

BAHRAIN

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

The view from within: One man up, thousands down

In the past few weeks several worrying developments have happened in Bahrain, with implications that go far beyond the current standoff between the opposition and the ruling family. Among such implications is the sliding towards sectarian strife, planned, encouraged and, probably executed by certain members of the ruling family. The situation has been likened by a senior political figure arguing that it is similar to a sinking ship with its captain relentlessly drilling more holes to hasten its demise. Over the past 18 months, Sheikh Hamad's councils have transformed into a race course in which participants exchanged accusations and abuses on sectarian issues. The grass roots of both the Shia and Sunni citizens have rallied behind their "representatives" to whip up emotions and encourage them to inflict more wounds on the other side. It is a race towards political, social and religious Armageddon. It is a competition that is unlikely to lead to a winner. Both will be fatally wounded. What the Al Khalifa rulers hope to achieve is exactly that. They have no love for either the Shia or Sunni Muslims. Both would be repressed if they attempted to disrupt Sheikh Hamad's destructive political programme, or any part of it. The aim of this programme is to transform the political realities of Bahrain into one in which the various communities are too weak to pose a threat to the Al Khalifa domination. With a strong Shia Muslim population in excess of 70 percent, Sheikh Hamad sought to undermine their strong presence, history and culture through a campaign of political naturalization, containment or cooption. This has enabled him to feel free from the life long worries of his uncle, or for that matter, his own father, who had lived their political lives in fear of continuous accusations of factionalism or sectarianism.

Today, Bahrain lives on a low fire that is pushing up the political temperature to new highs. Following the imposition of the now-defunct "reform programme" the regime opted to create conformist elites that would embrace it and act as a buffer zone against the people. The success has been limited. Few individuals and groups

have responded positively to the advances of the Al Khalifa, and are now acting within their political programme. Last month, for example, one of the undersecretaries of foreign affairs, headed the Al Khalifa delegation to Geneva to defend dismal human record of the Al Khalifa "reformists". The regime had prepared a large group, from amongst those who had aligned themselves against the people, to defend its record. The minister, a member of the Shia community, acted in a shameless way when he claimed that the Al Khalifa had not discriminated against large sector of the people, nor had they violated the human rights of the people. When some activists presented documented evidence of human rights abuses, he asked UN officials to intervene and remove their literature. This unholy alliance is viewed as opportunistic, unethical and unholy. Once again the incident has proven beyond doubt that it is impossible to retain an independent personality and thinking while serving tyrants, dictators and despots.

Within Bahrain, the emotions are running high as reports from torture cells were smuggled to the outside world with harrowing details of torture and abuse. Families of the political prisoners have spoken of unprecedented evil treatment of the Bahraini youth at the hands of the torturers, some of whom had been brought into the country to administer torture and inflict wounds on the citizens. When a seminar had been organized against the policies of the prime minister, who had held his post for the past 37 years, the owners of the congregation hall were threatened with serious consequences. The organizers were also warned of a bloodbath if the event went ahead. There are also several news about the deterioration of the health of several prisoners due to torture and that some of them may have been transferred to the military hospital as their conditions deteriorated. These news came at a time when the economic situation in the country has deteriorated with rising food prices and slow economic growth. The ruling family has been deeply incensed

by the success of the opposition in reflecting a realistic image of the internal situation to the outside world. International business companies have refrained from investing in the country and the sky-high buildings belonging the prime minister have remained empty for some time. Only those who wanted to do favours to the prime minister had rented office space in those building especially the financial harbour.

As the future appears more bleak than had been expected few years ago, the opposition has managed to regain the initiative, with protests, pickets and international trips and contacts. Moreover, many US Congressmen have recently shown interest in the affairs of Bahrain, the base of the US fifth fleet in the Gulf. Pressure is mounting on the White House and the State Department to support the struggle of the people of Bahrain, while both the US President and Secretary of State, Condoleza Rice, had been briefed about the situation prior to their recent visits to Bahrain. There is a burgeoning situation in which foreign powers are beginning to take interest in the situation of Bahrain especially as Sheikh Hamad's political programme appears to have stalled. The next few months will be crucial for the future of Bahrain. It will be a closely observed competition between the opposition and the ruling Al Khalifa family as both jostle for influence on international media. The feelings are that the ruling Al Khalifa family, may have missed a golden chance to enhance their records and bring Bahrain back to the list of countries with genuine respect of human and political rights. The consequences to the rulers are likely to be catastrophic. The ongoing internal struggle amongst the members of the royal family is gradually finding its way to the outside world who is watching the unfolding of an era in Bahrain, and indeed the Gulf region as a whole. The Domsday scenario for the oppressive regime appears within the grasp of those seeking to involve the international community in support of the Bahraini struggle to achieve rights, democracy and sovereignty. The good work of the activists will soon yield fruit for Bahrain.

Torture Chambers echo with cries of tortured prisoners of conscience

The merciless attacks on the Bahraini citizens by the Al Khalifa mercenaries have taken a sharp turn to the worse. Scores of young men have been rounded up in dawn raids on their homes, detained and maltreated. There are increasing fears for their lives. Some view this sudden escalation as a revenge for the ruling family's failure to convince the world community of its respect of human rights. Its representatives failed to defend Bahrain's human rights record at the UN Human Rights Council's deliberations in Geneva earlier this month. The ruling family thus felt the need to present different scenarios to justify its aggression against the people of Bahrain.

The epicentre of the Al Khalifa's bombshell came when it alleged that demonstrators used a Molotov bottle against one of the police vehicles, setting it on fire that allegedly led to the death of one of its occupants. The victim is said to be a foreign mercenary who is working for the foreign-staffed riot police, alongside the notorious death squads. More than fifty youth are now languishing in the Al Khalifa's torture chambers. They are said by their families to be subjected to merciless torture, humiliation and maltreatment. The ruling family has refused to investigate the said incident, despite the numerous calls from various quarters to form an independent inquiry to look into the security-related incidents which had

caused the death of innocent lives. These include the unexplained death of Abbas Al Shakhouri, Mahdi Abdul Rahmad, Mohammad Jum'a Al Shakhouri and Ali Jassim Makki, who was killed by the death squads on 17th December 2007. The failure of the ruling family to form independent inquiries is yet another incriminating factor against it and has been cited as an attempt cover up the crimes inflicted on the people of Bahrain by the ruling family and their foreign mercenaries.

The latest incident is said to have happened on Wednesday 9th April near the town of Karzakkan. No clear picture has yet emerged especially that the official story by the authorities appears to contain serious contradictions to the extent it has created more confusion than certainty. Many believe the incident to be yet another blunder by the security forces to justify more aggression and detentions. The detainees from Karzakkan are: Sayyed Hashim Sayyed Ibrahim and his brother, Sayyed Sadiq, Hussain Abdul Karim Makki Eid, Sayyed Hadi Sayyed Hamid, 28, and his three brothers Sayyed Ahmad, 24, Sayyed Jaswad and Sayyed Omran, 25, Habib Mohammad Habib, 22, Hussain Ali Dhaif, Fadhel Abbas Ashoor, 27 and his brother Hussain, 25, Ahmad Ali Hassan, 23, Saleh Al Seeb, 28, Mohammad Makki Mansoor, 27, Hussain Abdul Hassan Khatam, 23, and Kumail

Ahmad Ali Mahdi, 24. Three youth were also arrested from Barbar: Hussain Ali Abdulla Abdul Hadi Al Marhoon, Jaffar Hassan yousef Al Jowhar and Mohammad Yaqoob Yousef.

More Bahrainis were also arrested in the past few days for taking part in country-wide demonstrations. Among them are: Sayyed Adnan Sayyed Majid, 16 from Hamad Town, Sayyed Adnad Sahhed Hadi Sayyed Kadhem, 17 from Karbabad, Jamil Abdulla Abdul Karim, 37 from Saar village., Abbas Ali Mohammad from Saar village, Sayyed Hussain Sayyed Hashim, 17 from Tubli, Mohammad Abdullah, 25, from Tubli, Mohammad Abdul Karim Al Samee, 18 from Iskan Jihhafs, Ali Abdullah Sa'ad, 26 from Daih, Hassan Radhi Al Baqqali, from Jidhafs and Abbas Hassan Ahmad, 26 from Daih.

There are disturbing news from inside the torture chambers that those prisoners have been subjected to most horrific torture at the hands of the interrogators. The health of several of them have deteriorated, and their families are extremely worried about their fate. Torture include shackles to the hands and feet, hanging in the chicken position, beating on all parts of the body, electric shocks and sleep deprivation. International human rights bodies are urged to intervene to stop this human tragedy.

*Bahrain Freedom Movement
15th April 2008*

Arbitrary detentions; torture as the Al Khalifa's HR records scrutinised

The fate of Abdulla Mohsin, 32, one of the political prisoners, is unpredictable as he lays semi-conscious at Room 6, Wing 207 of the Salmaniyah hospital. He had been transferred from his torture chamber to the hospital after his health took a dramatic turn to the worse on Monday morning, 7th April. He suffers from respiratory complications as a result of blood pressure, torture and maltreatment. The opposition has accused the ruling Al Khalifa family not only of gross neglect but of deliberate maltreatment of the political prisoners. Several international bodies have been informed of the situation and urged to take action against the ruling family as it continues its crackdown against activists for their peaceful expression of opinion.

Meanwhile a young youth was arrested from the town of Karbabad. In the early hours of 7th April, Sayyed Adnan Sayyed Hadi Sayyed Kadhim, 17, was snatched by the death squads from his bed. Nothing has been heard of him since. On 5th April, another youth was detained. Hassan Radhi, 18, from Iskan JidHafs was arrested and tortured without mercy. His hands and feet are swollen as a result of intensive beating, hanging and maltreat-

ment. He told his family during their first visit three days after his arrest that he suffers from severe pains as a result of torture. He also said that the torture session would begin at midnight and continue until the morning, with sleep deprivation in addition to beating, electric shocks and hanging.

Arbitrary arrests have claimed more victims. In the early hours of this morning, the house of Mohammad Habib Ashoor, in Karzakkan, was stormed by members of the death squads with the intention of arresting his son, Ali. His brothers were threatened with sentences and harsh revenge if they did not "cooperate". He was eventually found at the second floor, beaten and arrested. The death squads then stormed the house of Mohammad Khalil Ashoor, in search for his son, Qassim. The doors of the house were smashed, but the youth was not there. A third house was then attacked; that of Ahmad Hassan. He was subsequently arrested at the family's farm outside the town. The fourth house was then targeted; that of Ahmad Habib Ashoor, in search for his son, Habib. He was not there. Fifteen people have now been arrested from the town of Karzakkan for their role in targeting the farm of the

notorious torturer: Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa. Among them are: Sayyed Hadi Sayyed Hamid, 28, Mohammad Arafat, 27, Saleh Al Seeb, 28, Ammar Hassan Basri, 17, Ahmad Hassan, 33, Ali Mohammad Habib, 30 and Hassan Kashem, 28. Torture is said to be rampant inside the torture chambers and there are genuine fears for the lives of these men.

Reacting to these arrests, the people have organized several protests in various places. In Maqsha, tyres were yesterday burnt near the entrance to the village as a sign of anger. Riot police then attacked mercilessly, using rubber bullets and plastic bullets. Several people were injured in this aggression. At the entrance of the village of Saar, similar fires were seen yesterday as the feelings of anger among the youth reached unprecedented levels.

A Committee of the Families of Detainees has been formed to organize the activities seeking the release of their beloved ones. The Committee has called for a protest near the Bori Roundabout. The Committee represents the families of the political prisoners from Karzakkan, Demstan, Tubli, Saar, Daih, Karbabad and Jidhafs. The protest will take place at 4 pm next

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A put-upon majority feels done down—and is getting angry Not so sunny for Shias

THE monarchy of Bahrain regards itself as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East. It was the first in the Gulf to give all its citizens the vote, setting up a partially elected parliament, albeit with limited powers, in 2002. Yet in the past few months its officials concede that in an average week there have been more than two riots and five public protests.

Most of the unrest takes place outside the predominantly Sunni capital, Manama, in poorer, mostly Shia, villages. No official statistics are published but some villagers say that a third or even half of them have no jobs. Bahrainis are readier to work in menial jobs than their wealthier counterparts in Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates but cheap foreign workers depress wages. A typical foreign construction worker is housed in a labour camp, cannot bring his family to Bahrain and earns around \$160 a month, which would barely support a Bahraini family with four or five children.

The soaring price of land is another grumbling point. Some Bahrainis have been waiting for state housing since 1992. Mortgages are hard to get. Yet the government has embarked on a grandiose campaign to reclaim land, with banks pouring cash into construction. Many of the new schemes are for fancy flats and artificial islands, like those in Dubai, and are more likely to be sold to rich Saudis or people from the emirates than to Bahrainis.

To make matters worse, these inequalities often have a sectarian tint. Most Bahrainis are Shias but the royal family is Sunni. The Shias are more likely to be jobless; many government employers discriminate in favour of Sunnis. "Recently I went for a public-sector job and they asked me what sect I was," says a sour Shia mechanic. "But I didn't come to the garage to pray!"

Ebrahim Sharif, a former banker, heads Wa'ad, a liberal Arab-nationalist party. Himself a Sunni, he thinks Sunni and Shia Bahrainis should form a united opposition. "Most of the Shias are worse off than the average Sunni but the only first-class citizens are the royal family," he says. However his party lost all its seats in the last election, and the parliament is dominated by Islamists of both sects.

These included the country's main Shia opposition group, Wafaq National Islamic Society, which joined parliament in 2006 after boycotting the previous election four years earlier. Its presence raised hopes of change. But voters are growing frustrated with parliament as they realise how few powers its elected members have. The government controls the pace of liberalisation. Local political activists get little support from abroad. America is wary of calling for more democracy. It fears that parliamentarians may turn against America's naval base in

Bahrain, its biggest in the Gulf; last year a majority of them declared that it should not be used in any war between America and Iran. More recently the government has signed an agreement with America to help Bahrain develop peaceful nuclear technology.

Wafaq must now deal with one of the trickiest sectarian issues raised by its supporters: a widespread rumour that the government is handing out passports to Sunnis from other countries in an attempt to turn the Shias into a minority. These fears were raised in a report in 2006 by a former government adviser, Salah al-Bandar, who said he had confidential government documents revealing such a plan. The government hotly denies any such thing. The row has flared up again with the publication of government statistics that show

the population jumping by 41% last year and the number of citizens growing by 15%, against a previous rate of 2.4%.

Wafaq wants to question a minister named in Mr Bandar's report. The constitution says a minister must submit to questions in parliament if five of the assembly's members so demand; in this case, 18 want the minister questioned, so far in vain. The row has paralysed parliament for the past six weeks as debates have descended into shouting matches; for one week it was suspended. A Sunni Islamist member says it should be dissolved. Wafaq is wondering whether it was sensible to have joined it.

This week, just before its officials were to attend a UN meeting to review Bahrain's human-rights record, the government said it would set up a new human-rights task-force. What a coincidence.

From The Economist, April 3rd 2008

Serious maltreatment of political prisoners

The detainees of the December events are still being ill-treated and those requiring medication are denied that right, among them are well known activists.

A report was received today (21st April) from inside the detention in the Dry Dock prison indicating that:

Husain Jaafar Turaif was urgently hospitalized into Al-Qala'ah Hospital (Al-Qala'ah, or the Fort, is the dubbed name for the headquarter of the Ministry of Interior) at 4:30pm (local time) last Saturday 19th April 2008. This is because of the sudden deterioration in his health resulting in high fever, vomiting and weakness affecting his ability to stand and hold himself. He is still under treatment.

Without any previous notice, the physiotherapy medication program for Mohamed Al-Singace was terminated without completion. Mohamed has three physiotherapy sessions in the BDF: Bahrain Defence Force (Military) Hospital, and was supposed to be taken to the forth session on Thursday 17th April 2008 (A day after the last court session). Mohamed is still suffering from severe pain at the lower part of his spine (Backache). Moahmed Al-Singace is a well know activist and the head of the popular Committee to Combat High Prices. He has been subjected to severe physical and psychological torture and ill-treatment by bodies of the security authorities at the Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB).

Mahmood Hasan Saleh was admitted in the Dry Dock Health Center at 12pm on Thursday 17th April 2008, suffering from severe chest and back pain. The medical doctor at the health center prescribed that Mahmood is to be taken to the BDF for x-ray, diagnose and treatment, but he was denied this right.

It is to be mentioned that in the last session of the prosecution of the 15 detainees charges with riots, illegal assembly, blazing patrol vehicle and theft and illegal possession of a weapon was carried out on last Wednesday 16th April. A medical report was presented supporting the torture claimed by the detainees, a matter refuted and not accepted by the representative of the Public Prosecutor. The judge further postponed the court to hear the witness of the medical doctor responsible for the report and other negation witnesses. The court session on this case started on February 24th and has been subjected to a monthly adjournments since then. The detainees were subjected to severe torture and ill-treatment by the CIB officers to force them to confess of what they did not really do.

HAQ expresses its concerns over the ongoing ordeal the activists and other detainees are forced to endure. All the detainees have the rights and accessibility to medication as and when they deemed to be in need for it, especially those who are on medical prescription. The Authorities are called to abide by its obligation to respect and maintain the rights of the detainees, treat them humanly and positively respond to their human need.

HAQ, on the other hand, reiterate the need to close this issue which is fuelling over all societal security and stability. This is done by unconditionally releasing all the detainees of and aftermath the December events arrested as a result of a protest.

*Dr Abduljalil Alsingace- Human Rights Bureau, HAQ Movement-Bahrain.
Tel: 973- 3966-8179, Email: asingace@gmail.com*

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OMCT-FIDH) Ongoing acts of harassment against Ms. Najiya Abdulghaffar

Open letter to Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King of Bahrain

Paris - Geneva, April 3, 2008

Re: Ongoing acts of harassment against Ms. Najiya Abdulghaffar

Your Highness,

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), expresses its deepest concern over various acts of harassment against Ms. Najiya Abdulghaffar, Vice-President of the Post Office Trade Union, affiliated to the Bahrain General Federation of Trade Unions (BGFTU).

According to the information received, on March 19, 2008, Ms. Abdulghaffar was informed that a new investigation on her activities had been initiated. It is the sixth investigation that has been launched against her since her election as Vice-President of the trade union in 2003.

Ms. Abdulghaffar was subsequently summoned to appear before the investigation committee of the post office on March 30, 2008. The outcome of this interrogation remains unknown, but the Observatory strongly fears that Ms. Abdulghaffar might be once again sanctioned because of her human rights activities.

In 2003, Ms. Abdulghaffar had addressed a letter to the Minister of Social Affairs, outlining the various problems faced by post office workers. This was followed by a petition signed by 200 workers supporting the activities of the newly-created trade union. At that time, all the employees who signed this petition - including Ms. Abdulghaffar - were threatened with dismissal and with promotion freezing. Ms. Abdulghaffar related these abuses to the press through various press releases and interviews in 2006 and 2007, in which she also mentioned the problems faced by post office workers, infringements to trade-union freedom as well as the constant discrimination and harassment against the members of her union in terms of pay rise, workload, and relocation.

Since then, the post administration has almost systematically resorted to measures of intimidation against her as a reaction to the publication of her interventions in the media or to the exercise of her fundamental freedoms:

- on October 17, 2006, she received a warning letter from the assistant of the Post Office Under Secretary, threatening her with suspension of salary for three days, as a reaction to her press releases of August 2006;

- on November 23, 2006, she was summoned to appear before an investigation committee for a discussion on her press articles as well as her trade union activities. The committee decided to suspend her salary and professional activities for three days (from January 23 to 25, 2007);

- on July 23 and October 10, 2007, she was again called before the investigation committee to explain herself on the information she published in the press in 2007;

- on January 14, 2008, another session of the investigation committee accused her of "wasting time" and "disobeying orders";

- on January 28, 2008, she was accused before the same body of "attending a solidarity picket in support of trade unions". As a consequence, she was suspended from work for 10 days (from February 9 to 14 and 16 to 19, 2008).

In addition, all contacts between her and other employees have been banned by the post office administration since 2006. Her telephone and computer were also removed from her office, and the administration decided to stop giving her work duties.

At the end of 2007, Ms. Abdulghaffar was given a bad evaluation mark from her employers, who decided to freeze her salary indefinitely.

The Observatory denounces these acts of continuing harassment against Ms. Abdulghaffar, and deplores the situation of trade-union freedom in Bahrain, in a context of a degradation of fundamental freedoms.

The Observatory further recalls that as a member of the Human Rights Council from June 2006 to June 2007, Bahrain had committed to "uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights". A few days ahead of the review of the human rights record of Bahrain through the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, the Observatory demands that the Bahraini authorities refrain immediately, permanently and unconditionally from any form of harassment against all human rights defenders, and conform in all circumstances with international human rights standards.

Accordingly, the Observatory urges the Bahraini authorities to guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Ms. Abdulghaffar and of all the members of the post office trade union, as well as to put an end to all forms of harassment against Ms. Abdulghaffar and human rights defenders in Bahrain.

Furthermore, the Observatory calls upon the Bahraini authorities to conform with the provisions of the UN Declaration on

Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1998, in particular its Article 1, which provides that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels", its Article 6 (b), which reads that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others [...] freely to publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms, Article 11, which states that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to the lawful exercise of his or her occupation or profession", as well as Article 12(1) that provides "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to participate in peaceful activities against violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms".

More generally, the Observatory calls upon the Bahraini authorities to ensure in all circumstances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments ratified by Bahrain.

In the hope that you will take these considerations into account,

Yours sincerely,
Souhayr Belhassen, FIDH President
Eric Sottas, OMCT Secretary General

Arbitrary detentions, torture, Al Khalifa records tested

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Saturday and is intended to attract attention to the fate of the political prisoners who are being held at various detention centres.

The Al Khalifa rulers are now seeking revenge for their fiasco at Geneva, where their crimes against the people of Bahrain have, this week, been exposed to the world. They have spent more than one million dollars in bribes and public relations to counter the opposition's efforts that had succeeded in presenting the true picture of the regime to the world. It is expected that the ruling family will face more scrutiny for its dismal records on human rights.

*Bahrain Freedom Movement
9th April 2008*