

BAHRAIN

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Six years of disasters may herald the downfall of a despotic regime

Despite what appears to be a serious deterioration of the political situation in Bahrain, there is a mood of optimism within the widening circles of opposition. Six years after the imposition by the ruler, Sheikh Hamad, of his own constitution, new political realities are emerging that indicate the end of the ruling family's "era of deception". Furthermore, the consequences of the total collapse of Sheikh Hamad's political programme are likely to herald a decisive phase in the historical struggle between the people of Bahrain and the ruling Al Khalifa family. It can be argued that there may not exist another regime (except that of the Al Khalifa) that is so widely out of step with the people it purports to rule. The two sides stand on two opposite sides with nothing in common; political, historical or cultural. This is not new. The historical documents relate a long history of total detachment between the two sides and a deep-rooted animosity resulting from the fact that the Al Khalifa who had occupied the islands by force had not been able to bridge the gap between the colonialist attitude and that emanating from natives. They have always lived in seclusion; arrogance and feeling of superiority. They have always treated the people of Bahrain with disdain. The grandfathers of the current generations were treated as slaves, often beaten and killed for disobeying the Al Khalifa orders. Lorimer, the famous historian of the Gulf region at the onset of last century, outlines the grievances of the natives, while the Major Daly, the British Political Agent in the 1920s had prepared long lists of crimes committed by members of the Al Khalifa against the natives of Bahrain.

However, as the decades passed, the people have attempted to overcome those historical injustices and looked forward to long-lasting remedies. Instead of calling for the removal of the occupiers from their lands, they sought to co-habit with them in return for a degree of good governance. This has been the case for the past eight decades. Petitions, strikes and peaceful demonstrations have been the main ways of airing their grievances. The situation had at times erupted in popular

uprisings (in the fifties, sixties, eighties and nineties). In almost all these events, innocent Bahrainis were brutally suppressed, often with fatal consequences. When Sheikh Hamad rose to power in 1999, following the death of his father, he promised to change the situation. The people rewarded him for what they saw as kind words with the endorsement of his charter in February 2001. He had promised that it was a step to re-instate the country's constitution, which was the only legal document that offered legitimacy to the Al Khalifa rule. In February 2002, however, everything came to a sudden halt when he unilaterally abrogated the constitution and imposed his own version of the new governing rules. The people reacted in fury and the situation has been deteriorating rapidly. Whether by design or default, he thought that the participation in the "elections" of half the members of his shura council would end the political boycott by the people to his rule. When the Al Wafaq participated in the elections of 2006, he and his supporters inside and outside Bahrain, thought that they had sealed the final victory over the opposition.

Now the situation is clearly far from that. The total polarisation of opinion in the country against Sheikh Hamad and his ill-fated programme cannot be dismissed as peripheral. It is a serious challenge to the Al Khalifa rule that could, one day, culminate in the total collapse of the hereditary dictatorship. He may have been able to exploit the country's riches to his advantage, and may have succeeded in wooing some old foes back into his fold. But what about the masses? Those who have joined the mass movement either in demonstrations, or signing the successive petitions especially the latest one calling for the dismissal of the prime minister, are genuinely seeking a fundamental change in the political system that has ruled the country with fire. The killing in December of Ali Jassim, 30, was a timely disaster for Sheikh Hamad and his supporters. The people reacted in anger and resolved to continue the peaceful struggle until the Al Khalifa are defeated. With his son, the crown

prince, sucked in the muddy lakes of corruption, embezzlement and arrogance, the ruling political circles have been devoid of credible contenders for leadership. Neither Sheikh Hamad, nor his son, have presented a credible alternative to his uncle, the prime minister who is one of the worst political figures in the history of the country, and the most corrupt of all. The people have given their verdict in the ongoing petition that he has to go soon. It is unlikely that he will remain much longer, but his successors are unlikely to be much more credible than him. The ruler, Sheikh Hamad also has blood on his hand. He has so far killed and tortured scores of Bahrainis. Among his victims are Nooh Khalil Al Nooh, Mohammad Jum'a Al Shakhouri, Mahdi Abdul Rahmad and Ali Jassim. He has failed to investigate these deaths.

Now he and the rest of the Al Khalifa will have to answer questions by the United Nations Human Rights Council shortly, about a long list of human rights abuses and sheltering torturers. He has taken every possible deceptive step to circumvent the investigation, including the appointment of a Shia minister to defend him. He will not succeed. The victims of his torture chambers, including those who are currently languishing in his torture cells, are ready to testify for the international body, and Sheikh Hamad cannot escape the inevitable guilty verdict expected from the investigation, unless bribery has reached its ranks and files.

History is being re-written in Bahrain as the people have refused to be contained or co-opted by the corrupt regime of the Al Khalifa. As they commemorate the bleak day of 14th February, they are proud enough to proclaim their moral high grounds, remembering those who have paid the ultimate price in sacrifice for what their beliefs. Their sons and colleagues are spending the best part of their youth in the Al Khalifa torture chambers, often under torture and degrading treatment, simply because they had the courage to express themselves freely. They deserve respect, greetings, and above all, support and solidarity from all freedom-loving people.

Torture of detainees intensifies as petition for PM removal is circulated

Local and international bodies have expressed outrage at the extent of torture being inflicted on political detainees in Bahrain's torture cells. Reports of extensive torture have been confirmed by family members who have recently been allowed to visit their relatives languishing behind bars for their peaceful expression against the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship.

Among the officials who are alleged to have been involved directly or indirectly (by condoning the heinous acts of torture) in torturing Bahrainis are: Colonel Mohammad Bu Humood, deputy minister of the interior, Ahmad Bucheri (head of the prosecution office of the Northern District), Usama Al Mehri and Anwar Al Arabi.

The wife of Mohammad Al Singce said that her husband had been arrested on 21st December after Al Khalifa mercenaries had broken the door of their house. His children were taken hostage. She was beaten up severely when she asked to see her husband. On 3rd January she saw her husband who had been denied even a shower for two weeks. He was kept in solitary confinement, blindfolded and shackled (in the same way as the Guantanamo Bay detainees). He had blood on his wrists and his body bore marks of extensive torture.

The wife of Naji Fateel, from Bani Jamra described what she saw when she met her husband two weeks after his arrest. He

did not recognize his wife or children for few minutes. He had blurred vision as a result of severe torture. He confirmed that he had been subjected to torture by electricity on daily basis. He was shaking throughout the ten minute interview. He informed her that he had been kept in solitary confinement for the whole period, blindfolded and shackled (similar to those at Guantanamo Bay).

The case of Maitham Bader Al Sheikh was unique. He was weak, unable to concentrate and had not had a shower since his arrest on 21st December. His wrists were bruised and bloody. He ate the food brought in by his family in a way that indicated his extreme hunger. His hands exhibited signs of burning by electric tools. He said that on New Year's Eve he was tortured by electricity from 7 pm to 12 am. He said farewell to his family fearing that he may not meet them again. The father of Majid Salman Ibrahim said that when he met his son earlier this month he was appeared in fear for his life. He did not answer any question from his family. His father said that he put his hands on his ears when a question is asked, because he had severe pain in his ears drum. He has now called for an independent investigation into the torture of his son and the others. Majed was denied the use of his spectacles despite his weak eyesight.

Saleh Al Jamri, the lawyer of Ibrahim Al Arab, confirmed that his client had been

subjected to torture. The torture sessions would start from early evening until the morning. It would be carried out in the open. The victim's clothes would be removed and he would be sprayed with called water in those frosty winter nights. He was beaten on the neck. His hands showed clear marks of torture. Another young Bahraini, Essa Al Sarj, was also tortured with him. They both suffer pains in the knee and neck due to beating and standing for long periods.

Another victim is Maitham Al Shaikh who is reported to have been subjected to sexual aggression by the Al Khalifa torturers. There are now forceful voices calling for severe punishment for an immediate action to stop those atrocities directed against the people of Bahrain.

The popular petition calling for the removal of the prime minister, Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, has been launched by Haq Movement. The petition has presented a long list of grievances that make his removal a necessity for the preservation of the country and the people. Khalifa is reported to have fled (whether temporarily or permanently) to South East Asia amid growing what appears to be growing tensions between senior members of the Al Khalifa. Thousands of people have signed the petition despite warnings from the ruling family to crush the people of Bahrain if the petition was launched. The leadership of Haq Movement have taken the courageous step against all the odds.

More torture reported as websites closed amid massive crackdown

Torture is rampant at Bahrain's prisons. This is the stark reality unveiled by letters and verbal messages from the prisoners of conscience languishing at Al Khalifa torture chambers. Among them are: Ahmad Jaffar, from Daih, Naji Fateel, from Bani Jamra and Hassan Abdul Nabi, from Sitra. The wife of Naji Fateel was reported to have become hysterical when she visited him in jail this week. She described him as a pale and drawn out person who lost energy to talk as a result of severe physical and psychological torture by Al Khalifa officers.

Among the new faces of torture are: Usama Al Mehri, Anwar Al Arabi and Abdulla Al Sarh. Usama Al Mehri carried vicious attacks against women when they went to the prosecution office to demand meeting their detained relatives. Abdullah Al Sarh was involved in the detention, interrogation and torture of Ibrahim Al Arab, an activist from Bani Jamra. In a leaked letter, Mr Al Arab described the maltreatment he endured as the torturers sought to incriminate him of possessing weapons confiscated from a police vehicle. He denied the accusations and was thus subjected to severe

torture. They promised to release him if he confessed to possession of weapons. He said in his leaked letter that he knew that if he made such false confession he would face terrible consequences. He refused their offer. Little is known about these torturers, but are thought to be a new breed who administer torture in more sophisticated ways. They would inflict maximum pain leaving as little physical marks as possible. Those victims whose injuries are severe would be left in detention for longer periods pending the healing of their wounds.

Families of the prisoners of conscience have shown courage, patience and determination in their struggle against the illegal detention of their sons. They formed "The committee of Prisoners Relatives" which has been active in organising their campaign. Today, a statement was issued by the committee urging people to support them in exposing the crimes being committed by the regime against the prisoners who are now being used as hostages. After several days of pickets and demonstrations, the Al Khalifa reluctantly allowed some visits. To the horror of the families, their children have been severely tortured.

In their statement, they said that the hostages are taken every night for torture sessions between dusk and dawn. Their clothes are taken off before being sprayed with cold water in these winter nights. Some have been subjected to electric shocks. Many are shackled in similar ways as those at Guantanamo Bay. Their wrists show clear signs of strains and injuries. They are blindfolded most of the time. They have been denied the right to wash up to the extent that their body odour has become unbearable. Some families have described how the bodies of their beloved were shaking as they talked to them. Torturers were overseeing the visits and preventing the hostages speaking freely to their families.

As the international concerns grow for the well-being of the Bahraini prisoners of conscience, the Al Khalifa rulers have appointed their deputy foreign minister to defend them against the charges at the UN Human Rights Council. The new official has spoken in vague terms of the cleanliness of the human rights records, and sought to shelter the ruling family from the international accusations of torture

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Front Line is deeply concerned following the arrest of eleven human rights defenders and the alleged torture and ill-treatment of a number of those arrested. The arrests took place in the days following demonstrations on 17 December 2007 in Manama and other regions of Bahrain, in which a protester, Ali Jessam Mekki, was killed. The demonstrations were organised by members of the National Committee of Martyrs and Victims of Torture to mark the 13th anniversary of the death of two young Shiite men killed by security forces while participating in a demonstration calling for the restoration of democracy. From the 21st to the 28th December 2007, members of the Special Security Forces (SSF) arrested approximately 50 people including at least 11 human rights defenders.

Further Information

Posted 04/01/2008 On 21 December 2007, at 4.00am Shaker Mohammed Abdul-Hussein Abdul-Aal, member of the Unemployment Committee was arrested; at 8.00am Abdullah Mohsen Abdullah Saleh, member of the Unemployment Committee was arrested; at 8.50 am, Naji Ali Fateel, member of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR) was arrested; at 2.15pm Mohammed Abdullah Al Sengais, head of the Committee to Combat High Prices; at 5.00pm Maytham Bader Jassim Al-Sheikh, member of the Unemployment Committee; On 22 December, at 2.00pm, Majid Salman Ibrahim Al-Haddad, member of the Unemployment Committee

Bahrain: Arrest of eleven human rights defenders

was arrested; On 23 December 2007, at 11.30pm, Ahmad Jaffar Mohammed Ali, member of the Unemployment Committee was arrested; On 26 December, at approximately 11.00am, Hassan Abdalnabi, Board member of the Unemployment Committee was arrested; on 23 December, at 2.00am, Nader Ali Ahmad Al-Salatna, member of the Unemployment Committee was arrested; On 27 December 2007, at approximately 11.00pm, Hassan Abdalnabi Hassan, member of the Unemployment Committee was arrested by members of the SSF; On 28 December 2007, at 11.00am Ebrahim Mohamed Amin-Al-Arab, founding member of the Martyrs and Victims of Torture Committee was arrested by members of the SSF. Both Hassan Abdalnabi Hassan and Ebrahim Mohamed Amin-Al-Arab have been arrested in the past. All eleven human rights defenders have been accused of having taken part in an 'illegal gathering and rioting' and of 'theft of a weapon and ammunition and possession of a weapon and ammunition without permission'.

None of the human rights defenders have access to their lawyers. They are reportedly all being detained at the Criminal Investigations Department, (CID) in Adliya.

It is reported that a number of the human rights defenders have been ill-treated and possibly tortured while in detention. Witnesses have alleged that Naji Ali Fateel had been detained in handcuffs and blindfolds for two weeks; that Mohammed Abdullah Al Sengais had been handcuffed and blindfolded for one week and he had been held in solitary confinement for ap-

proximately two weeks; that Maytham Bader Jassim Al-Sheikh had been allegedly tortured, a witness reported that he had burn marks on his arms and on his stomach, as a result of having been electrocuted, he was also handcuffed for a period of time; that Ahmad Jaffar Mohammed Ali had been handcuffed possibly for a number of days as he had marks on his wrists; that Majid Salman Ibrahim Al-Haddad had been physically assaulted, as a result he has a perforated ear drum, which he is receiving medical treatment for and he also had a hand injury. It has been alleged that some of the human rights defenders may have been ill-treated or tortured while being questioned.

Furthermore, on 25 December 2007, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), was subjected to a physical assault and verbal insults by a masked Bahraini officer and three SSF members who are not of Bahraini nationality, outside the Office of the Public Prosecutors. Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was forcibly removed from the entrance of the Office of the Public Prosecutors, where he had tried to be granted permission to enter. It is reported that family members of a number of detained human rights defenders were also physically assaulted by police officers.

Front Line is concerned that the aforementioned human rights defenders have been targeted by the Bahraini authorities due to their peaceful activities promoting human rights, including economic and social rights.

More torture: *Continued from P2*

and maltreatment of detainees. The people are disgusted at this way of handling such a sensitive issue. At every complex juncture, the Al Khalifa have adopted deception as a tool in its war against the people of Bahrain, including buying off individuals who are ready to stand against their own people and shelter the criminal regime. Sources at the UN Human Rights Council have remarked that they were aware of these desperate tactics by the Al Khalifa and that these tactics have confirmed the suspicion of the international community with regards to the treatment of detainees.

Meanwhile, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights has said that many websites have been closed by the authorities in retaliation for publishing unfavourable news about the plight of the Bahraini prisoners. The ruling family had imposed Law 47/2002 as a useful tool against freedom of expression and closed down these sites.

Political Discontent And Rival Entreaties Make Pitch Difficult

By Andrew Critchlow, January 24, 2008
DAVOS, Switzerland -- Bahrain's Sunni-Muslim ruling family is putting on a charm offensive at this week's World Economic Forum. But the effort risks falling flat as Western business cozies up to Bahrain's richer neighbors in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Executives and government officials from the tiny Gulf archipelago led by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa, backed by an expensive advertising campaign, hope to persuade international investors that Bahrain is the steppingstone to the booming economies of the Middle East.

But dwindling oil revenue, domestic political discord and the more aggressive efforts of some of Bahrain's Gulf rivals make that pitch a hard sell.

The Khalifa clan, which holds most of the major government positions and controls much of the country's wealth, is under threat from discontent within the kingdom's majority Shiite Muslim population. It enjoys few of the economic and political privileges of Sunnis.

Last month, tensions spilled over in Manama, the capital, when Bahraini security forces used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse Shiite Muslim rioters. That resulted in multiple arrests and the reported death of one protester.

Unease between the kingdom's Sunni rulers and the Shiite majority is an important point for Saudi Arabia and the U.S., which bases its Gulf Fifth Fleet in Bahrain.

So far, the U.S. has been reluctant to disturb the status quo with Bahrain's rulers for fear of losing basing rights for the American fleet, despite Washington's desire to encourage greater representation for Shiites in the wider Middle East.

But despite the Bahraini hoopla, delegates to the World Economic Forum in Davos may come away with the feeling this is too little, too late.

Indeed, some would argue the money and time spent in Davos would be better employed improving the Shiite slum villages in Manama's Sitra neighborhood and devolving more executive power to the country's elected assembly.

Democracy disappoints Bahrain

By Andrew England

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When George W. Bush became at the weekend the first US president to visit Bahrain, he was quick to compliment the small archipelago's ruler.

King Hamad bin Issa was at the "forefront of providing hope for people through democracy" the president said, and was "showing the way forward for other nations".

If Mr Bush had been speaking five or six years ago many Bahrainis might have agreed with him – after inheriting power in 1999, the monarch released political prisoners, adopted a new constitution, reconstituted a bicameral parliament and has since held two elections for the lower house.

But when the American leader touched down in Bahrain during his Middle East tour, Bahrainis were still coming to terms with the death of a man involved in a demonstration in December, with some blaming the state security forces. Subsequent protests led to dozens being rounded up. Human rights workers say about 20 people remain in prison, some of them allegedly tortured and denied access to lawyers.

An interior ministry spokesman dismissed allegations that security forces used excessive force, describing the protests as a "sabotage spree" and accusing demonstrators of attacking police with petrol bombs. The spokesman also rejected the torture claims and described those arrested as criminals.

But opposition politicians and activists say the episode shows that, rather than being a model of progress, Bahrain is an example of the weakness of the type of democracy in some Middle Eastern states. They express the frustration felt by reformers throughout the region who argue the US administration has bolstered authoritarian regimes and weakened reform movements by reneging on earlier promises to push for greater democracy.

Bahrain is an important Washington ally, as it hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. It also boasts a reputation for being more liberal and open than its neighbours and is a big financial centre.

But the events in December highlight underlying problems which critics say the government has failed to address, including alleged discrimination against the Shia community, inequitable distribution of wealth, corruption and the slow pace of reform.

Bahrain stands out as the only Gulf nation with a Shia majority – Shia Muslims account for about 60 per cent of the population – but the state is ruled by a Sunni royal family.

"There was reform in 2001, significant reform, but then in 2002 it was put on the back seat. Actually, it's not even on the back seat, it is in the trunk now," says Ebrahim Sharif Al Sayed, secretary-general of the opposition National Democratic Action Society. "It's what you call a decoration of a so-called modern democratic state that meets that minimum required by the US president."

Small protests, mainly by young, disaffected Shia – who tend to be the poorer community – have been held sporadically for more than a

year. These created cycles of arrests that triggered more demonstrations, but activists say security agents used greater force than usual. As in other Gulf states, the Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq has exacerbated sectarian tensions in Bahrain, which worsened amid allegations that the government had been giving citizenship to Sunni from other countries in a bid to change the state's demographics. The assembly has limited powers. Shia also complain they are excluded from many civil service jobs.

"The mother of the problem is the discrimination against the Shia. There's a strong feeling among the Shia that they are not only marginalised but they are being squeezed so they have to leave the country," says Nabeel Rajab, vice-president of the banned Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. He describes Mr Bush's remarks as "very disappointing". "I'm afraid the government will take it as support by the US government for its internal policy and that for sure will weaken all the reformists and political and human rights activists."

Petition to Bush upon his visit to Bahrain

Shortly before President Bush showed up in the region last week, human rights activist Abduljalil Alsingace tried to deliver a petition to the U.S. Embassy complaining about the lack of democracy in his native Bahrain. He thought he might have some hope, given the strong language coming from the White House on the need for political reform in the Middle East.

But as he tells it, the U.S. Embassy was cool to his plans to deliver a petition, accepting his document only grudgingly after several days of negotiations. Then he was astounded to hear Bush's description of Bahrain as an example of positive democratic reform. "All the wealth and power are with the royal family," Alsingace said in an interview.

Adam Ereli, the U.S. ambassador in Bahrain, disputed Alsingace's account, saying the embassy was happy to accept the petition and sees its job as listening to "all sides of the political spectrum."

The following is a statement by Haq on 10th January:

A delegation representing the Movement of Liberties and Democracy (HAQ) met yesterday with an official at the American Embassy in Manama to deliver an open letter to President George W. Bush and hand in a copy of the constitutional petition signed by 82000 of adult Bahrainis and submitted in August 2006 to the office of the then Secretary General of the UN.

The open letter, attached below, addressed two main issues followed by a conclusion. The first issue is concerned with the aspects of the authoritarian regime in Bahrain, governed by a repressive ruling and use of laws violating the basics of democracy and human rights. It focused on the imposed constitution of 2002 which has no popular legitimacy and focuses all the powers at the hand of the ruler. A reference was made to the biggest petition in the history of Bahrain, a copy of which was passed and to be handed to the President, refusing 2002 undemocratic constitution and call for a new democratic and progressive constitution to be drafted by the people of Bahrain. The letter mentioned the fact that Bahrainis cannot peacefully and democratically change their government, half of which including its head are from one family, and that they- Bahrainis- knew only one divine prime

minister from the ruling family who has been heading the government for over 37 years.

The other issue of concern mentioned in the open letter to Bush is the plan to change the demography in Bahrain by importing tens of thousands of mercenaries from areas, known of extremism and violent behaviour, like Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, Baluchistan of Pakistan and, last but not least, Iraq. The main objective behind this plan is to undermine the grass rooted indigenous struggle of the Bahraini people for true constitutionalized democratic governance, and to circumvent these demands by creating a de facto situation with a "artificial" majority population of "secured loyalists" to the regime.

The signatories of the open letter expressed concerns about this plot which will lead to unrest by the indigenous people, and believed that true democratization, fair distribution of wealth and respect for human rights values, which include equality and all manifested freedoms, are the only guarantees to dampen the currently boiling situation.

The open letter, accompanied by 18kg of the signed petition signed by 82000, ended by calling for:

Supporting Bahrainis call for a new democratic- by people for people- constitution, securing rights and safeguarding Bahraini identity and culture
Ceasing and reversing the politically driven change of demography plan, the disqualification for the Bahraini Prime Minister and the peaceful exchange of power representing the well of people and away from the influence of the Royal court.

Remedy of the deteriorating human rights situation in Bahrain.

Protecting defenders and activists supporting human rights values and democratization.

Finally, two issues were mentioned in the open letter. First is the release of all detainees recently apprehended the security authorities, subjected to ill-treatment and faced alleged criminal charges. The second is the advert for upcoming launch of a new popular petition calling for the disqualification of Bahrain's PM Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman Al-Khalifa.