

BAHRAIN

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After four years of illegitimate rule

Bahrain's people are calling for referendum under UN auspices

February has entered the history of Bahrain as the month in which the ruling Al Khalifa family reneged on all promises and torn apart the only document that offered them the legitimacy to rule. In 223 years of occupation, the only source of that legitimacy was the 1973 Constitution which was a political and binding contract between the people of Bahrain and the Al Khalifa occupiers. Prior to this constitution, they had relied on the British for protection and ruled the country by the use of force. Before they withdrew in 1971, the British planned the future political map, including an undertaking by the Al Khalifa to recognise the people of Bahrain in return for recognition of their hereditary rule. The first Constitution was thus drawn up by representatives of the people of Bahrain who had been elected in the first experiment of its kind. That document offered the Al Khalifa the legitimacy to rule. Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman, the veteran prime minister understood the significance of this document and refrained from abolishing it. He did, however, suspend some of its articles, mainly those regulating the political role of the people, and exercised oppression at a massive scale. But it was only Sheikh Hamad, the present ruler, who is audacious enough to tear that document and resort to a rule by force, disguised in new terms, but lacks any democratic substance.

Today, the people of Bahrain are engaged in relentless confrontations with the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship. The situation of the first half of this decade has now fundamentally changed and the rules of the game have also changed. As Sheikh Hamad abandoned the contractual document, the people have also taken steps to withdraw their recognition of the Al Khalifa rule. It is an outdated mode of government that belongs to several centuries back in history and has no legitimacy in modern politics. People's right to choose their government has become the order of the day and no tyrant is allowed to rule except within the framework of popular representation. Sheikh Hamad has

benefited from the enormous oil revenues over the past four years, blundering most of it and directing only a small portion to the national budget. He has attempted to use the cash flow to buy off people, but his success is very limited. The boycott of the elections for his "parliament" was so successful with more than 60 percent of the population boycotting that process. The result was the burial of his political programme whose grave was dug on 14th February 2002, the day on which he disowned the legitimate constitution. Over the past three years, the Al Khalifa machinery has been in action to try to woo back the people to Sheikh Hamad's faltering political programme but to no avail. Anyone seen as towing the line of the Al Khalifa has been discredited, and the majority of the people are now aware that their conflict with the Al Khalifa occupiers is becoming an all-out political and psychological warfare, while the prospect of a solution of the conflict are becoming dimmer.

It can be said that the scene has now been set for a total showdown with the Al Khalifa dictatorship in a war that is unlikely to be limited in time or place. While the Al Khalifa are fighting for legitimacy, the people are fighting to safeguard their existence, identity, history and rights. Despite what appears to be a degree of normality, the ongoing political strife, including the arrests of activists, the daily demonstrations, the writing on the walls, the heated seminars and the rising animosity among the people towards the Al Khalifa are taking new dimensions unheard of before. Sheikh Hamad had the chance to solve the crisis but he chose to follow a policy of deception and corruption.

He, his family and those supporting him from outside the country have to understand that his rule is devoid of legitimacy, and no matter how much efforts are put into disguising this fact, the general feeling among the people is so serious that the Al Khalifa dictators are likely to resort to their old policies of

repression and human rights violations. International bodies have repeatedly condemned them for their brutal treatment of political prisoners and more reports and statements are likely to accuse them of blatant violations. The events in Kuwait over the past few weeks have clearly demonstrated the difference in the political behaviour of the rulers of Kuwait and Bahrain. Sheikh Hamad does not recognise even his own bodies, and does not feel obliged to appear before them to administer the oath. He is above everyone and every political body in the country. He is an absolute dictator whose brief military training at Sandhurst has created in him a tendency to use violence and repression against the people of Bahrain.

This month (February) marks the fourth year of legalised dictatorship and institutionalised personal despotism. The people are in a sad mood as they see themselves marching in the opposite way to that of the Al Khalifa. They are not ready to offer legitimacy to an illegitimate regime, and have now called for a United Nations sponsored initiative to hold a referendum on the wishes of the people of Bahrain. Senior religious scholars have called for internationalising the political crisis in this Gulf state, and are ready to carry their struggle forward until they achieve their legitimate rights and defeat dictatorship and hereditary dictatorship.

This is not a political slogan but a fact that is supported by the continued volatility of the internal situation, the rising number of political prisoners, the large numbers of injured young men and women in demonstrations and the verdict of international bodies such as the Economist Intelligence Unit which gave Bahrain a democratic ranking lower than any most Arab countries. It is a sign of the success of the people's struggle and the defeat of dictatorship, despotism and hereditary dictatorship. The next few months are crucial for the popular movement to make a difference in the struggle to achieve their rights, determine their destiny and establish a constitutional rule based on the wishes of people.

Assaulting Prominent Figures Attending

As was warned by the Bahrain Center for Human Rights one day earlier, the special force chased away and assaulted a dozen of people coming to testify or attend the trial of seven activists held on 23rd January 2006, related to the airport-incident case [1]. No official statement was given for the assault, but the unofficial explanation given by police officers was that the special force had orders to disperse by force any gathering of four persons or more, as strict implementation of the law on gatherings.

Aqeel Al-Sarri, Shaikh Al-Jidhafsy, Sheikh Habib Al-Muqdad, and Sheikh Muhammed Sanad; four Shi'a clerics, were walking towards the court when they were greeted by a dozen of young men opposite the side entrance of the complex. They were confronted by riot police and, after being asked to disperse, the forces started firing rubber bullets at their backs.

Shaikh Al-Jidhafsy told BCHR that after they were asked to disperse, they moved to leave, but they were attacked by a wave of rubber bullets with no warning. Sheikh Muhammed Sanad told the BCHR that they had confronted the higher ranking officer in the force and told him that they came to attend and testify at the court, but

he refused to admit them. This was before they moved to disperse and were hit. Sheikh Habib Al-Muqdad stated that he was hit in his upper right arm while Sheikh Sanad was hit in his back with rubber bullets. The BCHR also received testimony from Abdulla Makki Mahdi, 18 years, who was hit in the hand by a rubber bullet. His hand was visibly bruised.

Some, including Shaikh Mohammed Habib and Shaikh Mohammed Sanad were later allowed into the court complex, where Shaikh Mohammed Habib testified as a witness in the airport incident case. He also complained to the judge that police had assaulted them on their way to court and that Shaikh Mohammed Sanad had been slightly injured[2].

The BCHR calls again upon the Bahraini authorities to refrain from using force against peaceful activities under the contexts of the lack of authorization, in order to prevent further deterioration of security conditions and more casualties. The BCHR calls upon all national and international concerned figures and organizations to do whatever possible to stop the loop of violations and violence, and to provide a means of monitoring protest activities to insure conformity with international standards.

Abused prisoners sent to hospital

A judge appointed by the Al Khalifa ruling family was forced to refer three political prisoners to hospital for examination and treatment after they had been brutally tortured by . The men, on trial following clashes during a protest at the Bahrain International Airport, had been on hunger strike for several days. Mohsin Abdulla Al Salman, 23, Hassan Hamad Al Haddad, 25, and Ismail Hasan Makki said they had been refusing food and drink for four consecutive days, to protest their innocence and demand their release.

They each face three charges, damaging public property, assaulting police and causing a disturbance in a public place and, thirdly, taking part in an illegal gathering. These charges are being used extensively by the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship to stop the rising tide of opposition to their illegitimate rule.

The men said in court that they had been mistreated in custody and that officials had interfered with their religious practices.

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Testimony of an eyewitness reporter

The BCHR received the following testimony from a reporter, who preferred not to disclose his/her name.

"At approximately 9.15am on Monday January 23 I was walking towards the public prosecution in the diplomatic area from the sandy grounds near the Ras Ruman mosque where I had parked my car. As I crossed the road by the sandy grounds I noticed a group of four men (although I am unsure about this detail -it could have been three men) including two I recognized as the religious clerics Shaikh Mohammed Sanad and Shaikh Mohammed Habib Al Muqdad.

The men were especially recognizable as local religious figures because they were wearing brown 'bishets' (robes) and turbans on their heads. I believed that the clerics were also going to the Public Prosecution and walked a few meters behind them in the direction of the courts.

As we reached the opening onto the road outside the Public Prosecution a group of young men who were gathered on the pavement (and also seemed to be going to the courts) began to greet the clerics, and pay respects. The clerics paused on the pavement to greet the young men while I carried on walking. I crossed the road towards the side entrance to the court, which was manned by ordinary police (guards).

As I crossed the road I noticed that there were squads of riot police (wearing blue

camouflage and armed, with some wearing black balaclavas) standing in lines across the width of the street to my right and to my left. I stopped at the side gate of the court to ask the guard where court number two was. As I was talking to the guard, I noticed a squad of riot police approach the clerics (and the young men around them). A very brief conversation ensued - it could have been less than one minute.

The clerics and the men started to walk again - I saw one of the clerics step around a member of the riot police who was facing him, and the group walked in loose conformation to their left and my right (I was facing them).

They were approximately two meters away from the riot police with whom they had just spoken, standing outside the Batelco building opposite the courts, when the riot police opened fire. From where I was standing, the police appeared to be firing mainly at the men's feet and at the ground where they were standing - as if to force them to move. It was not clear what they were shooting - rubber bullets or pellets, although I am confident that it was not tear gas because of the sound of the shots, and the lack of gas, smoke or smell.

When the riot police began shooting the clerics picked up their robes and began running. The young men they had been walking with also started running. The riot police squad chased them, and continued

firing shots (of what, as I said, I don't know). I saw one of the young men place himself behind one of the clerics and put his hand on the cleric's shoulder as if to protect him from being shot - although it was not clear whether the police were now firing at them, and not at the ground.

At this point I asked the gate guard "what are they doing?" and he replied "nothing, nothing, just go on inside" and ushered me inside the courts complex. From inside the complex I looked over the wall and saw a second squad of riot police follow the first (who were chasing the men and clerics) down the street.

I don't know what happened after that, but I saw Shaikh Mohammed Habib Al Muqdad inside the court where he was giving a testimony, where he claimed he had been hurt during the attack. I went back the place on the road where I saw riot police open fire, but there was no evidence of a shooting - no rubber bullets (or any other ammunition remnants) on the ground.

The incident I have described happened much much faster than I have been able to describe, but I have tried to be as accurate and detailed as possible, and to the best of my knowledge the above statement is honest to my memory."

Bahrain: Sheikh Hamad unleashes a reign of terror

Appeals for the international community to intervene and put an end to the aggression by the Al Khalifa rulers against the people of Bahrain have been issued by the victims of their atrocities. The ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, has now unleashed a reign of terror against those who raise their voices to protest his dictatorship and despotism, the people have no protection from this illegitimate rule, except the United Nations.

Jassim Al Haddad, is a young Bahraini who is now in hospital suffering from severe torture inflicted on him by the Al Khalifa mercenaries because he expressed his opinion calling for the release of political prisoners. He has internal bleeding in the head after being mercilessly beaten by these thugs, under direct orders from Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the self-styled king. A photo taken secretly shows these mercenaries carrying barrels of internationally-forbidden chemicals to use them against peaceful demonstrators. They have orders to inflict as much injuries as possible, hopefully, without leaving traces of

their crimes. If such traces remain, the victims would be accused by the Al Khalifa judges of attacking the police who reacted in self-defence.

On Thursday, a peaceful demonstration demanding the release of the hostages was mercilessly attacked by the special forces under the command of the ruler. More than 400 demonstrators were injured, scores were hospitalised. It was unprovoked attack intended to suppress the feeling of the people who are re-acting against the hate policies of the Al Khalifa. Among the victims were human rights activists and supporters participating in the demonstration. Mr. Al-khawaja and Mr. Nabeel Rajab (President and Vice-President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights), Dr. Abdul-Jaleel Al-Singace (the Committee of Solidarity) and Mr. Naji Ali (the Committee of the Unemployed). A number of women and children, mainly relatives of the prisoners of conscience, were also injured.

In their seminar on Friday night at Al Sadiq Mosque, Mr Hassan Mushaime (who was jailed for six years until 2001

without trial) and Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja re-iterated the grievances of the people under the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship. Mr Mushaime highlighted the plight of thousands of Bahrainis who have no jobs or housing, while Al Khalifa members are occupying more than half of the land and the whole of the reclaimed lands. Mr Khawaja presented a serious case against the Al Khalifa, accusing them of harbouring those who have committed crimes against humanity, and who are giving orders to foreign mercenaries to attack unarmed civilians calling for their rights. Both have called for the immediate release of political prisoners who are being held as hostages under the orders of Sheikh Hamad himself. He has now taken the role of the two notoriously hated figures of his uncle and Ian Henderson, to oversee the implication of his inhumane rules of engagement. These include the administering of torture including sexual abuse, not within the walls of the Al Khalifa torture chambers, but in the streets of Bahrain.

Political prisoners attacked and tortured

A peaceful gathering in support of the prisoners of conscience was viciously attacked yesterday by the Al Khalifa mercenaries. Several people were injured by rubber bullets fired by these lawless thugs. The people, including senior religious figures such as Ayatullah Sheikh Mohammad Sanad, had gathered at the Government House where the Al Khalifa court was being held. More than twenty young men were being tried for taking part in a demonstration calling for the release of another group of Bahrainis detained earlier. An order from Sheikh Hamad's palace was given to the mercenaries to wage an attack on the peaceful citizens. Several people were injured by rubber bullets which were fired without warning. The prisoners issued a statement deploring this state terrorism and calling for those responsible to be arrested. However, in the Al Khalifa kingdom criminals are protected by those in power. Sheikh Hamad had given his personal pledge to protect those who are accused of human rights violations, despite the international call to investigate their crimes.

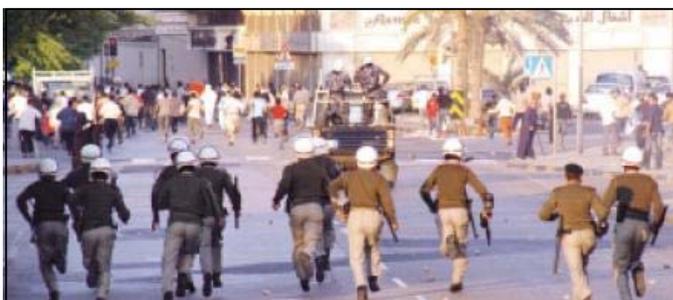
It has been reported that the political detainees have been ill-treated, beaten and tortured on orders of Sheikh Hamad, the self-styled king. The mother of Mohammad Hassan Saif, one of

the detainees was horrified when she saw the extent of torture on her son's body. Last Saturday, she was allowed to see him at the Dry Dock Torture Centre. She said that she had seen her son semi-naked. When she asked him where his clothes were, he told her that they had been torn during torture sessions. He told her that he had been tortured during interrogation. She said that she had put her hand on his forehead and realised he had high fever as a result. She appealed to international bodies to intervene to stop the Al Khalifa oppression against the people of Bahrain. Meanwhile the situation is becoming more volatile. People have resorted to peaceful means of protest in many areas. In Al Daih, Sanabis, Ne'aim, Al Khamis and other places, several fires were reported. It has become a habit of the protesters to burn rubber tyres on the side of the roads to declare their protest and rejection of the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship. In Karzakkan, slogans have been written on the walls of the town demand-

ing an end to this dictatorship, the release of the political prisoners and an end to the discriminatory and absolutist policies of the Al Khalifa.

Sheikh Hamad, who is one of the worst rulers Bahrain has ever seen, has continued his policy of installing members of his family in senior positions. Abdullh bin Khalid Al Khalifa, one of his cronies, has been appointed in charge of the Radio and Television Commission. The Al Khalifa are now dominating the life of the country in every corner. Of 22 ministers, Sheikh Hamad has ensured that half of them are filled by members of his family. The Shia, who form more than 70 percent are allocated only five ministerial posts.

The people of Bahrain have now called on the United Nations to intervene in support of the people of Bahrain to determine their future. This position is a serious development and has come 35 years after the British withdrawal from Bahrain. One of the conditions was that the country would be ruled by the Al Khalifa in consultation with the people of Bahrain in accordance with the only binding document, the 1973 Constitution. Now that Sheikh Hamad had torn this document, the Al Khalifa rule is considered illegitimate. The only way this despotic rule would be reformed is through a participatory political process in which the people would take an active part.



Freedom of the Web challenges Bahrain elite

By Neil MacFarquhar
The New York Times
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MANAMA, Bahrain. Ali Abdulemam, the most notorious blogger in Bahrain, sat in the boxlike reception room of his father's house in a cramped Shiite village dotted with cinderblock houses, trying to log onto the popular Web site that he founded.

The government of this flyspeck of an island nation, home to a U.S. Navy base, recently renewed its effort to block dozens of opposition Web sites. So Abdulemam, 28, a computer engineer, had to spend about 10 minutes whipping through computer servers around the world before finally pulling up his Web site, BahrainOnline.org.

It was the Bahraini National Day, Dec. 16, and some eight kilometers, or five miles, away, the landscaped boulevards of Manama, the capital, were packed with revelers enjoying bands and fireworks. Pictures of the ruling princes blanketed the city, which was also awash in the national colors, red and white.

But most of the couple of hundred people chatting in the "National Forum" section of BahrainOnline mocked the idea of celebrating the day in 1971 when a Sunni Muslim monarch ascended the throne to rule over a Shiite Muslim majority.

"In Bahrain, glorifying the king means glorifying the nation, and opposing the king means betraying the homeland and working for foreign countries," wrote one online participant, adding that such a formula is the mark of a dictatorship. "Should we be loyal to the king or to Bahrain?"

Bahrain, long a regional financial hub and a prime example of the power of the Internet to foment discontent, bills itself as a leader of political change in the Arab world. It is a claim echoed in praise from the United States, which considers Bahrain crucial for its many regional military ventures because the U.S. 5th Fleet is based here.

But in Bahrain, as across the Arab world, those pushing for democratic change want to end minority rule by a family, sect or a military clique. The royal family dominates here, holding half the cabinet positions and the major posts in the security services and at the University of Bahrain.

Sheik Muhammad al-Khalifa, the prince who runs the Economic Development Board, said Bahrain should not become a democracy in the Western sense.

"As traditional Arabs, I don't think democracy is part of our nature," he said.

"I think all people want is accountabil-

ity," he said, adding that some form of democracy was needed to achieve that.

Some political change has occurred. Debate is growing through the Internet, satellite television and other media. Elections this year will replace the Parliament and municipal councils first chosen in 2002 under a new Constitution. Members of the ruling Khalifa family describe this as a vibrant process that will ultimately establish a local strain of democracy.

Yet some of the family's most senior members and their Sunni allies have hinted that the process is threatened because, they say, Bahraini Shiites disloyally serve outside interests like the Shiites in Iran and Iraq. Members of the opposition call this nonsense and accuse the ruling dynasty of questioning their loyalty to avoid having to share power.

They say King Hamad and his Khalifa clan will make only cosmetic changes, adding that almost nothing has been done to alleviate the entrenched discrimination faced by the poorest Shiites.

"The problem with the royal family is that when they give us any democracy they think that it is a gift and we have to thank them for it," Abdulemam said. "The time when they were the lords and we were the slaves is gone. The new generation is well educated. They won't live like our fathers did in the past, when they said O.K. to whatever the royal family did."

When King Hamad inherited power in 1999, he promised a democracy that he described as *areeqa*, or well rooted.

He announced changes that included amnesty for exiles and the disbanding of the dreaded State Security Courts. Bahrainis approved the new plan in a public referendum.

It was then that Abdulemam established his groundbreaking Web site, determined to give Bahrainis a place to share ideas and develop plans to deepen political change. "It seemed like a golden time, when the country was moving from one period in its history to another," he said. "Everybody needed a place to talk, so I provided it."

But King Hamad soon hit the brakes. In 2002 he announced a new Constitution, formulated without public consultation, that increased his power.

"I had been full of hope that a new era was coming to Bahrain," Abdulemam said. "But what happened next threw us all in the dirt."

In the old days, with its monopoly over television and radio and the ability to shut down newspapers, the Khalifa dynasty would have had less trouble controlling the debate. Now, with the Internet and satellite television outside its reach, the government often resorts to tactics like tossing Abdulemam and two of his fellow

Web site masters into jail for a couple of weeks last year.

Repeated demonstrations and international intervention helped win his release, but legal charges of insulting the king, incitement and disseminating false news remain pending.

In 2002, BahrainOnline led a fight to boycott the elections. As a result, Shiites mostly stayed away from the polls, and the vote exacerbated the sense among Shiites that the Khalifas and their Sunni allies were not interested in treating them as equals.

When Abdulemam was arrested in February, he found that his interrogator was an Egyptian, one of hundreds of Sunnis from Arab nations and Pakistan recruited into the security services, given houses and often citizenship. "He was asking me whether I was loyal to this country," Abdulemam said sourly. "How can an Egyptian ask me about my loyalty? There are many ways to love your country, and what I do is one of them."

Abused Prisoners

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Defence lawyers Ahmed Al Arayedh, Shahzalan Al Khamees and Mohammed Al Mutawa asked that all three be released on bail, but this was refused on orders from the royal court.

They also asked that the men be taken for treatment at Salmaniya Medical Complex (SMC), on the basis that the Interior Ministry clinic was not equipped to treat them. Their physical condition has seriously deteriorated while in prison, Ms Al Khamees told judge Judge Ibrahim Sultan Al Zayed.

The lawyers also asked the judge to order that the three be tried together with seven other defendants, who appeared earlier on similar charges. Supporters also rallied outside the Public Prosecution in the Diplomatic Area, carrying placards and photographs of detainees as well as addressing passers by via loud speaker.

The airport clash was sparked by the arrest of cleric Shaikh Mohammed Sanad who had called for UN intervention to write a new constitution.

Mr Al Salman, Mr Al Haddad, and Mr Makki will now join Nader Ebrahim Abdulemam, 32, Hasan Abdulnabi, 25, Bader Ahmed Al Jazeri, 40, Yasser Khalifa, 31, Jawad Al Salman, 24, Hasan Majeed Al Jashi, 20 and Qasim Hasan Khaleel, 19, for a hearing on February 4. Atif Mahdi Ahmed, Yousif Ahmed Husain, 27, Fakari Abdulla, 40, Nasser Ali Nasser, 33, Mohammed Majeed Aljeshi, 24, and Abdulameer Madan, 23, Mohammed Hassan Ashor, 21, are said to be due in court on a later date.