

BAHRAIN

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

Millions paid to lobbyists to misinform the public about real Bahrain

It is naïve to view the situation in Bahrain as one in which a small group of disenchanted citizens are attempting to destabilise a political regime intent on openness and political reform. This is not true for several reasons. First the people of Bahrain, unlike other people in the Gulf, have a long history of opposition to the ruling Al Khalifa family, extending back in history to the beginning of the last century. Successive British administrations in the Gulf region were bogged down by the intractable situation in this Gulf island and had persistently failed to help the people to achieve their political goals. Second, the dilemma has worsened in recent years as some sectors of the opposition were lured into working within "the system". Large sections have however refused to be dragged into this dirty quagmire and preferred to watch the scene from a distance.

It is not a satisfactory situation but one that has the ingredients of potentially serious crisis that could engulf the country anytime. The ruling family has adopted policies that are clearly directed to inflict maximum damage on the opposition, but it has failed to stem the rise in its unpopularity. Bahraini people today feel that they are separated by an ocean of hatred from the Al Khalifa who have hitherto failed to realise that these feelings could turn into an unstoppable political tsunami. The ruling family may have succeeded in splitting the opposition, but it has incurred a bigger failure by not matching it with realistic alternatives and satisfactory solutions to the problems of people such as poverty, employment, housing and general freedoms.

Among the destructive mistakes of the Al Khalifa are two. First its failure to uphold the country's 1973 Constitution which had been considered as the only source of constitutional and popular legitimacy. Second is its attempts to alter the demographic balance in a country that can hardly cope up with the continuous influx of foreigners with its endemic shortages of living space. When the ruler, Sheikh Hamad, imposed his tailor-made constitution on 14th February 2002, he failed to realise that the people of Bahrain had decades of opposition behind them and could not be lured into meaningless ventures. The subsequent political experiment was doomed from the start. The reaction by the ruling family was to order

elections based on that constitution, anchoring its hopes on the people's lack of appetite for more political instability. The past seven years have shown that he could not have been further from reality. Indeed some sections of the opposition may have joined Sheikh Hamad's bandwagon, but for how long? The situation in Bahrain has continued on the same political trajectory that had defeated earlier leaders since 1920s. For the past three decades, for example, almost every December had witnessed one form or another of political uprising, sometimes in the form of what had been perceived as a "government-conceived" coup attempts, and at others, people's uprising against the dictatorial rule of the Al Khalifa. In either case, the situation had remained tense and had often spiralled out of control. After years of plotting to undermine the united opposition, the ruling family managed to lure some political groups into its political process, but the opposition has remained largely outside the pseudo-parliamentary process.

Instead of strengthening the positions of those who had taken part in the 2006 elections by granting them more powers and enabling them to present to their constituents a viable alternative to real opposition, the ruling family has sought not to appease Al Wefaq, and, instead, insisted on its policies of dragging everyone behind its misconceived policies. Those who decided to work within the official frameworks and declared allegiance to Sheikh Hamad's constitution, have exposed themselves to unlimited accusations and questioning. On the other hand, those who had continued their stands of opposition and civil resistance have gained more respect from the general public. Today, people like Hassan Mushaime' (the President of Haq Movement), Mr Abdul Wahab Hussain and other nationalists and Islamists are enjoying international and local support for standing up to the challenges of the tyranny. The argument today is not whether to be involved in a political programme that has exhibited every sign of institutionalising hereditary dictatorship and inflicting maximum damage on the fabric of the Bahraini society. In the age of enlightenment and democracy, forces of

change must not give up struggle to end despotism and dictatorship.

As the month of December approaches, the people of Bahrain start to ponder on the historical significance of the past events that had taken place in this period. Last year, for example, the death squads killed a young Bahraini, Ali Jassim, who was 22 while he was taking part in a peaceful demonstration to commemorate two martyrs who had fallen on 17th December 1994. None of the killers of Bahrainis has ever been arrested or brought to justice. The impunity of these killers and torturers has encouraged other criminals to continue torturing Bahrainis. Throughout the year political prisoners have detailed their ordeals as they were brought to kangaroo courts. The judges, who are often members of the ruling family, have ignored their pleas of innocence and claims of torture. The prisoners exhibited their wounds to the judges but were repeatedly ignored. Scores of victims of repression and dictatorship have remained behind bars without trials or due process of law.

Boycotting the regime is thus not a passive step as a result of ignorance or arrogance but is part of a political process that has started soon after the ruler imposed his constitution in 2002. Over the past six years several Bahrainis were killed by the death squads and hundreds imprisoned and tortured. The ruling family has sought to silence opposition through intimidation, containment or cooption. It has recruited several Public Relations and Lobbying companies especially in UK and USA. Millions of dollars of people's wealth have been plundered by the ruling family as it sought to silence opposition or mis-inform those in positions of power in the world. The recent briefing at the US Senate about the discriminatory policies of the Al Khalifa against the majority of Bahrainis has infuriated the hereditary dictatorship to the extent that its officials hurried to sign a multi-million deal with a US lobbying firm, Patton Boggs under the directorship of Senator Tommy Boggs. It is yet another sign of the despair of the Al Khalifa. The struggle will thus continue between the pro-democracy activists and their freedom-loving supporters, and the hereditary dictatorship whose time appears to be running out.

Angry Al Khalifa lambasts UK over asylum

The appointment of yet another member of the ruling family to a ministerial post has increased the share of the Al Khalifa in the government to 18 out of 29 (24 cabinet ministers and five senior posts with ministerial status). Mai Al Khalifa has been appointed minister of information replacing Ahmad Bu Kamal who had spent less than a year in his post. The reason is simple. A member of a political society, Ibrahim Sharif, mentioned in a television interview the budget of the ruler saying that the 1973 Constitution had specified the budget at 6 million Bahrain Dinars. Since 2000, the budget has been off record and no one knows how much it is now. The ruler now controls the whole oil income with no limit to his expenditure. The minister was summarily sacked and replaced by Mai Al Khalifa, a female member of the ruling family. Since Sheikh Hamad rose to power in 1999, he increased his family's share in the cabinet from one third to almost two thirds at the expense of the share of non-Al Khalifa members. He has enforced a stringent policy of occupation unseen before.

As the Day of the Martyrs approaches, preparations are underway to mark the 17th of December with great enthusiasm and determination to turn it into a national struggle against the hereditary dictatorship. Writings on the walls have become common phenomenon and there are daily reports of pockets of demonstrations and small fires on the main roads. Riot police have been deployed in many areas in anticipation of major breakouts of demonstrations and riots. Last year, the day was marked on a large scale and a young man, Ali Jassim, was mercilessly killed by the notorious death squads which is under the command of the royal palace. A local demonstration in Bani Jamra on Wednesday afternoon to commemorate the death anniversary of the late Sheikh Abdul Amir Al Jamri was attacked with tear gas and riot bullets. Young participants were scattered in the surrounding villages as the smoke filled the air and caused breathing difficulties to many.

Meanwhile a seminar to highlight the people's concerns about the political naturalisation has been banned by the ruling family. The seminar is due in few days time but the hotel where it had been scheduled to take place was threatened by the ruling family of serious consequences if it was allowed to be held there. Discussing the ethnic cleansing policies of the ruling family has become a taboo as a policy of repression has now dominated the political scene in the country. The banning of the seminar coincides with the convening of a government-sponsored show conference on hu-

man rights. Only government-supported NGOs are allowed to speak at the conference while real human rights activists are pursued relentlessly by the secret service which is noted for its dirty methods of silencing opponents. The ruling family has been offering financial support to international bodies in order to silence them and prevent international condemnation of the bleak human rights record of the ruling Al Khalifa.

On another level, the people were disgusted by the news that the ruler's son, Abdulla, had been involved in "close personal relationship" with the singer, Michael Jackson and that he is now pursuing the singer for money allegedly owed to him, estimated at more than 7 million dollars. It is reported that Abdulla had paid millions of dollars to Mr Jackson to enable him to produce a single based on poems written by Abdulla Al Khalifa. The court case by him is continuing in London, with little sympathy from the public

for him. Michael Jackson was invited by the ruling family to settle in Bahrain following his infamous court case about allegations that he had mistreated a boy under his care in his Neverland ranch.

The foreign minister of Bahrain, Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, has waged an attack against UK for granting political asylum to few Bahraini exiles. He expressed his anger in an interview with a local newspaper, saying that he had contacted his British counterpart and complained about the decision to grant three young Bahrainis refugee status after their serious ordeals under the secret service of the ruling family. In the past seven years only three Bahrainis have applied and succeeded in getting asylum in UK. Earlier this month, two Bahrainis were granted asylum in the United States. The Al Khalifa minister has failed in his bid to influence the British decisions which are based on facts and figures and not emotions and sensations.

Bahrain Freedom Movement
22nd November 2008

Talking to the outside is a crime punishable with detention and torture

A state of shock and disbelief has erupted among human rights activists following the bombshell released by the minister of the interior against anyone who opposes the hereditary dictatorship of his family. Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, has threatened members of the Sheikh Hamad's councils who spoke at foreign forums with severe punishment. He singled out the appointed and elected members of these councils who did not praise the ruling family when speaking to international political and human rights bodies that they would face spending time in prisons where torture is a routine practice. He said that article 134 of the penal code stipulates that: "any citizen, regardless of his status or position, who attend without government permission any public meeting, seminar or conference held abroad, or participated in anyway in its proceedings with the aim of discussing Bahrain's political, social or economic conditions will be punished with at least three months imprisonment and payment of at least BD 100 (\$250)". The article adds that the same punishment applies if he communicates without permission from the government, with representatives of foreign countries, body, association, trade union or society for the sake of discussing any of what has been mentioned". These threats have been taken seriously especially by human rights activists whose work include communicating with international bodies especially those of the United Nations. The threats are in violation of Bahrain's commitments in accordance with the special conventions on

political and cultural rights and those on economic and social rights, as well the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The apprehension among international bodies has intensified following the court appearance today by Mr Mohammad Al Masqati, the President of Bahrain's Youth Human Rights Society. The ruling family has refused to recognise the society in line with its refusal to approve the Bahrain Centre of Human Rights, Haq Movement and other non-conformist bodies. Mr Al Masqati was forced to appear today at a show trial ordered by the ruling family and presided over by one of its members. He is accused of associating and management of an unauthorised body. In the Al Khalifa culture, activities of civil society must be controlled by the ruling family which ruled Bahrain without popular mandate. The victim, Mr Al Masqati, has refused to back down in his endeavour to pursue the issue of human rights with vigour and enthusiasm, especially as he witnesses the rapid deterioration of human rights in the country.

There is now growing fear for the life of Mr Al Masqati and other activists for their continued defiance, especially after the attempt on the life of another young citizen, Mohammad Makki. This young man had been freed after spending several months in the Al Khalifa torture chambers for opposing the hereditary dictatorship. On Monday night, 3rd November, he was targeted for assassination by members of the Death Squads roaming the streets in

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Article 19 Alarmed by threats to criminalise freedom of expression

ARTICLE 19 is alarmed by a recent statement by the Bahraini Interior minister, Shaikh Rashid Bin Abdalla Al-Khalifa, reported in the local press, calling for the enforcement of Article 134 of the Bahraini Penal Code against any citizen who attends meetings, conferences or seminars abroad or meets with representatives of foreign countries, organizations or bodies to discuss the internal affairs of Bahrain, without government authorization.

"The minister's statement is an attempt to silence human rights defenders and severely impedes freedom of expression in Bahrain. ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned about articles in the Bahraini Penal Code which deprive Bahrainis of the right to freedom of expression" said Dr. Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

Article 134 of the Bahraini Penal Code of 1976, states that *"any citizen, regardless of profession, who attends without government authorization, a conference, meeting or seminar abroad discussing the political, social or economic situation in Bahrain, likely to weaken economic confidence in Bahrain, its prestige and diplomatic relations, is punishable by imprisonment of no less than three months and subject to a fine of no less than one hundred dinars, or both."*

The same punishment applies to any citizen who *"deliberately broadcasts false news, statements or rumours on the internal situation in Bahrain which could weaken economic confidence in Bahrain, its prestige and diplomatic relations."*

This renewed call for the implementation of Article 134 comes amid increased state intimidation of human rights defenders in Bahrain, described in some local newspapers as "traitors to Bahrain". This accusation follows the participation on 15 October 2008 of leading Bahraini human rights activists, in an event in Washington DC on the "Impact of Political Reform on Religious freedom in Bahrain", as well as increased activity from Bahraini activists raising concerns about human rights in the country.

This climate of increased pressure on human rights defenders in Bahrain is evident in the most recent case of Mohammed Abdul Nabi Al-Maskati, founder of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR). The BYSHR "encourages and supports young people to learn about human rights and pushes them to participate actively in the protection of human rights cases, and the struggle to promote human rights among young people in accordance with international standards."

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Al-Maskati is due in court on 15 January, 2009 on charges of "activating [an] unregistered association before issuing the

The Housing Dilemma

One of the main duties of any government is to provide infrastructure services to its citizens at a level that responds to their actual needs. Of these services is housing, which represents the most important for all citizens. In a small country like Bahrain, land that can be allocated for such projects is usually scarce. Housing projects are therefore on the top of the agenda for any government that senses the difficulties of providing housing.

With the rising cost of land and building construction, more people are becoming unable to buy land or build their houses relying on their own income alone. In situations like this, government intervention and role in providing this important service becomes essential. However, the policies of the Government of Bahrain are contrary to this fact. There is a clear absence of recognition of the importance of housing.

While the Government spends hundreds of millions of Dollars to provide services for private investment projects, the housing projects which are supposed to serve the citizens are moving at a very slow pace. Moreover, the Northern Town project, which was intended to mitigate the housing problem in the country, is behind schedule by months, and a great percentage of the project has either been allocated to members of the ruling family or sold to private investors. At the same time, many of the lands available elsewhere in the country are confiscated by members of the ruling family and stamped as "Royal Property".

Political naturalization has also forced the government to allocate many of the housing units to those who came from different counties, while the indigenous citizens remain on the waiting list, sometimes for more than 15 years. Injustice went steps further by taking back keys from a number of Bahrainis who were recently allocated their houses after 16 years of being on the waiting list.

With no near hope of sorting out these problems, such practices give clear examples of the agony the citizens of Bahrain are forced to go through, and the dilemma they have to live in. While this agony continues, so do the attempts to confiscate whatever remains public land, thus eliminating any hopes of easement for the citizens in the near future.

Bahrain Freedom Movement
3rd November 2008

declaration of registration", under the Bahraini Penal Code of 1976 and the Association Law of 1989. This charge carries a sentence of a maximum of six months in jail and/or a fine of five hundred dinars.

This is not an isolated case however. According to reports by various human rights groups submitted to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in April 2008, "threats, ill treatment, torture, and all forms of intimidation and harassment have been directed towards Bahraini human rights defenders," in recent years.

ARTICLE 19 urges the Bahraini authorities to reverse this alarming trend of harassment against human rights activists and to repeal provisions of its Penal Code, specifically Article 134, which flagrantly violate Bahrain's international human rights commitments on freedom of expression in Bahrain and abroad. ARTICLE 19 calls upon the Bahraini government to uphold the human rights to freedom of expression and association as guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bahrain acceded in 2006.

Threats against talking to the outside world

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the area of Sanabis. An unmarked white car with three occupants drove fast towards him as he was walking along one of the town's roads. He managed to escape the assassination attempt by throwing himself away from its path. He had earlier testified at the Court of Cassation to confirm that he, with others, had been subjected to horrific torture for taking part in an anti-regime protests in December last year. Civil protests have continued with youth burning tyres outside the village of Abu Saibe' on Monday. Families of the political prisoners are also planning more protests and marches in the coming days.

This political activism comes at a time of heightened tensions as the annual Day of the Martyr approaches. This year's anniversary is expected to take new dimensions as the political crisis deepens. Last year, a 22 years old Bahraini was killed by the Al Khalifa Death Squads as he took part in protests. Meanwhile, more protests have taken place in recent days, with university graduates picketing outside the ministry of labour. The ruling family has failed to address the problem of unemployment despite the enormous gains from high oil prices.

Bahrain Freedom Movement
6th November 2008

FT: Hidden majority wants to be drawn into the mainstream

By Andrew England

Published: November 10 2008

At a scruffy compound in Karzakan, a village a short drive outside Manama, a handful of young Bahrainis work into the evening fixing cars. The sight of nationals in the oil-rich Gulf engaged in manual labour is unusual – and it is clear this group of men are not happy with their lot.

They complain about the lack of job opportunities, rising prices, uneven wealth distribution and sectarian discrimination. In Karzakan such sentiments are not unusual. The village is predominantly Shia, relatively poor and has been the scene of numerous protests by young, frustrated men. Demonstrations have been occurring in Shia areas throughout the island for the past couple of years, leading to cycles of arrests that then spark more protests. Most demonstrations have been small, with groups of youths burning tyres and sometimes coming into confrontation with security forces.

But on a couple of occasions, the situation has turned particularly ugly. In December a protester died at a demonstration that turned violent, with some blaming over-inhalation of tear gas; in April a policeman was killed after Molotov cocktails were thrown at a patrol car in Karzakan.

While Bahrain claims to be one of the more open and liberal nations in the Gulf, it has been dogged by allegations of its Sunni leaders marginalising the Shia population.

It is the only Arab Gulf state to have a Shia majority – with Shia estimated to account for between 60 and 70 per cent of the population – but it is ruled by a Sunni minority.

“The royal family use our money and we do not see any of it,” says Zuhari, a driver. “We call for development, for better living conditions and for our friends to be released [from prison].”

The young men insist they have never been involved in violence, but readily admit to taking part in protests. Key among the Shia grievances is the belief that their community is excluded from many top-level government jobs and a belief that the nation’s rulers are trying to rebalance the demographics of the country by granting citizenship to Sunnis from other nations such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Pakistan.

The oft-repeated Shia complaint is that none from their community are allowed to join the army, national security force or national guard and few get into the police force. Meanwhile, they claim, many of the so-called nationalised foreigners slip easily into the security forces and receive government-subsidised housing while others wait for years.

In terms of violence and arbitrary arrests, Shia say the situation is better than the

1990s, when there was broader unrest and a number of Shia were forced into exile.

Bahrainis also point out that it is a small minority that take part in violent protests. But Shia activists and politicians claim the discrimination is becoming more institutionalised, has noticeably worsened in recent years and could lead to greater unrest if the problems are not addressed.

Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and an outspoken critic of the government, says the percentage of Shia in high-ranking government institutions has fallen from 18 to 13 per cent in the past five years, while Shia have only five of 25 cabinet positions today, compared with seven out of 24 in 2002, with just two full ministers. Last month, Mr Rajab presented the figures to a US congressional committee and is warning Bahrain’s allies that unless the trend changes, there will be the risk that the small protests may spiral out of control.

“There’s a conflict between the Shia and the ruling family. It’s very clear and I did not say this before,” he says. “Whatever reforms you make will not be built on strong foundations, and with the crisis between the Shia and the government the whole thing will collapse.”

He says the discrimination is fuelled by a misplaced fear among members of the royal family, who see the Shia as a threat to their rule. Some say the situation has been exacerbated by the region-wide sectarian tensions triggered by the Shia-Sunni violence in Iraq and the rising influence of Shia Iran.

Still, few’s general agreement that there are few cases of sectarian issues among ordinary Bahrainis and mixed marriages are not unusual. Shia also dismiss questions about their loyalty, arguing that while they may look to Iran, Iraq or Lebanon for religious and spiritual guidance, they are Bahrainis first and foremost.

The government, meanwhile, dismisses any suggestions of Shia marginalisation and argues that the protests are merely a sign of democracy at work.

In response to questions about the Shia allegations, Jihad Bin Hassan Bukamal, the minister of information, says that 27 per cent of the police force are Shia. Asked about the army, he says the question should be addressed to the minister concerned.

“There is no discrimination against the Shia ... at the end of the day there are what we say [are] unseen hands trying to create sectarian problems in this nation,” Mr Bukamal says. “If you go out and find those protestors, just look at them. They are young, beautiful youth. They’ve been misdirected.”

He also dismisses the allegations of a programme to give nationality to Sunnis from other countries. “It’s not true,” he says. “It’s only what we say are false statements addressed by people with hidden agendas.”

The young men at the workshop, however, would beg to disagree about the levels of discrimination as they sweat over a dismantled engine.

One young man recounts how he and a group of Sunni friends applied for the army and police force. He was rejected, his friends accepted, he says.

And it is not just Bahraini Shia who point to marginalisation, but also some of the kingdom’s allies.

The US State Department’s 2007 human rights report says the Shia were “routinely discriminated against”, noting that educational, social, and municipal services in most Shia neighbourhoods were inferior to those in Sunni communities.

Shi'ites Don't Have It Hard in Bahrain

20/11/2008 WASHINGTON

Regularly slammed by the State Department for the way it treats its Shi’ite population, which represents 70% of inhabitants but are viewed as second class citizens, the **al Khalifa** Sunni dynasty in Bahrain has signed a contract with the lobbying concern **Patton Boggs** run by Democrat **Tommy Boggs**. The dynasty’s account will be handled by a team composed of Boggs himself and the lobbyists **Ed Newberry**, **Stephanie Peters** and **Peter Gould**. Their job will essentially be to say the Shi’ites are getting a fair shake in Bahrain. Manama’s representative in Washington had previously been the Republican lobbying concern **Fierce, Isakowitz & Blalock**, but with **Barack Obama**’s election as president Bahrain has deemed it wise to choose a defender with solid connections in the Democrat camp. Determined to burnish Bahrain’s image, **Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa**, son of the sovereign, **Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa**, has already kicked off a major campaign against corruption in the country, with help from the **Kroll** business intelligence firm.

