

BAHRAIN

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

Weeks of tension and repression herald a new black era

The season of Ashura has been commemorated by the people of Bahrain in their usual styles; massive attendance, energetic participation and relentless attempts to highlight to political predicaments of the people. The Al Khalifa foolishly attempted to provoke them at the beginning of the season by removing banners and signs from some village leading to clashes between young men and members of the death squads. The Al Khalifa then relented for fear of major backlashes. The people of Bahrain are used to provocation from the ruling family at times of heightened emotional congregations, and their memory contains images of members of the ruling family stirring up sectarian hatred in 1953 during the Ashura congregation that had led to major uprising. The eighties witnessed similar aggression on orders from the prime minister who could not tolerate the massive show of people's power. This time, however, the prospect of a major outbreak of violence was anticipated and the death squads were ordered to keep a low profile. However, the public speeches by several preachers has angered the Al Khalifa dictators and are now expected to take revenge against those who expressed their political opinion during the ten-day commemorations. Several preachers have now braced themselves for arrest and possible torture in the coming days and weeks.

The underlying political situation in the country is becoming more volatile as the extent of oppression takes new and more dangerous dimensions. The people are gradually becoming more aware of the blundering of their wealth by the Al Khalifa. Out of more than US\$ 5 billions annual oil revenue less than US\$2 billions are channeled to the treasury, the rest are expropriated by Sheikh Hamad and his clique. Images of extreme poverty are a continuous reminder of the corruption of the ruling family and its political and economic system. The attempts by the ruling family to nationalise public institutions and de-politicise the society are becoming irritants to many activists who have vowed to continue the struggle to change the situation and either reform the heredi-

tary dictatorship or end its reign of repression. The recent elections have done little to dampen the desire for real political change. Several months into the life of the new "parliament" and the public feeling remains that it is a powerless venture that has failed to provide a real alternative to the gloomy situation in the past decades. The young adults who witnessed the popular movements of the eighties and nineties are becoming more disillusioned as the performance of the various bodies of government shows no sign of improvement. The royal palace has become more dictatorial and is increasingly becoming target for the pro-democracy activists who view it as a repressive body whose main aim is to subjugate the people and safeguard the autocracy of the ruling family.

Instead of addressing the real problems of the masses; the lack of legitimate democratic bodies, the absence of free press, the rampant corruption, the frightening mismanagement of people's affairs, the rising unemployment and the continuing process of political naturalisation, the "representatives" of the people have been dogged down into endless arguments about their salaries, financial allocation and type of car they deserve at public expense. They have fallen into the trap prepared by the ruling family for them to become participants in corruption, mismanagement and inefficiency. The people are disillusioned, furious and angry as they witness new negative realities presented as achievements and progress. Opponents of the regime have always argued that in the absence of a real contractual constitution, no one can administer justice, governance or faithful representation of people's aims and ideals. They have argued and campaigned against offering legal or constitutional legitimacy to the illegitimate regime of the Al Khalifa through participation in its various political and social formations. Their arguments are now being vilified. In the past few months the situation has deteriorated further with the arrest of young men for expressing their views openly.

The year ended with people in chains for peaceful exercise of their rights. Several international human rights organisations have expressed dismay at the way young people are arrested, tortured and maltreated for their peaceful anti-regime activities.

What is more worrying about the behaviour of the Al Khalifa is their tendency to prop up extremism and fanaticism by their support of sectarian tendencies. The Bandar Report had exposed a serious programme of sectarianism planned and executed by the royal court. The programme is headed by a member of the Al Khalifa ruling family who has been empowered financially and politically to put the plan into action. Recent images of Ahmad Atiyat Allah Al Khalifa (the brother of the notorious torturer Abdul Aziz Atiyat Allah Al Khalifa) in the company of extremist elements has, once again, demonstrated the real designs of the ruling family. They now view their future closely linked to alliances with rogue elements and extremist tendencies. Their dangerous anti-Shia social and political engineering is a recipe for more problems and crisis. In the next few weeks the world community expects the Al Khalifa to submit a report on the present demographic balance in the country, as demanded two years ago by the UN Commission Against All Forms of Racial and Religious Discrimination. Two years ago the Geneva-based commission had issued 20 recommendations to the Al Khalifa ruling family including a demand for data on the population of the country. It is expected that the Al Khalifa would not submit this data due to its sensitive nature. The world community is duty-bound to insist on receiving this information which is critical to the pursuance of peace in Bahrain. The natives of Bahrain are worried by the policies of ethnic cleansing of the ruling family and have called for international help against the invaders of their land. The Al Khalifa must not be allowed to pursue their evil designs, They must be resisted, boycotted and threatened with deterrent measures if they do not reverse their policy of ethnic cleansing. It is in nobody's interest to support this evil regime.

More repressive attacks waged against innocent demonstrators

A peaceful demonstration calling for the release of two innocent citizens was viciously attacked today by the Al Khalifa's thugs on orders from the royal palace. Many young men were injured including a youth who was hit in the head. The demonstration was called for by the families of the two detainees; Dr Mohammad Saeed Al Sahlawi and Hussain Abdul Aziz Al Habshi, who have been languishing in torture cells for the past two months. Their guilt is possession of leaflets urging people to boycott elections for powerless bodies. Many calls have been made to the ruling family to release the hostages but to no avail. Today's demonstration took place near the town of Daih. Riot police were deployed to prevent the demonstration whose organisers had already obtained a permit to hold it. Women and children were frightened by onslaught who mercilessly attacked the participants and caused enormous fear among the children.

Last night (18th January) running battles were fought by the youth of the town of Karzakkan following provocative acts by security forces who had attacked the village, tearing posters and removing banners which had been displayed by the people to mark the martyrdom of Imam

Hussain as the commemoration festivities got underway. Small fires were seen on the roads as demonstrators vented their anger and called for an end to the oppression against the people of Bahrain by the rulers who are of foreign descent. The emotions of the people are running high as they see their religious beliefs systematically attacked by the Al Khalifa thugs. As Ashura gets underway, more public activism becomes widespread and it is hoped that the oppressive rulers refrain from their repressive policies, and adopt a more rational and objective approach.

Meanwhile a young man, Ahmad Abdul Nabi, 17, has been located at the police station of Isa Town. He has been missing for the past four days after informing his parents that he was going to Saudi Arabia. The circumstances of his abduction by Al Khalifa death squads are yet to be established. He had apparently been outraged by some police officers who have refused to give details of the decision to abduct the young man. Calls have now been made to the people to give more information about the incident, as the young man remains under scrutiny in the torture chambers. Five months ago, a young Bahraini youth was brutally murdered by the Al Khalifa's death squad, and the government refused to order an investigation

into the crime. It is believed that Mahdi Abdul Rahaman, 22, was brutally murdered by those thugs who are roaming the streets looking for easy prey, in order to create fear in the hearts and minds of the citizens.

The ruling family, on the other hand, has failed to provide an explanation for the granting of Bahraini citizenship to a Kenyan who has recently participated in a marathon in Israel. Leonardo Michiro, a professional runner, was given the Bahraini nationality for unspecified reasons, and has now become a liability on the Al Khalifa who have attempted to put a brave face to cover their ugly intentions. The Kenyan athlete travelled to Israel, possibly encouraged by the Al Khalifa who pretend to be against contacts with Israel. However, both the crown prince and the foreign minister of Bahrain had a meeting with Shimon Peres on the periphery of the UN General Assembly in defiance of the pan-Arab ban on any contact with the Israelis.



When peaceful expression of opinion is criminalised

A kangaroo court presided over by a foreigner, sentenced two citizens to one year and six months imprisonment for possessing leaflets calling for boycotting the illegal elections last November. The two, Dr Mohammad Saeed Al Sahlawi and Hussain Al Habshi, were arrested on 16th November for possessing leaflets calling for the boycott of the elections of half the members of Sheikh Hamad's shura (consultative) council. On Wednesday 31st January, the Egyptian judge, Ahmad Abdul Khaleq, on orders from the Al Khalifa ruling family, delivered the sentence in less than a minute. The court was packed with relatives, friends and human rights activists who were shocked by the verdict. They chanted slogans against this summary justice and vowed to continue the struggle against the dictatorship of the Al Khalifa. The two prisoners of conscience were charged with two offences; possessing anti-regime leaflets and by inference, urging a regime change. Human rights activists who had followed the proceedings of the court appearances, ridiculed both charges and called for their immediate release. However, the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship is attempting to exploit this case in order to deter others from taking similar stands against their rule.

International Human Rights organisations

have condemned the arrest of the two activists and called for their immediate release. Human Rights Watch in line with 49 other organisations considered the case as a flagrant violation of the basic right of freedom of expression.

The Committee to Defend Activists and Prisoners of Conscience said that the court setting marked the beginning of a serious attack on freedom of expression guaranteed international conventions, especially article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 19 of the International Convention for Civil and Political Rights which was signed by Bahrain on 20th September 2006. It urged human rights bodies "raise their voices in protest against these acts that undermine the stability of the country and the rights of its citizens".

On another level, voices of concern have been raised about the ill-treatment of several young men arrested earlier and subjected to horrific torture on direct orders from the royal palace. An uprising against the Al Khalifa cruelty was in the offing as news of torture spread among the people. The heavy-handed approach by the security forces in handling the case, especially the unprovoked attacks on houses, created enormous tension and led to deep feelings against the Al Khalifa occupiers. In total eleven people were arrested; four of them

were accused of attacking a police vehicle, the rest were "witnesses". All were subjected to horrific treatment by the police in order to extract confessions. The youth remained steadfast in their positions and dealt a blow to the morale of the death squads. Protests were being prepared when Sheikh Hamad and his torturers realised the danger and ordered the immediate and unconditional discharge of the detainees. Calls have now been made for the arrest of those torturers who ill-treated the innocent detainees. The Al Khalifa were forced to release them as their continued detention became an embarrassment and a cause for more political troubles.

Meanwhile, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights has issued an analytical study of the plot by the Al Khalifa occupiers against the natives of the country. The study is under the title: *Conspiring Against the Shia of Bahrain: An overview of the classified study at the heart of the Bandargate scandal; Islamist groups penetrate and influence government and society. It highlights the plot which is tantamount to ethnic cleansing, and urges a vigilant approach to the policies of the present regime.*

Murder Case Verdict Fuels Sectarian Tension in Bahrain

Mazen Mahdi, Arab News —

The family of a Reuters computer technician who was shot down in a street ambush last August was angered by a court decision yesterday (24th January) to sentence the killer to life imprisonment instead of executing him.

The judgment, which came after four court appearances by the 29-year-old suspect, shocked family and friends of the 32-year-old father-of-two Mahdi Abdulrahman Mohammed who was gunned down on Aug. 20.

Some family members fainted in court and had to be rushed to hospital after the judge announced the sentence, while others organized protests calling the decision “sectarian” and “unfair”.

The killer, who has a criminal record and a history of drug abuse, had admitted to the shooting after an argument with Mohammed, but his lawyer claimed that he was provoked and acted in self-defense. He was arrested along with two other men who were in the car with him at the time of the shooting, but he was the only one charged.

The shooting sent shockwaves through the island where private citizens are not allowed to own firearms, and fuelled sectarian tension as the victim and the killer belonged to different denominations.

The murder also came in the midst of celebrations of the perceived victory of the Lebanese Hezbollah against Israel.

Some witnesses suggested that the argument had erupted between the two over Shiite celebrations in the streets.

“We want justice. My husband was gunned down in cold blood and his killer gets away with a life sentence while others who commit murders in less heinous ways are executed,” complained Mohammed’s wife following the court verdict.

Mohammed’s sister said the “mild sentence” would encourage others to commit murder because they know that they can get away with it. “He will be imprisoned and later they will pardon him; what justice is this? My brother is dead, his wife is struggling and his 12-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter will grow up without a father,” she said.

“We want him executed and we want the other two who were with him, and those who helped him obtain the firearm, charged with being accessories to a crime. They too should face justice.”

Mohammed’s relative Hassan Hajji said that the decision was motivated by sectarian differences. “This only fuels the sectarian tension here,” Hajji said.

“The proceedings were short and the judge did not even ask him about how he got the gun or the involvement of the other two despite the fact he has a crimi-

nal record and he was a suspect in another murder case.”

On Jan. 18, a Bahraini court sentenced a Bangladeshi to death and jailed two others for life over the premeditated murder of another Bangladeshi in October 2005.

The sentence came after Bahrain carried out its first execution in 10 years in mid-December when three murderers, a Pakistani man, a Bangladeshi woman and a man, were executed by firing squad.

In March 1996, Bahraini Isa Ahmad Qam-

bar was executed by firing squad after a court ruled that he was guilty of the premeditated murder of a police officer. The execution of the three last December drew criticism from international and local human rights groups, who said that the death penalty should be abolished. According to Bahraini law, a life imprisonment sentence would place a convict in jail for the rest of his natural life, without the possibility of release unless he is pardoned by the king.

HRW: Activists Face Prison for Political Leaflets

Police Attack Peaceful Demonstrators Supporting Detainees

(New York, January 30, 2007) – Two nonviolent political activists in Bahrain face up to seven years in prison for possession of leaflets calling for peaceful political change, Human Rights Watch said today. A court in the capital Manama is scheduled to deliver its verdict in the case tomorrow.

Human Rights Watch called on the Bahraini government to drop charges against Mohamed Sa’id al-Sahlawi and Husain Abd al-`Aziz al-Hibshi, and grant their immediate and unconditional release. On November 16, state security forces arrested al-Sahlawi, a dentist, and al-Hibshi, an insurance executive, for possessing leaflets calling for the boycott of the last election. The leaflets in question do not condone or encourage violence, but instead called for a boycott of the previous elections and political change through “peaceful legitimate means.”

The public prosecutor charged al-Sahlawi and al-Hibshi under articles 160, 161, and 168 of the Bahraini Penal Code, which criminalize the dissemination and possession of materials that could “damage the public interest.” Their trial began on January 7 before a judge of the Lower Criminal Court.

“The imprisonment of two Bahrainis for trying to express nonviolent political opinions violates freedoms guaranteed under Bahrain’s international obligations and the kingdom’s own constitution,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “Bahrain’s persecution of free expression makes a mockery of its membership in the UN Human Rights Council.”

The Bahraini constitution reaffirms the right of free expression. Article 23 states that “freedom of opinion and scientific research is secured, everyone has the right to express his opinion verbally, in writing or otherwise, in accordance with the terms and conditions prescribed by the law.” The International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Bahrain acceded in September, states in arti-

cle 19 that “everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression” and that “this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.”

The imprisonment of individuals merely for having in their possession and copying a document critical of government policy violates their freedom of expression. Although the ICCPR allows for certain restrictions on freedom of information on grounds of national security, the terms of any such restriction must be specific and narrowly tailored to prevent against arbitrariness and to ensure that the internationally recognized human rights of all individuals are protected. The detention of al-Sahlawi and al-Hibshi and the threat of further penal sanctions against them under the vague provisions of article 168 of the Bahraini penal code constitute precisely such an arbitrary restriction on the two activists’ rights under Article 19 of the ICCPR. In addition, security forces in Sanabis on January 19 attacked peaceful demonstrators protesting the continued incarceration of al-Sahlawi and al-Hibshi, according to the Committee of Solidarity with Activists and Detainees of Conscience in Bahrain. The Committee also said that security forces used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the demonstration, causing injuries to demonstrators. Human Rights Watch called on the Bahraini government to investigate any excessive use of force and ensure that anyone injured by the security forces has access to effective remedies. This is the minimum required by Bahrain’s international legal commitments. “The Bahraini government should repeal its vague legal provisions on freedom of expression instead of using them to prosecute its critics,” said Whitson. “The authorities should also respect peaceful protest instead of resorting to violence.

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The Times: Shia cleric who campaigned for democracy in Bahrain

Abdul Amir al-Jamri
1937 - December 18, 2006



Sheikh al-Jamri endured years of prison and house arrest (Adam Jan/AFP/Getty Images). Despite the best efforts of Bahrain's rulers to silence him, Sheikh Abdul Amir al-Jamri, a leading Shia cleric, worked indefatigably to consolidate the Gulf state's majority Shia population, together with secular groups of moderates and leftists, into an effective opposition movement. The object was for democracy, and equality between the Shia and minority Sunni.

About 60 to 70 per cent of the indigenous population of Bahrain is Shia, with Sunnis, including the al-Khalifa ruling family (in power since 1783), making up the rest. Traditionally, Pakistani and Indian nationals have held senior posts, with the Shia denied roles in the police and defence forces — trained by the British, whose forces withdrew from the Gulf in 1968 — and generally being treated as second-class citizens.

Sheikh al-Jamri, born in Bani Jamra, a village near the capital, Manama, was educated at home before attending the Shia Najaf Religious Institute in Iraq where he studied religious doctrine and jurisprudence. In 1972, together with other Najaf graduates, he was one of the founders of the Religious Bloc, which was formed mainly in villages in response to the announcement of an intention by the Bahraini regime to establish the first elected constituent assembly. Candidates of the bloc won nine seats in the National Council and Sheikh al-Jamri served in the short-lived parliament of 1973, raising objections to various legislative issues, including the security law.

The parliament was dissolved two years later by the then emir, Sheikh Issa bin Salam al-Khalifa, for "obstructing the work of government". Six years later, the Islamic revolution in Iran encouraged Shia religious groups in the Gulf region to continue agitating for political representation, a fact of which the Bahraini Government was only too aware.

Until 1988 Sheikh al-Jamri worked as a judge, before being forced to leave his job because of his vocal opposition. In 1992, with others, he demanded the reinstatement of the legislature, and called for the return of political exiles and an end to the economic disparity between Sunnis and Shia. Tensions between the Sunnis and Shia escalated, with Shias attacking businesses owned by Sunnis and Indian immigrants: at least 40 people were killed. In response, the Government targeted not only Sheikh al-Jamri, but also various members of his family, including his elder son and a son-in-law, who were tortured (according to a 1997 UN report).

By 1995 the Government had banned public gatherings, and opposition leaders were put under severe restrictions, Sheikh al-Jamri was placed under house arrest. The follow-

ing March, under Sheikh Issa, he was imprisoned at al-Qalaa prison, reportedly for intensifying his campaign for political reform, although no trial was ever held. The foreign minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Mubarak al-Khalifa, said that the campaign of violence was clearly organised and supported by foreign forces, and accused Sheikh al-Jamri of involvement with a "Bahraini Hezbollah" that had trained its followers in Lebanon and had links with Iran.

Tehran rejected the Bahraini Government's accusation that Iran, which is predominantly Shia, had been behind the violent clashes. The Bahraini Freedom Movement, of which Sheikh al-Jamri's son Mansoor was a founder, denied allegations of a plot to overthrow the Government and questioned the very existence of a Bahrain Hezbollah, accusing the Government of fabricating it in order to claim that external forces were at work within the emirate.

By the time Sheikh Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa took over from his father as emir in 1999, the Gulf archipelago was split on sectarian, economic and political grounds. Under Sheikh Hamad, Sheikh al-Jamri was again accused of allegedly spying for a foreign power and for instigating anti-government unrest: the three years he had already spent mostly in solitary confinement was deducted from the ten-year sentence handed down. However he was immediately pardoned, after being compelled to make a humiliating public apology on state television and sent home, to spend the next 18 months under house arrest.

Ill-health afflicted Sheikh al-Jamri from early 2001, the same year that Sheikh Hamad announced a national charter to restore democracy and transform Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy, which gave hope to Sheikh al-Jamri and his supporters. The release of political detainees and prisoners held for their part in the unrest of 1994-99 preceded the February referendum.

Through his Friday sermons at the Diraz mosque, Sheikh al-Jamri encouraged his followers to vote in favour of the emir's reforms. But the following year, Sheikh al-Jamri and other influential Shia figures criticised the king's decision to establish a second, appointed legislative house that significantly limited the power of the elected one, and called for an electoral boycott. The elected deputies were largely moderate Sunnis and independents. The invasion of Iraq by US-led forces did little to ease Shia-Sunni tensions.

Bedridden since suffering a stroke in April 2002, Sheikh al-Jamri remained a powerful mentor to the main Shia opposition party, al-Wefaq, despite playing no active role in politics for the past several years. Though his death went unmarked by Bahraini state radio and television, the Shia opposition party, the Islamic National

Accord Association mourned him as "the father of the uprising of dignity in the 1990s", and his funeral attracted thousands of followers.

Sheikh al-Jamri lived to see the first fruits of his legacy. Last month al-Wefaq won 17 of the 40 seats in the parliamentary polls, while, for the first time a Shia, Jawad bin Salem al-Oraeid, was appointed as one of three deputy prime ministers.

Sheikh al-Jamri, who was married to Zahra Attiyah, had ten children.

Sheikh Adul Amir al-Jamri, was born in 1937. He died of heart and kidney failure on December 18, 2006, aged 69

Reporters without Frontiers

Reporters Without Borders wrote today (10th January) to the King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, the following letter about his internet policies

Letter signed by Robert Ménard, Secretary-General :

"Your Majesty,

Reporters Without Borders, an organisation that defends press freedom worldwide, is concerned about your Kingdom's Internet policies.

In April 2005, your government adopted regulations that require websites dealing with Bahrain to register with your information ministry. We condemn this requirement at the time, believing that, although hard to apply, it seemed to indicate a desire to place inappropriate controls on the Internet.

Access to many news websites, online political and religious publications, and blogs was blocked in October 2006, a month before legislative elections. Several of these online publications appear to have been banned for covering the "Bandargate," a political scandal in which people close to the government have been implicated. Nearly 20 of these websites are still inaccessible.

We are particularly shocked by the banning for the website of the Network for Human Rights Information (HRInfo), which has been rendered inaccessible in your country since December. Blocking access to this site, which defends prisoners of conscience and free expression, is unacceptable.

As we are confident that you would like to ensure respect for diversity of information as well as the rapid and unrestricted development of the Internet in your Kingdom, we hope that you will agree to overhaul your Internet policies. An initial sign of your commitment to online free expression would be to quickly lift the blocking of HRInfo. We trust you will give this matter your careful consideration.

Sincerely,"