

BAHRAIN

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A new political awakening to achieve good governance

Good government is what the people of the world have been aspiring to achieve for centuries. This goal underlines the successive revolutions, revolts, reform movements, opposition activities, intellectual debates and, in many cases, international conflicts. The past century had solidified liberal democratic practices in the West as the ultimate achievement of western civilisation as it sought to leave behind the medieval era. It was challenged by the rise of communism in Russia but eventually, the Eastern challenge collapsed towards the end of the century. The western political experience would have been an ideal solution if it had led to a safer world and upheld the principles of justice, not only within the borders of western countries, but in the rest of the world. Alas, that has not happened. Today, the world is restless, with the shadow of wars, instability and terrorism looming in many places. The West, especially the United States has failed to administer justice on the international arena, failed to promote democracy in hot spots, especially the Middle East and adopted neo-colonial policies. It is now attempting to contain the threat of terrorism which has become nightmare to everyone, and is hampering the efforts to establish good governance especially in the Middle East. The long-awaited promises given by the United States in the aftermath of the war on Iraq are yet to materialise. The Bush administration has, apparently, achieved a compromise with despotic regimes in the region. They have to freeze their policies of repression, mass arrests, torture practices and heavy-handed treatment of civil opponents in return for continued US support. They have been exempted from adopting democracies. This has now become a core principle of US foreign policy in the Middle East, and is supported by Britain. The euphoria surrounding the initial promises of democratisation in the Middle East has now subsided, and US-supported dictatorships are enjoying a pressure-free period in which they are redrawing their internal political maps to crush internal opposition with new methods. The past four years has been a period of enormous wealth to the oil-producing regimes, as oil prices soured to over

US\$50 per barrel. This new wealth has enabled them to silence their opponents through policies of co-option and containment. While the average person in the street may not have benefited from this wealth but prominent figures in these societies have been targeted by the regimes for bribes at enormous levels.

Let us take Bahrain as an example. US officials have repeatedly boasted of the Al Khalifa political programme as being a "beacon" for democracy. But is it? With a regime that tolerates no real opposition, accepts nothing less than total subjugation of citizens and senior opposition figures through enactment of a repressive constitution and laws or allows no room for dissent, there is hardly any substance for claims of democracy. As the ruling Al Khalifa family tightens its grip on power, spread its members in all senior positions in the government, blunders the country's oil wealth, nationalises, through its rules and laws, opposition groups, there is hardly any change from their practices in earlier times. If anything, the situation has moved from bad to worse. The recent cabinet reshuffle has confirmed the Al Khalifa absolutism, with 11 out of 22 ministries in the hands of members of the ruling family, while only five ministries given to members of the Shia majority. In the seventies the 15 ministerial posts were divided equally among the ruling family, the Sunni and the Shia communities. Furthermore, the prime minister, notorious for his repressive policies including the institutionalising of torture, remains in the top post with no change or challenge in policies.

Indeed, there has been a reduction in the extent of physical repression, but that was due to several factors. The international pressures on the ruling Al Khalifa family has forced it to adopt alternative methods to contain the internal threats to its dictatorship, having realised the futility of Henderson-style practices. It has also realised that the enormous oil wealth can be used to buy off potential opposition figures and groups. It has also enabled it to widen its international army of mercenaries whose main func-

tion is to solicit support of western politicians to the Al Khalifa dictatorship. Several agencies are now acting on behalf of this repressive dictatorship in public relations and media activities. It could be argued that these policies have only short-term effects. That may be true if the Al Khalifa practices are confined to public relations. The most dangerous dimension in their new policy is the demographic change which is being implemented at an alarming rate. It is overshadowed by noisy media coverage of less significant issues. The huge financial liquidity has enabled the regime to exploit the media to achieve maximum achievements. For example, while the pseudo-democratic practices dominate the news on daily basis, the demographic changes receive no coverage whatsoever. The psyche of the people of Bahrain is being mercilessly exploited and remodelled in accordance with predetermined shapes in order to become gradually aligned with indifference to subjugation, demographic engineering and identity loss. The country's wealth has enabled the Al Khalifa to recruit former opponents to senior positions and use them against the remnants of the opposition.

The next few weeks are crucial for the Al Khalifa political programme as they prepare for the "Forum of the Future" that evaluates the political situation in the Middle East. The newly-formed opposition alliance is likely to make their voice heard during this forum while the Al Khalifa are contemplating how to counter such activities. They had hoped that their political programme would have annihilated the century-old opposition. To their dismay they will soon realise that that has not been achieved and that the new opposition is more principles, dedicated and determined to put an end to their hereditary dictatorship. The policies of deception, demographic engineering and unlimited corruption will be exposed to the world, and it is hoped, that those concerned with security and stability in the Middle East will realise the futility and dangers of supporting absolute dictatorship like that of the Al Khalifa.

Terrorising peaceful opposition in Bahrain

Execution to members of non-conformist associations

The latest "legalised" tool of terror against the people of Bahrain is the proposed "Law of Terror", which has exposed the extent to which the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship would go in order to silence legal opposition. Once this outrageous act is rubber-stamped by Sheikh Hamad's councils, it will make it a crime to express unfavourable opinion on almost anything related to his repressive political programme. It is tailor-made to appease the United States and Britain, but at the same time exact a price from the people of Bahrain. It outlaws any association outside the boundaries of the Al Khalifa constitution. Moreover, it calls for the death penalty to anyone who aims to change the repressive constitution.

"Punishment by death to anyone who forms, establishes, organises or manages, contrary to the rules of law, a society, association, organisation, group or a gang, or a branch to one of these, or becomes a leader in it, that aims to call, in any means, for the freezing of the rules of the constitution or the laws, or prevent one of the state's bodies or one of authorities from carrying out its duties"....

Anyone who becomes a member of these societies, associations, organisations, groups or gangs, or any of its branches or participate in its activities in any form, knowing its terrorist aims is liable for the life imprisonment.

The law clearly equates peaceful opposition to the Al Khalifa rule to terrorism and punishes people with death or life imprisonment. Sheikh Hamad has thus embarked on a bloody road to fulfil his aims, and is in no mood to compromise on that. While this is not new to the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship, the audacious nature of the regime to stipulate death and life imprisonment to people for exercising their right for peaceful association is a dangerous precedence that the world community must not ignore.

The law has several other articles that have deep contradictions. Article 8 which deals with military training and expertise in explosive materials calls for less dramatic punishment, ranging from ten years to life imprisonment. While Article 9 calls for "life imprisonment to anyone who manages an organisation, an association, an establishment or a special commission that has been formed in accordance with

the law, but exploits his management position in to call for committing any of the crimes stipulated in this law. The crimes here refer to peaceful opposition to the Al Khalifa constitution and laws.

Possessing unwanted literature is also a serious crime in the "Al Khalifa democracy". Article 12 calls for five years imprisonment to anyone possessing a leaflet aimed for others that is against the state policies.

The Al Khalifa are thus in breach of the most basic of human rights, and in clear breach of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are exploiting the current anti-terror feelings to widen the concept of terrorism to include opposition to their dictatorship. This is a crime worse than those committed during the black era of the prime minister.

Legalising repression at this scale is an affront to human dignity and values. It is thus incumbent on the world community to intervene against this dictatorship and look beyond the vale of the government propaganda machine. It is time that this dictatorship is brought to account for its deception, corruption and legalised totalitarianism.

Testimony of a Bahraini Human Rights Defender at Dublin Conference

The following is a testimony presented by Abdulhadi Alkhwaja, President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, addressed to the 3rd Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders.

13th - 15th October 2005, Dublin Castle

My name is Abdulhadi Alkhwaja, I am married to Khadija Almousawi who always supported me including 20 years in exile, during which I was engaged in campaigning for reforms and human rights in Bahrain. I was then the director of the Bahrain Organization for Human Rights which was based in Denmark from 1989 until 2001. As a result of wide internal protests and international pressure, the new ruler in Bahrain declared general amnesty, so in June 2001, I returned to Bahrain with my wife and four brave daughters who are now also engaged in voluntary work for human rights. In Bahrain I helped establishing the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, which was engaged in wide range of activities in the deferent aspects of human rights, including training, advocacy and addressing issues that considered forbidden by the ruling family, such as privileges, discrimination and the supporting the rights of thousands of victims of tortures in the past years. In September 2004, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights started a campaign on economic and social rights. A report on the subject

was launched during a seminar attended by several thousands of people. As the director of the center, I presented a paper to answer why the living conditions for half of the citizens is deteriorating in a country that is rich with oil. I criticized the head of government for mismanagement and corruption for thirty years, and I proposed strategies to promote economic and social rights in the country. The next day, at mid night, I was arrested. The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights was closed. Ramla Jawad, a young women who attended this conference last year, was engaged in transferring heavy boxes of documents from the premises to prevent being confiscated by the authorities. The hard work lead to a miscarriage and loosing her first baby while trying to save information related to victims of violations. The closure of the centre and my detention, provoked series of demonstrations and protests in Bahrain leading to the detention of other activists. The case was on the news and satellite channels. Many local, regional and international actors and NGO's intervened. In November 2004, after two month in detention, I was sentenced to one year imprisonment, but at the same day I was released, along with other detainees thanks to the powerful campaign on the national and international levels. Despite closure, the Centre continued its

activities with a larger scale, including assisting the unemployed, the poorly paid and people with poor housing to form there own committees and organize a series activities and peaceful protests. On Sunday 19 June 2005, during a peaceful protest by the unemployed in front of the royal court, I was severely beaten by the special military force, after presenting my identification as the president of the Bahrain Centre for human Rights. As a result I am still under treatment for a friction in the upper jaw and a two damaged teeth. Less than one month later, on Friday 15 July, and before the start of a demonstration calling for social security for more than 30 thousands unemployed citizens, I was again subjected to physical assault by the military special force "alsa'eqa" who were covering there heads with black masks. For more than 15 minuets, I was contentiously beaten by batons on the head and the back, in front of scores of people including my daughters Fatima and Batool. Fatima, 20 years, was also injured in the face trying to protect me. I suffered severe pain and body exhaustion, and still have scars of the beatings on my body. Other five victims, including Nabeel Rajab, the vice president of the Centre, are still under treatment. More than 90 people were assaulted in those events, including a minor boy and three women.

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The Challenge of continued despotism

The situation in Bahrain has remained tense, with many arrests and cases of maltreatment reported over the past twelve months. International Human Rights Organisations issued many statements expressing concern at the situation. After a period of relative calm, the regime is now becoming increasingly intolerant to peaceful opposition. Two months ago the ruling family imposed a new law to force the political societies to recognise its constitution that Sheikh Hamad, the ruler, imposed on the country on 14th February 2002. There are four political societies that have rejected that constitution and pledged to continue civil action to force the ruling family to accept a contractual constitution. However, the new law does not allow them to do this.

A month ago, a new law was unveiled, ostensibly to combat terrorism. It equates peaceful opposition to the dictatorship of the ruling family as equivalent to terrorism. It calls for the death penalty to anyone who forms, runs or supports an association that opposes the constitution, and for five years imprisonment for anyone found in possession of a leaflet that attacks the ruling family's constitution. Consequently, many activists are now contemplating the return to underground opposition.

Corruption has continued unabated. Two months ago, a cabinet reshuffle widened the presence of members of the ruling family in the cabinet. Out of 22 ministers, 11 are allocated to the Al Khalifa including that of prime minister and the sovereign ministries. The prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, has retained his post since 1971, with no due process of monitoring or accountability.

Furthermore, the ruling Al Khalifa family, has now adopted a dangerous policy to effect a fundamental change in the demographic composition of the country. Their aim is to make the Shia, who are the natives of the land, a minority. Over the past five years, tens of thousands of non-Bahraini Sunnis have been given Bahraini nationality. Thirty years ago the Shia made up over 80 percent of the population. By the year 2000, their majority had become around 70 percent. Today, they are probably around 60 percent or less. The ruling family refuses to give information on the extent of the demographic change.

In the seventies, the government was made up of 15 ministers, divided equally among the ruling family (holding the sovereign ministries; interior, foreign, defence and justice alongside the post of prime minister), the Sunnis and the Shia. Today, the government includes six Sunnis, five Shia and eleven from the Al

Khalifa.

People who are active now or had been engaged in anti-regime activities in the past have no prospect of proper employment, constitutional rights or security under the present system of hereditary dictatorship. Persons who refuse to adapt to the laws and rules of the hereditary dictatorship are liable to persecution, including imprisonment, torture and eco-

omic hardship. Those who had been imprisoned in during the popular uprising in the nineties are closely monitored and targeted for persecution. Government employees who had been jailed are unable to get promotions or compensation for lost income during illegal detention under the notorious State Security Law. Behind the façade of reforms stands an evil programme of ethnocide, cultural genocide and absolute hereditary dictatorship.

Home to foreigners, prison to natives

Following are two pieces on Michael Jackson's decision to live in Bahrain:

Jacko makes a home in Bahrain

*By Andy Goldberg in Los Angeles
October 23, 2005*

MICHAEL Jackson has moved from his Neverland fantasy retreat to take up permanent residence in Bahrain.

Lawyers for the controversial singer told the Los Angeles Times newspaper yesterday that he had not lived at Neverland since shortly after his acquittal in June on charges of child molestation.

"He's living permanently in Bahrain," lawyer Thomas Mesereau said.

"He has friends there who have been very loyal and helpful to him in a difficult period of his life.

"He's looking much better. He's with his children, and he's moving on in life." Mr

Mesereau made the statements in response to a jury duty summons for Jackson. Under California law, citizens do not have to serve on juries if they permanently reside elsewhere.

So while Mr Mesereau's comments might be a simple legal ploy, they do fit in with information that has consistently leaked from the Jackson camp, suggestinh he would never go back to live in Neverland. The sprawling estate was Jackson's indulgent retreat for about two decades, and he spent millions of dollars converting the property into a children's paradise.

Other American sources said that the singer had been the guest of Bahrain's Crown Prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa who is attempting to present an acceptable image of his family to the West.

Jackson Finds a New Home in Bahrain

Santa Ynez Valley residents speculate about the future of Neverland now that the singer resides in the Persian Gulf.

By Hector Becerra, Times Staff Writer
Does anyone know a good mover in the Santa Ynez Valley that can handle a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round and zoo animals? Michael Jackson's attorney said Thursday the pop singer has made the Middle Eastern nation of Bahrain, not Neverland ranch, his permanent home.

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Attorney Thomas A. Mesereau Jr. declined to comment on local speculation that Jackson planned to sell Neverland ranch, but said the singer is very happy in his new home. "He's looking much better. He's with his children, and he's moving on in life," Mesereau said. "He's living permanently in Bahrain. He has friends there who have been very loyal and helpful to him in a difficult period of his life." Jackson spent four months earlier this year in a Santa Maria courtroom before a jury acquitted him in June of charges that included sexually abusing a young recovering cancer patient. Within weeks, the singer traveled to Bahrain, where he has been a guest of the royal family. He has been a houseguest of Sheik Salman ibn



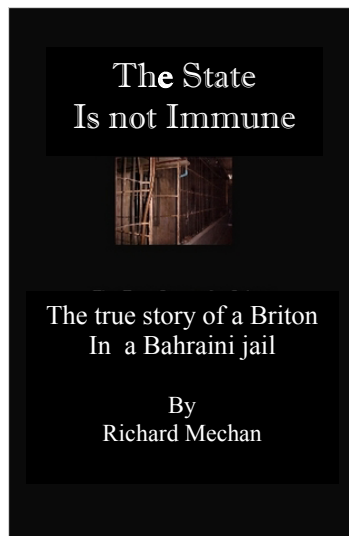
Hamed Khalifa, the crown prince of Bahrain, staying in a palace in the desert kingdom. The singer's brother, Jermaine Jackson, reportedly has close ties with Bahrain's royal circle, earlier this year announcing plans to unveil a charity theme song written by a son of the nation's king. As for the King of Pop, he appears to have won a warm reception in the Persian Gulf. In August, according to press reports, Jackson visited the Gulf region's trade and tourism hub of Dubai, where he hob-knobbed with friends and local celebrities. *(Los Angeles Times)*

Eyewitness account of the conditions in Bahraini torture chambers

A new book which graphically describes Briton Richard Mechan's experiences during his four year imprisonment in Aydia and Jau Prison in Bahrain has recently been published. In chilling detail, Mechan describes the overnight events which led to his imprisonment, the manipulations behind his trial and evidence process, the regime of beatings, neglect, and legal abuses in Jau Prison at the hands of the State of Bahrain. I needed to talk to the Arab political prisoners but it would not be easy as some of them had been there for years. The Head of the infamous SIS (State Intelligence Service) was a Briton, Colonel Ian Henderson, whose involvement in the suppression of the Shia majority since the inception of independence from Britain was synonymous with 'torture' on behalf of the ruling Al-Khalifa family. Eventually I did manage to speak with them. They were almost a military bunch, not in their build or demeanour, but in the way they guarded each others backs. All of them actively admitted to political dissent but none to pro-actively trying to bring down the Al-Khalifa government. In some cases, after they had been taken, whole families were split-up for months. The men suffered on a daily basis in the main SIS headquarters in Bahrain. They were shackled night and day at the old white-washed fort, and then they were taken in groups for systematic beatings, subjected to white noise torture where the static of a radio was left on all day and all night. Often, even when they had 'confessed', the torture would continue on for days on end. They suffered all sorts of humiliations including being forced to sit on glass Coca-Cola bottles until they completely disappeared up their rectums. If they were lucky, they got so badly injured that they would have to be taken to hospital where sympathetic Bahrain Military Force medical staff would keep them in as long as they could. Their skins were ravaged by disease but not from infection. It had simply blistered in the conditions of their confinement with temperatures hitting 55c in the summer. It was not hard to see this actually happening in an airless cell. They told me that this was done to them by British officers and, in particular a Bahraini Colonel, Adel Felaifel (who still remains protected by the King under decree #56 as does Henderson who is still living, albeit retired, in Bahrain). I couldn't believe that Brits were still openly involved with torture but I guess there are psychopaths and sadists in every society. I wondered how deeply Walmsley was involved in this underworld of suppression. Even a few ordinary individuals were caught up and brought in to be beaten to a pulp under

At night the guards would do their dirty work there, beatings and torture. The muffled screaming of helpless prisoners coming through the walls was horrendous

the guise of 'questioning'. Many had several toes missing as a result of being beaten so badly, losing the feeling in their toes/feet and then having their toes amputated because of infection. The State is Not Immune reveals for the



Testimony of a Human Rights Defender

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The police confiscated video and mobile cameras belonging to participants and reporters. A CD which I handed yesterday to Front line stuff, and which was officially submitted to the king of Bahrain few days ago, contained testimonies, photos, medical reports of the victims and video shots that was taken secretly by a mobile camera and was smuggled from the scenes. The events have not yet been investigated despite appeals and petitions on the national and international levels. Nevertheless, the Bahrain Centre for human rights, the committee for the unemployed, and other grass-root groups continue there activities in Bahrain with higher will and determination seeking the promotion of human rights despite harassments and threats.

Finally, I wish to pay gratitude to all those who supported me and the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, specially Front Line.

Thank you all for your patience.

first time the injustices and ill-treatments which led to the riots of 2001 as witnessed from a participant. As they moved around the room, Quibasi read from a list and then pointed at all the individual ring leaders. All of them; the spies had been busy. He passed me smiling. "Richard, you must come now," Lieutenant Isa said.

"No sir, I cannot. I am part of this protest."

"Very well. Your God and your Embassy will not be able to help you today." His lack of persistence worried me deeply.

The eleven ringleaders were taken away and there was much apprehension among those left behind. I wondered if they would fold and give in. Quibasi and his entourage returned and ordered everyone to move once more. None did. He barked and shouted in Arabic at a few at the front but they stood their ground.

"What did he say," I asked. "That we have five minutes to leave or they will make us leave by force," was the reply from Babool the Indian.

What seemed like a good idea last night was quickly turning into rat-shit. It was time for me to leave. As I did, some of the prisoners started to shout out to me. I had no way of leaving without losing face and, although I was bricking myself, I sat back down with purpose.

"Stay British. They will not attack with you here," said one Arab.

Wrong!! Just as he finished his words, the double doors of the dining area flew open. Guards poured in brandishing sticks and plastic riot shields. What happened next will live with me forever. It was like something out of Zulu Dawn. In one simultaneous massive movement, everyone around me cried "Allah Akbar; God is great" and picked up the nearest thing to hand. Chairs, tables, anything movable and launched themselves like a battalion towards the incoming guards. Guards that had managed to enter the dining room were battered with furniture and then chased back by prisoners, armed with table legs, who beat them back through the doors. It was carnage. The State is Not Immune is Bahrain's Midnight Express; compulsive reading which can be purchased on-line with free world wide postage from <http://www.lulu.com/content/150420> 'A door was opened and I was flung inside. There was no light and it took me some time for my eyes to adjust. It was a concrete box, three foot by six foot. There was a floor toilet and a hose pipe in the far corner. It was 50 degrees outside in the boiling sun. The Hole was unventilated. My heart began to palpitate as I struggled for air. I was going to die in here and looked for some way to hang myself to end this torture'