

BAHRAIN

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Elections without democracy

Who were the winners and losers in last month's "elections" held in the Gulf state of Bahrain? Whatever the official media attempted to say, the reality is that the people of Bahrain have remained voiceless and powerless as ever. If anything the stage-managed shows that accompanied the play may have enhanced the reputation of the hereditary dictatorship, and for a while, may shelter it from international criticism. Sheikh Hamad may be able to claim that he has achieved a referendum on his constitution and other political steps. He may also claim to have gained the loyalty of some religious figures across the sectarian divide. However, time will tell whether his achievements will be long-lasting. The most likely development in the coming months and years is an upsurge in anti-regime activities as the big bubbles of the show begin to burst into nothingness. The Al Khalifa and their media have attempted to limit the notion of democracy to elections. But they have failed to convince sceptical onlookers, inside and outside the country, that there is more substance to the experience than the empty shows, meaningless statements and hollow promises. Even those who won seats to the powerless bodies have repeated their own scepticism and powerlessness. They are aware that they have taken uncalculated gambles that could easily backfire against them.

The core issue in the country is not elections. Elections will remain without a meaning as long as national reconciliation is not undertaken by the ruling family. They have, hitherto, failed to acknowledge the need for such reconciliation, and attempted to conceal the underpinning causes of mistrust and tension with marginal steps including elections to those powerless bodies. The ruler remains the sole legislator with absolute powers that are often reserved to absolute despots. He imposed his own constitution, designed his own electoral constituencies, created his media, occupied several key islands and vast areas on the mainland, apportioned seashores and land and usurped the main oil revenues of the country. He has surrounded himself with a group of oppor-

tunist loyalists who have sunk to their necks in corruption and wooed others with money, fictitious roles and posts and lured them into the circle of official corruption. All these factors lead to the conclusion that the next four years are unlikely to be much different from the previous four or eight years in terms of the power of those "elected" bodies to legislate or provide a parallel challenge to the authoritarian rule of the Al Khalifa.

The main themes that have all along underpinned the ongoing crisis are multifaceted. First is the lack of a contractual memorandum of understanding between the two sides; the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship and the people of Bahrain. Second is the deep enmity of the ruling family towards the people of Bahrain and its continuous policies to replace them with new "designer Bahrainis". Third is the refusal of the regime to end the policies of discrimination against the majority of the population in political posts, job opportunities especially in Defence and Interior ministries. Fourth is lack of transparency in account books especially in relation to the oil revenues and distribution of wealth. Fifth is the unparalleled greed of the ruling family to occupy more land while squeezing the people into small ghettos and forcing them to flee to neighbouring countries. Sixth is the lack of freedoms at every level, despite the attempts by the ruling family to deceive the world that it is tolerant of other views. Seventh is the readiness of the hereditary dictatorship to administer torture against opponents, lock them behind bars for lengthy periods and deny them the most basic rights. The torture chambers have now been reopened for more political prisoners, and the case of Dr Mohammad Saeed Matar and Hussain Abdul Aziz Al habshi serves a reminder that people will be persecuted for their political opinion at every level and at all times.

The movement for political reforms will continue unabated, and the recent "elections" are unlikely to lead to effec-

tive legislature as the Al Khalifa control half of the Shura council through appointments. Change is not expected to emerge from inside the system which has been designed to prevent any such change. The people's struggle is thus necessary to bring to the attention of the world community the realities of the situation and the absolute dictatorship that is running the country with iron fists. The closure of internet sites, the arrest of political activists, the threats against the lives of the influential figures in the opposition community and the lack of safeguards against the excesses of the Al Khalifa are all indicators to the dire situation of the country. The next phase of struggle is likely to see the emergence of new forces that are more determined to force reforms on the ruling family, and new alliances among personalities and groups that have been disillusioned by the results of the rigorously-controlled "elections". Coverage of the events of the past months have also sent clear messages to the backers of the Al Khalifa dictators that all is not well in this "beacon of democracy". The images of the police brutality against activists on 23rd and 24th November, as well as continued detention of people for their political opinion have damaged the reputation of the regime and shrouded the election process with apathy and scepticism. Several journalists who visited Bahrain to cover the elections last month expressed their astonishment at the political scene. Some of them expressed their surprise at the low standard of living and development in a country whose rulers have portrayed different image to the world.

The basic grievances of the people that forced them to take to the streets in the eighties and nineties have remained almost as they had been. There are the ingredients for a popular revolt in the near future as the system repeats its failures and shortcomings in dealing with the demands of the people who are looking for jobs, housing, healthcare and, above all, respect and political reforms. The country has now entered a new phase in which popular dissent could come again to haunt the oppressors and their backers.

Bahrain: More political prisoners on the eve of pseudo-elections

Another young citizen, Mohsin Al Salman, 27, has been kidnapped today by the death squads of Sheikh Hamad. He is from Jad Hafs area and had been in jail before. Earlier this year, he spent with his brother, Jawad, several months in torture chambers because they had participated in a peaceful protest at the airport.

This is the third arrest in the past week and is a serious indication as to the direction of the country under the new despotic regime of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and his clique. Political prisoners are often ill-treated and often subjected to torture. Torture is widely practiced by the Al Khalifa regime and torturers are given impunity by Sheikh Hamad's notorious decree 56/2002.

There has been an international indignation at the continued detention of Dr Mohammad Saeed Matar and Hussain Abdul Aziz Al Habshi. The Al Khalifa have refused to allow visits by their fami-

lies and their lawyers have limited access to them. They are accused of possessing leaflets calling for the boycott of the elections scheduled for tomorrow.

Meanwhile, in a dramatic development, Musa Abd Ali, the former political prisoner who was released last month from months of unlawful detention, has recognised one of his attackers last year. As he was taking part in today's demonstration against the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship, he spotted the criminal, and started to shout. The criminal immediately took cover with the other police units and disappeared from the scene. There are pressures on the government to come clean by investigating the sexual crimes committed against Mr Abd Ali who is determined to pursue his attackers in international courts.

The Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship suffered a serious setback today as thousands of demonstrators took to the streets

to protest the continued silence of the ruling family on the criminal activities of the group exposed by Al Bandar's report. The demonstration passed by the government house while the participants chanted anti-regime slogans. They called for the immediate dismissal of Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al Khalifa, the prime minister who had been the chief engineer of the policies of torture and human rights violations since 1971.

There is also wide condemnation of the way the al Khalifa mercenaries dealt with yesterday's protest against the detention of the political prisoners. Scores of these mercenaries were seen attacking peaceful protestors including senior popular figures like Abdul Wahab Husain and Hassanm Mushaime. The protest attracted good publicity from the journalists covering the elections. Several news media broadcast balanced accounts of the protest.

Bahrain: Outrage as two activists held hostage

The arrest yesterday of two political activists has, once again, exposed the real nature of the hereditary dictatorship in Bahrain. Dr Mohammad Saeed and Hussain Abdul Aziz Al Habshi were arrested for possession of what the interior ministry claimed to be "leaflets with seditious intentions". The Al Khalifa described the possession of anti-regime leaflets "a crime". Dr Mohammad



Saeed is a qualified dentist who owns a practice in Manama. He had been arrested in the nineties and spent two years behind bars. He was subjected to horrific torture under the supervision of the notorious torturer, Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa and Adel Flaifel.

The year began with large scale arrests during peaceful protests against the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship. Sixty five people were maltreated in the torture cells before their mass release two months ago. Of course, the release was "a gracious act" by Sheikh Hamad, which was a week before the official termination of their imprisonment. Bahrain is not run by the rule of law but by the ruler himself. He is the constitution. He is the law. He is the state. He drew up his own constitution that places him above the executive, legislative and the judiciary powers. In Bahrain, all are one, and are all run by the Al

Khalifa. The arrests are believed to have been ordered by the royal palace, which is the effective government of the country.

Human Rights activists have raised concerns about the new prisoners of conscience. The Committee of Solidarity with Activists and Detainees of Conscience in Bahrain issued a statement in which it "holds the Bahraini Authorities the full responsibility for the safety of Dr. Mohammed

Saeed demanding his immediate and unconditional release. It also affirms the right of the people of Bahrain in expressing themselves against all forms of discrimination and marginalization, as mentioned in the Bandargate report." The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights said: "The BCHR finds itself concerned as to the reasons behind the detention as well as the activists safety in consideration of the infamous dealings of the intelligence and Interior Ministries officials with activists in the past."

We here appeal to human rights bodies, especially the UN Human Rights Centre to intervene and call for the immediate unconditional release of the two prisoners of conscience, whose guilt according to the official version, is no more than possession of "unauthorized by the regime" material. This is not a crime except under despotic and dictatorial regimes.



Hayya's integrity at stake as her family is investigated

Inner City Press website, 16th November

Inner City Press ran from the Q&A with Amb. Jones Parry to ask Kofi Annan's spokesman a question. Opposition groups in Bahrain have asked Mr. Annan to investigate reports that the government of Bahrain's ruling al-Kalifa family has been "secretly planning to manipulate the demographic makeup of the country, through the selective granting of citizenship... under the guise of creating a Shiite-Sunni balance in the country but would in fact weaken the Shiite population, 70 per cent of Bahrainis." Another report notes that "Bahrain will hold parliamentary elections Nov. 25. The elections could trigger a fresh wave of unrest, pitting the ruling Sunni al-Khalifa family against the country's Shiite majority.

The spokesman said he will look into the letter and Mr. Annan's response. Inner City Press then asked the spokeswoman for Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, the General Assembly president and a member of Bahrain's al-Khalifa family, to get a comment. The spokesman said that she didn't think there would be any comment, in the capacity of GA President. How about in another capacity? We'll see. One of the issues here is of structural conflict, wherein a UN Secretary-General is asked to investigate the family of the GA President, with whom the Secretary-General must work. Some have suggested that the GA President might publicly say something like, "Mr. Secretary-General, I will not be offended if you grant the request to investigate my family. In fact, it is better than you grant the request, to remove any appearance of conflict of interest." Others have suggested that the Secretary-General might recuse himself from the request.

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Communique by demonstrators demanding inquiry into Bandar Gate scandal

At a time when our people are subjected to a chain of deprivation and discrimination, and when public wealth and lands are plundered and wasted as a result of the despotic manner that this regime exercises, and for its assertion to deal with its public far from constitutional legitimacy, and while the regime prevents people from establishing and consolidating a true legislative government that represents the will and ambition of the people, and instead of seeing a ray of hope that would hopefully rescue them, they encounter a horrific wide-spread plan to devastate Bahraini unity at present and future. This was revealed in the Al-Bandar Scandal documentary report issued by the Gulf Center for Democracy. The foresaid report entailed many documents that confounded high officials and government establishments. The government could not refute the foresaid plan, nor could they provide a satisfying response from those responsible who sit at high, sensitive positions. Those documents have also enlightened the dangerous extent of the conspiracy laid down on the ground, and the extent of manipulation in the competency and wealth of this nation by those higher authorities.

However, instead of the high authority provision of a decent apology and accepting the fact of what was revealed as a very dangerous plan and make those accused stand trial, they instead used their well-know option, i.e. repression of freedoms and the press and strangling all activities that would express any opinion related to the scandalous report. This explicitly reveals and stresses the extent of the audacity and embroilment of the government in the conspiracy.

We, hereby in our demonstration and civil and patriotic movement are merely expressing our remonstrance and anger against the conspiracy and the harm against the national unity, Arabic and Islamic identity and national wealth by those officials who still undertake the State Security Law, not satisfied with what they have previously done in terms of wide-oppressions that our peoples have long suffered from in the last three decades. They have surpassed it to enforce political naturalization on a large scale, with the objective of changing the demographic makeup and historic stance of the people of Bahrain.

There is solid proof that the Al-Bandar conspiracy plan is implemented by the government and those executing the plan have also taken immunity with legislative regulation to secure their continuity without any obstacles. We therefore emphasize that their action is in defiance of peoples feeling and freedom.

We urge and call upon all society who consider Bahrain as a homeland and nation to firmly stand against this dangerous plan and work together in unity. Our demands, which are based on legislative and peaceful means with regards to this scandal, include the following:

1. Conducting a thorough investigation on a national and international level in regards to the content of the Al-Bandar report, the systematic sectarian discrimination and the wide political naturalization
2. To bring all those involved to trial and punish them accordingly
3. The resignation of the government for its involvement in the scandal

International HR organisations condemn attack on freedom of expression

Policies of repression being implemented by the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship are being systematically implemented as the regime feels throttled by its own acts and the peaceful activities of the opposition. Last week the minister of information, Mohammad Abdul Ghaffar issued an order banning the following websites:

www.bahrainonline.org,
www.shahedbh.com, www.vob.com,
www.tubli.net, www.ahraralbahrain.com,
www.montadayat.org, <http://www.bahraintimes.org>,
<http://www.alsaheefa.net>, <http://www.rezgar.com>,

Most of the above sites had already been closed by Bahrain Telecom company (Batelco) which is controlled and run by the Al Khalifa.

In November Abdul Ghaffar issued another order banning more sites: www.shahrakkan.com, www.hrinfo.net, www.Bab-albahrain.net, www.aldair.net, www.alhiyak.net, www.Bintjebel.org, www.althalaqain.com, www.aldemokrati.org.

Hassan Oun, director of press and publications at the information ministry, wrote in a statement published in the press on November 1: "The information ministry has decided to close a number of Bahraini and foreign websites ... These sites transgressed a legal decision prohibiting the discussion of the case of the accused Salah Al Bander ... The information ministry will refer the owners of these sites to the judges for not cooperating and complying with the law."

Furthermore, the minister, acting on orders from the Al Khalifa ruling family, threatened to prosecute the people in charge of these websites for discussing the Bandar report and its implications. The report had exposed criminal acts by

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We see that the continued conspiracies and crises that our people are encountering will not be resolved if not provided with the following legitimate rights, which we endeavor to continue to demand:

1. Establishing a true and modern legitimate parliament empowered with full and complete legislative and monitoring powers.
2. Establishing a national government chosen by the people who are the corner-stone of the three-powers. This will be implemented by a fundamental democracy in the constitutional kingdom
3. Limiting Royal Council authorities, in order to achieve the principle of separation of powers

members of the ruling family, with the tacit support of the ruler himself and the staff of his palace. The report included documents showing the extent of the plundering of the country's wealth for use against the people. It is also another step to silence the opposition and prevent dissenting voices especially as the ruling family embarks on elections for half the members of the powerless shura council. It has become paranoid as the anti-Al Khalifa feelings become more apparent within all sections of the Bahraini society.

The steps taken against freedom of expression have received wide condemnation from human international human rights organizations. On 28th October, Reporters sans frontières (RSF), Paris, issued a statement condemning this act and outlining its concerns as more websites are blocked by the regime. On 1st November, 25 Cairo-based human rights organizations and civil society institutions signed a petition condemning the policy of extreme censorship employed by the Al Khalifa in their quest to subjugate the people of Bahrain. They included the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, the Egyptian Society Against Torture and others. The signatories expressed their utter disappointment at these repressive measures that represent back-tracking on promised reforms in human rights and political areas. They said that the government of Bahrain wants to continue being an active member within the despotic states in the Arab world.

The Bahrain Center for Human Rights condemned recent threats by the Ministry of Information to prosecute website owners for discussing the recent Bandar-gate scandal.

In Bahrain, Democracy Activists Regret Easing of U.S. Pressure

By Faiza Saleh Ambah

Washington Post Foreign Service
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MANAMA, Bahrain, Nov. 26 -- Bahrain's government has touted parliamentary elections here as a model for regional reform and a milestone for democracy. But critics say the polls are similar to those in many Arab countries: designed to give the appearance of democracy while maintaining the government's tight grip on power.

Although many countries in the region have introduced various degrees of political participation, from limited municipal councils in Saudi Arabia to spirited parliaments in Kuwait and Yemen, the reforms have consistently fallen short of the freedoms democracy activists have sought.

The Bush administration, which said several years ago that greater democracy in the Middle East was a cornerstone of its foreign policy, has recently tempered its demands. Democracy activists say that with the absence of strong grass-roots movements, Western pressure is the only remaining option that could force totalitarian governments to give up some of their power.

"The dictatorships in the region are the real winners of the shift in U.S. policy," said Sulaiman al-Hattlan, editor of *Forbes Arabia*. "They are not serious about reform and only respond to international pressure. They can easily repress their populations because they have total control of all state apparatuses." Voters went to the polls Saturday in Bahrain, a tiny Gulf country ruled by the Sunni Muslim al-Khalifa family. Bahrain is the poorest oil-producing country in the region and the only one with a Shiite majority. Shiites make up 60 percent of the country's population of 700,000.

The government did not allow international observers to monitor the elections and appointed local government-affiliated groups for the job. Officials said 72 percent of the 300,000 eligible voters cast ballots.

Bahrain's main opposition groups boycotted the 2002 elections, the first in three decades, because political parties were banned and the power of the assembly had been diluted by the creation of a more powerful upper house appointed by the king. When elections were announced again last year, activists said they had to choose between being left out of the political system or working within it.

"There are no democracies in the Arab world, apart from Iraq," said Sheik Ali Salman, a cleric and head of the largest opposition group, al-Wafaq National Islamic Society. But the runaway violence in Iraq has given Arab governments an excuse to scale back on political reform, he added.

"Authoritarian leaders will use any excuse not to give up power if they don't have to," said Salman. candidates to have won seats in the next assembly.

Abduljalil al-Singace, a university professor and head of Haq, said he had felt the sting of the U.S. "change of heart" in actively

supporting democracy in the region. Singace has visited Washington five times in the past two years to lobby members of Congress to press the Bahraini government for more democracy. The reception on the Hill, he said, has grown colder and colder.

Singace said he believed that the country's rulers have used the enmity between the United States and Iran to their advantage. Because of Bahraini Shiites' historical religious and social ties with neighboring Iran, the United States "was convinced by the regime that empowering Shiites here means empowering Iran," he said.

Haq boycotted the elections, he said, because the parliament is ineffectual. "Even if you win a majority of seats in parliament, you can't make any changes," Singace said, leaning on crutches because of a disability caused by polio when he was a child. "Whether you're a rabbit or a lion, entering that parliament is like entering a cage." Bills initiated by the elected assembly must be approved by the appointed upper house and by the king himself.

At a polling station set up at the Jid Hafs Girls' Middle School, Sayed Mahmood, a 24-year-old telecommunications student, waited more than an hour to vote, in lines that snaked over a hundred yards. In a refrain echoed by many young men here, Mahmood said one of the biggest problems in Bahrain was the unequal distribution of land and wealth.

Mahmood, who lives in a house with his parents, four siblings and their children, said he became even more frustrated when he looked up Bahrain on Google Earth and saw vast tracts of empty land, while tens of thousands of mainly poor Shiites were squashed together in small, dense areas.

"We are 17 people crowded in one small house, like many people in the southern district," he said. "And you see on Google how many palaces there are and how the al-Khalifas have the rest of the country to themselves."

Bahraini activists have encouraged people to take a look at the country on Google Earth, and they have set up a special user group whose members have access to more than 40 images of royal palaces.

At a demonstration last week, human rights activist Nabeel Rajab stood on a sidewalk as thousands of people, including clerics, women and students, streamed by carrying large banners.

The protesters marched near the Rass Ruman mosque here in the capital, demanding that Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, in office since the early 1970s, leave his post. "Enough, Khalifa. Step down, step down, step down Khalifa," the crowd chanted.

"If the international media weren't here, the riot police would have been beating the demonstrators," said Rajab, who has documented police assaults on activists, including himself.

Rajab heads the banned Bahrain Center for Human Rights, which was shut down and its Web site was blocked after the group issued reports documenting widespread poverty and discrimination in government jobs. But the government has accused the opposition of exaggerating and has said it is openly criticizing the government with impunity. "In a dictatorship you can't speak. In a democracy you can speak," said Information Minister Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar Abdulla. "We are in the process of democratization, and we are strengthening this process day by day."



State repression increases

Bahraini police attacked mercilessly a group of protesters who gathered on Thursday 23rd November in Manama to demand the release of two activists detained a week ago. Some 50 people, including relatives of the pair arrested on November 16 and leaders of the opposition group Haq, rallied for about an hour before police ordered them to disperse, a participant said.

Haq said last earlier that the authorities had arrested two of its activists. They were Dr Mohamed Saeed, one of the signatories of a recent petition to Sheikh Hamad demanding a probe into an plot to marginalise Bahrain's Shia majority, and Hussein Abdul Aziz al-Habshi. Haq organised a rally in Manama on November 17 to press for an inquiry.

The group, which also includes Sunni opposition figures, has written to UN chief Kofi Annan urging a probe into the purported conspiracy by some figures in Bahrain's Sunni-led government to rig legislative elections scheduled for tomorrow and marginalise Shias.

The plot allegations were made in a report by Dr Salah al-Bandar, who exposed a secret organisation operating within the government to "deprive an essential part of the population of this country of their rights" – an allusion to Shias. Sudanese-born Bandar was an adviser on "strategic security" to the Bahraini government, which expelled him from the country in September and subsequently accused him of spying. Bahrain's high court has banned the publication of any information on the alleged plot.