political activists in Bahrain, questions are being asked about the viability of serious political opposition to the hereditary dictatorship in this troubled island. While there appears to be unanimity among the people that they had been lured into Sheikh Hamad's political programme, difference have emerged as how to counter the developing military dictatorship at the head of the system, and whether his policies of buying off loyalties to his programme will make much difference to an already volatile situation. It is not clear yet how much support and advice the Al Khalifa dictatorship have received in recent years from the two most important allies; the US and UK. Their enthusiasm to Al Khalifa's dictatorship, their support for Sheikh Hamad's programme and their willingness to prop up a hereditary dictatorship is deafening. The realities are testimony to this totalitarian regime. Last month's cabinet reshuffle, for example, has produced a government half of whose 22 cabinet posts are allocated to Al Khalifa members. This is outrageous by any standard. Furthermore, the reshuffle has added more humiliation to the once-overwhelming majority Shia, who are allocated five junior cabinet posts.

This discriminatory policy has underlined the recent anger among the political activists who were forced to re-register their political societies in line with the newly-enforced Societies Law. This draconian law effectively strips these societies off their ability to offer a viable and independent opposition to the ruling family. It makes it a condition for any society to recognise the Al Khalifa constitution which was put in place by Sheikh Hamad to replace the contractual constitution of 1973. This Law has caused a rift among the political activists who have been split into two camps: those who resist this offensive law and those who want to submit to the will of the hereditary dictatorship. Several prominent activists have now resigned from their societies and are planning to undertake new political initiatives to counter the increasingly dictatorial na-

ture of the regime. While the rift is heart-breaking, it may have a hidden blessing. Those who have chosen to continue the struggle from outside the regime's dictates now have more freedom to act, and are ready to face the consequences of their peaceful opposition. Those who may decide to work from within the Al Khalifa system will eventually find the futility of attempting to change from within.

Once significant move was apparent in the cabinet reshuffle. The notorious torturer, Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa, the head of the torture apparatus instituted by Sheikh Hamad regime, was relieved of his duties and appointed an advisor to the ruler on security matters. This step is in response to the demands by the UN Human Rights Commission that called on the Al Khalifa not to give impunity to torturers. Atiyyat Allah has become a liability to the regime, and is likely to be pursued by the victims of torture. The National Committee of Martyrs and Torture Victims, in collaboration with the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights succeeded in bringing the Al Khalifa torturers to the notice of the international community through their intensive work last Spring in Geneva. The cabinet reshuffle, however, only re-enforced earlier claims that Sheikh Hamad has become more despotic than his predecessors. He has taken bold steps to change the country once and for all, through his programme of fundamental demographic change. He has offered Bahraini nationality to tens of thousands of foreigners as he struggled to transform the Shia majority into a minority. He had planned to avert the predicament of Saddam Hussain who had ruled Iraq with an iron fist and persecuted the majority of the population.

The Al Khalifa have infuriated the people of Bahrain further. Sheikh Hamad has signed a protocol lifting the boycott of Israel. This unilateral action without allowing a debate even within his various bodies like the Shura Council with its two chambers, is yet another evi-

dence of the lack of popular consent to the acts and decisions undertaken by the Al Khalifa. The media, which is wholly controlled by the ruling family, has been ordered not to debate this decision, which is considered one of the sovereign matters confined to the ruling family. Banning public debate of matters of concern to the people is yet another policy that is being put in place by Sheikh Hamad and his clique. Last month a seminar to debate the Societies Law was scheduled to take place at Al Oruba Club. Few hours before it was due to convene, a member of the Al Khalifa ruling family in charge of youth activities and sports called the club management team to warn them against allowing the seminar to be held on their premises. The seminar was thus cancelled. It was subsequently held at another location but only after is lost its appeal.

Bahrain has thus become an absolute dictatorship, notwithstanding the large propaganda machine that is fuelled by people's wealth which is blundered by the ruling family. Out of over US\$5 billion oil revenue, only US\$2 billion is allocated to the national budget. The rest is pocketed by the senior members of the Al Khalifa. This is the essence of the "reform programme" undertaken by the present ruler. Robin Lustig, of the BBC World Service, in a programme on democracy in Bahrain broadcast last month, could not decide whether the glass was half empty or half full. He was right. Those who investigate the situation in the country can only discover more atrocious acts, treachery and mockery. The BBC team which visited the country has managed to clarify the situation in a more convincing way. They had met with activists, victims, professionals, ordinary people and government officials. Their verdict was clear in the programme, and was put eloquently to the listeners. Human rights groups had discovered part of the truth some time ago. Now the journalists have now discovered the truth. The question is: when will the politicians acknowledge the reality of the political situation in Bahrain?

Bahrain offers dram of democracy

By Robin Lustig
BBC News, Bahrain

In the fourth of his five-part Looking for Democracy series, the BBC's Robin Lustig reports from the Gulf state of Bahrain. (Broadcast on Thursday 22nd September 2005)

The tiny Gulf state claims to be the region's most democratic nation

Bahrain is not like the other Gulf states, it is not awash with oil and it does have to look after the pennies.

While it is both the smallest and the poorest state in the region, it also claims to be the most democratic.

The ruling family, the al-Khalifas, have run the place since the late 18th Century.

They provide the king, who is the head of state, and his heir apparent, the crown prince.

They also provide the prime minister, deputy prime minister, foreign minister, defence minister, oil minister and finance minister.

In fact, it is rather an odd democracy in which nearly half the cabinet members are related to each other.

Accountability

But it is not quite that simple. One government minister, not a member of the royal family as it happens, told me he gets regular grillings from MPs, which he clearly does not much enjoy. A lawyer said he has actually won cases in court against royal princes.

Officially, Bahrain is now a constitutional monarchy.

If parliament passes a vote of no confidence in a minister, royal or not royal, the king has to sack him within seven days.

The Saudis have a nick-name for Bahrain - they call it "the bar" for short, because you can buy alcohol here

No, it has not actually happened yet, but they insist that it could.

How democratic is Bahrain? Well that depends on whether you consider the glass to be half full or half empty.

On one hand, ministers are answerable to parliament, although there is not a single woman member in the elected lower chamber.

There are dozens of political societies that campaign on human rights and constitutional reform.

On the other hand, the upper house of parliament is wholly unelected, the press is only semi-free and political parties are banned.

Judges have sole jurisdiction over family cases like divorce in the country's Sharia courts.

'The bar'

Ghada Jamsheer, a feisty women's rights campaigner, has run into trouble with the judges and now faces trial on charges of having insulted them.

"They say they don't like to see my hair," she tells me, pointing to her defiantly uncovered head. "Well, I don't like to see their beards."

The Saudis have a nick-name for Bahrain - they call it "the bar" for short, because you can buy alcohol here.

Every weekend, thousands of them drive across the 15-mile-long (24km) causeway that links the island to the mainland to enjoy all kinds of delights not available back home.

I even heard that some of them turn up to human rights classes, but I suspect they are in the minority.

Is a taste for democracy as easy to acquire as a taste for whisky?

Human rights campaigners here tell you there is still far too little democracy, even in Bahrain while the Islamists think the whole reform programme has already gone too far.

The government sits uneasily in the middle. Stability and order are the watchwords, say ministers - democracy cannot be built in a day.

But as I stare at my glass of beer, I still cannot decide: is it half full or half empty?

More attacks on free speech

The General Secretariat of the Constitutional Conference (GSCC) was prevented from holding a seminar to refute the Al Khalifa's allegations against the opposition. One of these allegations is that the opposition is seeking outside support for its struggle against dictatorship. The seminar was scheduled to be held at Al Oruba Club on Tuesday 20th September. But hours before the seminar was due to convene one of the Al Khalifa members called the management of the club informing him of the decision to prevent the seminar without giving convincing reasons.

The GSCC insisted on holding the seminar, and rescheduled it for the following week. It was held at the headquarters of the Democratic Action Society. Several speakers addressed the seminar including Jalila Al Sayyed, a lawyer, Hassan Mushaime', a political activist, Dr Aziz Abul and Dr Abdul Jalil Al Singace.

The Al Khalifa action, once again, proved the inability of the ruling family to allow the exercise of free speech. It has now become known to the people that the freedom that the Al Khalifa often refer to is confined to the activities that support their dictatorship. Any criticism of the regime is not tolerated.

Budget cheat in Bahrain

Actual figures for 2004 budget confirm that the regime has not used the state fund properly. In effect, while income increased by 61 percent to BD1,300 million, real spending dropped by 11 percent to BD1,105 million. Still, instead of recording a surplus of BD195 million, the authorities played another trick.

Of this, BD85 million was allocated for unspecified capital spending and BD51 million for purchase of weaponry systems. As such, merely BD60 million was recorded as real surplus. Altogether, the results demonstrate that the authorities are uniquely unfit to run financing for a country, no matter how small that maybe.

In reality, the cabinet, headed by Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, Bahrain's sole premier since independence in 1971), was wrong in its budget planning across the board. Mistakes were made in forecasting revenue, spending and deficit.

For example, projected revenue was put at BD806 million but ended up rising by BD494 million to BD1,300 million. The government calculated the budget using oil price of US\$18 per barrel. Certainly, there is every sense in pursuing a conservative policy, but by adopting such a low oil price, the authorities demonstrated they lacked any clue about market situation.

Yet, despite stronger revenue, the regime failed to spend budgeted funds.

Instead, actual expenditure dropped by 11 percent or BD134 million from BD1,246 million to BD1,105 million. Nothing justifies what happened, not least because the country is badly in need of investment on capital projects for upgrading of roads and boosting power transmission and distribution. What happened suggests that the regime is certainly careless about the country's well-being. In other words, the fiasco shows that the regime is stingy by all means. Accordingly, money was there (considerably more than projected amount) but there was no resolve to use it. Worse yet, the regime decided to make use of the surplus amount the way it desires, with no questions asked. Sheikh Hamad bin Isa, the state's ruler, decided to grab BD51 million of the surplus to spend on his beloved institution, the military establishment). In fact, the authorities made no effort to inform so-called National Assembly as to why they have had failed to spend the allocated money let alone dispersion of surplus amount. In reality, some members of "parliament" (which is nothing more than a showcase entity used by authorities when needed) expressed their dismay after learning about the real figures for fiscal year 2004 from press sources. The whole fiasco shows that some selfish, unqualified individuals are running Bahrain.

Freedom of speech, if the govt says so

It was only a month ago, in response to Lord Avebury's seminar in London, that GDN owner Anwar Abdulrahman wrote in his column:

The question that one asks is, do they [the opposition activists] really need to discuss Bahrain's affairs in London, chaired by a British godfather?

Are we to believe that in Bahrain there is no freedom of expression and exchange of opinion?

At the time I would have responded by agreeing that there does exist a level of freedom of expression in Bahrain to hold such seminars here... but that that should not prevent activists from going abroad to speak, if they are invited. It seems to me quite a normal and accepted practice in much of the world.

Yet it seems that the government is actually still interested in preventing such seminars from taking place even within Bahrain. The Constitutional Conference was planning on holding a seminar at the Al Oruba Club this Tuesday about the "Constitutional Crisis", featuring speeches by Jaleela Al Syed, Hassan Mushaima' and Dr Aziz Abel. However, the GDN reports, :

Ms Al Sayed told the GDN yesterday that the [Al Oruba] club's management received a phone call at 6.30pm, two hours before the event, from the General Organisation for Youth and Sports (Goys), telling them to cancel the meeting.

"In their phone call, Goys claimed the Interior Ministry didn't give them permission for the event, so the club had no right to hold it," she said.

"The club has been warned that it will bear the consequences of hosting the meeting, with Goys taking severe action against any breaching of the decision." (Continued)

The problem in this case, and in general with the reforms is that nothing is institutionalized. In general, we do enjoy a much greater level of freedom of speech in Bahrain today than during the 90s, there's no denying it; but it's all at the mercy of the regime. The government can take away this right from anyone at its whim; not based upon any agreed principles. The regime uses the excuse that it has the responsibility to prevent anything that "promotes sectarianism", "threatens stability" or "harms national unity". Yet it is the regime, and only the regime, that decides which events constitute such a crime and which do not.

So, in just the past two years we've had the arrest of seventeen people for trying to submit a petition; the arrest of a human rights activist and the closure of his organization for criticizing the Prime Minister; the arrest of three website mod-

erators for their website; threats against a political society for holding a rally; the suspension of a political society because of a conference it held; and on two occasions protesters have been viciously beaten for trying to hold rallies. To my knowledge, in none of the above cases did the government attain any type of judicial writ prior to taking action. Additionally, there has not been any serious legislative discussion to define, with some level of precision, when the government has the legal right to prevent people from expressing themselves, and when it does not. (Our parliament takes much of the credit for this one).

And so in the case of Tuesday's "Constitutional Crisis" seminar, the gov-

ernment needed only make one phone call a mere two hours before the event, and it became illegal. The seminar has now been rescheduled for this coming Tuesday, at the NDAS premises. Let's hope the government doesn't try to throw a spanner in the works this time.

On a somewhat related note, the BBC News website has published a story about the state of democracy in Bahrain, concluding in its headline that: Bahrain offers dram of democracy. There's nothing really new in the article for those of us in Bahrain, but it does carry a great quote from women's rights activist Ghada Jamsheer regarding the judges who accuse her of slander:

"They say they don't like to see my hair," she tells me, pointing to her defiantly uncovered head. "Well, I don't like to see their beards."

Victims of Al Khalifa aggression hospitalised

Urgent Appeal

Activist Rajab hospitalised, five others await proper treatment as a result of attack by the State Military Forces

ACTIVIST RAJAB HOSPITALIZED
6th September 2005

The Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) has received today, with concerns, news about a well-known human rights activist, Mr. Nabeel Rajab, who was taken by ambulance to Salmaneyya Government hospital. Mr. Rajab was unable to move a result of severe back pain which he suffered when attacked by the Bahraini military forces while intending to participate into a peaceful demonstration by the Unemployed on July 15th, 2005.

The initial medical diagnosis showed a vertebral slippage in his backbone, which requires surgery. A delicate surgical operation of this kind is a great danger as any failure could result in a total immobility. BCHR demands that the Bahraini authorities to bear its responsibilities and save Mr Rajab from danger by arranging for immediate and secure surgical operation.

It is to be noted that a group of citizens, attacked by Bahraini military forces during gathering to commence a peaceful demonstration for the Unemployed, have been receiving medical treatment in public hospitals, but because of the deficiency of the process, some have reverted to private hospitals irrespective of their downgraded financial situation. These include:

1- Nabeel Rajab, 1964, Human Rights activist, vertebral slippage in back bone (currently in Salmaneyya Governmental Hospital)

2- Hassan Ali Fatil Al-sarri, 22yrs, recently employed, suffering from dam-

aged nerves in his right hand (not receiving any treatment)

3- Imad Husain Abbas Madan, 1983, unemployed, receiving physiotherapy in his neck, difficulty of head maneuver

4- Yousef Ahemd Husain Ali, 1978, unemployed, still receiving treatment in the lower back bone.

5- Mosa abdali Ali Mohammed, 1981, unemployed, still walking with crutches, receiving physiotherapy and treatment in lower backbone and right leg.

6- Abdulhadi Al-khawja, 1961, Human rights activist, still receiving treatment in Salmaneyya Governmental Hospital for broken and malfunction of the upper frontal teeth.

These cases are amongst 94 individuals who were reported to be attacked in peaceful gathering of the unemployed on 19th June 2005 in front of the Royal Court and Riffa police station and on 15th July 2005 near the National Council Building in Manama. Among those attacked were 3 women, 3 human rights activists, 3 journalists. 69 of the victims were aged between 17 and 30 years.

Although 20 individuals filed cases to the Public Prosecution Office after the two attacks on June 19th, no measures were taken by that office which encouraged the military forces to repeat its third attack on July 15th, less than a month from the previous. The Public Prosecutor has refused earlier to send his representatives to Riffa Police station to collect videos, evidences of attacks and witnesses, an attitude encouraged for the second attack in that station.

Two months have elapsed from the first and second attack, and almost 7 weeks from the third, but the Authorities in Bahrain have not responded to the numerous

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On the King's Dreams

Let me begin my remarks by a positive reference to a speech made by the king of Bahrain last February. The speech, "I dreamt of a homeland that embraces all its citizens", provides glimpses of sheikh Hamad perceives himself and his role as a person whom destiny and history have charged him with a mission he defines as 'moving the country forward.

Unfortunately, and in spite of all the creative public relation endeavours, Sheikh Hamad's performance as a nation-builder remains abysmal. At least not anywhere near the hopes many of us were led to believe when sheikh Hamad announced in 2001 his intentions to take up the challenging tasks of reforming the dynastic rule in Bahrain and to build a country where citizens, regardless of their backgrounds would enjoy equality in rights, privileges and responsibilities. Sheikh Hamad ignores the fact that his dream of a land that embraces all its citizens will remain a dream as long as he adamantly refuses to deal with what I call the legacy of the conquest. This refers to 1783 conquest of Bahrain by the al-Khalifa and its tribal allies from the mainland Arabia. To this day, the ruling family in Bahrain, and of course Sheikh Hamad himself, refer to that conquest as the basis for establishing the legitimacy of their dynastic rule. I am not talking here about few symbolic signifiers of this legacy such as titles or demeanours. No. The legacy of conquest is to be found in the real world of politics and business. It is to be found the daily experience that any al-Khalifa person whether senior in rank and age or not, is above the law. The legacy of conquest is found in the monthly stipend of pounds given to each and every member of the al-Khalifa. It is to be found in the songs and poems that Bahrain children learn to sing and recite acknowledging the conquest as an act of historic salvation. And in the monuments constructed to tell parts of the inhabitants that they remain the vanquished. The legacy of conquest is found in the submissive acknowledgement by an employee, professional or otherwise, that a priority in appointment and in promotion is reserved to one's al-Khalifa colleagues. I can of course go on into more examples and details.

Sheikh Hamad has not only refused to address these day-to-day manifestations of the legacy of conquest but he has indeed expanded them further. During the past five and a half years Sheikh Hamad has done a great deal to consolidate this legacy and consolidate the feudal privileges enjoyed by his siblings. In fact a process of Khalfanisation of the state initiated by him has putting an al-Khalifa

person on the top of nearly all government and public institutions in Bahrain.

The poor performance of Sheikh Hamad as a reformer and a nation-builder does not surprise observers of Bahrain's political development and students of its recent history. The tremendous tasks that Sheikh Hamad pronounced he would undertake required overcoming serious obstacles. But the sheikh did not because he was unable, and I am tempted to say unwilling, to pay the price of reforms. That would require him to take straight on some of the persisting obstacles to reform and to nation building.

In May 2001, three weeks after my return to Bahrain following 25-years in forced exile, I delivered a public lecture in which I pleaded to Sheikh Hamad that he addresses some of the most obvious and most immediate of these obstacles. Unfortunately he chose to ignore that plea as well as other pleas made by so many concerned Bahrainis. Sheikh Hamad's unyielding position has complicated an already very complex situation in Bahrain and may frustrate all attempts to bridge the widening gap between the diverse political, religious, ethnic, and other segments in Bahraini society.

Another reason for the abysmal record of the reform project in Bahrain is found in Sheikh Hamad perception that reforms are nothing more than a series of makramas, royal grants, aimed at securing allegiance and support. Relying on makramas seemed to work for a while as it helped appease some of the leaders of the opposition. Unfortunately sheikh Hamad ignored every warning sign that generous grants cannot be a viable alternative a thoroughly work-out strategy of reforms.

In spite of past failures, Sheikh Hamad continues to view the reform project as his own private initiative. It is his grand Makrama. He remains reluctant to consult with any of the political groups on any aspect of the stagnant political process in the country. On he has the power to draw the contours of the process, to chart its future, its perimeters, its intensity and its extent. Indeed, through his political and financial makramas the sheikh continues to insist that he, and he alone, who determine what social group or political network, is to be included in the public sphere.

Let me end these remarks by going back to the royal speech of last February where sheikh Hamad where speaks of his dream of a homeland that embraces all its citizens". Unfortunately for sheikh Hamad and for the people of Bahrain, he went the wrong way to fulfil that dream.

Dr. Abdulhadi Khalaf, Ex-Parliamentarian, 1973-1975 Parliament-Bahrain

Deteriorating situation

The debate about the new draconian law that effectively nationalises the opposition has taken new dimensions. Following the imposition of the Societies Law, several leading members of the Al Wefaq Society offered their resignations in protest against the decision by the Executive Committee of the society to re-register the society in line with the new law, instead of fighting it. Senior religious figures also expressed their opinions on the law.

The most significant view came from Sheikh Hussain Najati, who categorically rejected the idea of re-registering the societies in line with the new law. He considered any such move is both humiliating and defeatist. His views offered a balance to a situation which was contaminated by ideas calling for giving in to the Al Khalifa wishes and laws.

Sheikh Najati's rejection of the law infuriated the ruling family. The next day, the notorious torturer, Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa tried to summon the senior cleric, but Sheikh Najati ignored the summon. The torturer was subsequently removed from his position in a new cabinet reshuffle. Sheikh Hamad, the ruler, has tightened his family's grip on power by allocating half of the cabinet posts to Al Khalifa members. His democracy dictates total domination of this oppressive family over the affairs of the country.

Urgent Appeal, *Cont from Page 3*

international appeals requesting an immediate and transparent investigation concluding in showing the facts, prosecuting those responsible, providing medical treatment and rewarding the victims as well as taking measures to prevent recurrence in the future.

The victims of attack have consequently decided to form a committee of their own and commence a campaign starting with meeting the King of Bahrain to furnish complete memorandum enclosing full details, proofs and photos. This is in addition to organizing popular activities to push the authorities to take up their responsibilities towards what had happened and preventing it from its reoccurrence.

BCHR is demanding the Bahraini Authorities to disclose the motives for the excessive force used against the peacefully gathered people, without an excuse, the justifications of using the militants who have been covering their faces with masks, and the names of the officials who gave the instructions. Also, BCHR demands the investigations in what appears to be a collaboration from the Public Prosecution Office, and its short fall in compliance with its duties towards the victims and their complains. BCHR demands the disclosure of the photos and videos which were taken by the authorities or those confiscated from the participants in these peaceful gatherings.