

BAHRAIN

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New year, new challenges to a doomed dictatorship

The new year has not brought much hope to the people of Bahrain, especially the natives. The month of December has brought more misery and tragedy to the people who have strived to lead normal life in difficult circumstances. As the time passes, it becomes more apparent that there are irreconcilable differences with the ruling family. The events of the past month have, once again, opened the old wounds that had often flared up in the last month of the year. While the people mourn their dead on 17th December Sheikh Hamad and his clique would often engage in merciless campaigns against the natives. They have been particularly targeting activists inside and outside the country. The country would thus be polarised between the majority who commemorate their martyrs and the minority who celebrate their dominant positions and unlimited powers. As the country becomes an open battle field between the native people (both Shia and sunni) and the foreigners-made-Bahrainis more victims fall and more misery ensues. At the same time, the economic situation is putting more pressures on the majority, while the minority enjoy the oil revenues. The situation is likely to become more acute this year as the situation takes new and more dangerous dimensions that could reverberate for some time.

It may be argued that the recent claim by the ruling family that they had "uncovered" a plot to overthrow the regime had surprised everyone. In flagrant violations of all international norms and conventions, the ruling Al Khalifa dynasty paraded Bahraini detainees on TV screens to "confess their crimes". On 22nd December even young people, including teenagers were forced to re-iterate statements prepared by their torturers claiming that they had been "trained" at a camp in Syria, later found to be no more than a house in a residential area, inhabited by people unaware of any of the Al Khalifa claims. Among the paraded hostages are: Mohammad Salman Yousef, Ahmad Yousef Al Sami', Fathi Makki Jassim, Mohammad Jamil Taher, Ali Jamil Taher, Hassan Ali Fateel, Mohammad Khalil Ibrahim, Mohammad Abdulla Abdul Hussai, Mohammad Jaffar Isa,

Mohammad Hassan Ali and yaseen Ali Mushaime'. A wave of anger has spread throughout the country as images of the severely tortured victims were shown in one of the worst episodes of human rights abuses committed by the Al Khalifa occupiers.

On 21st December a group of lawyers who volunteered to defend the Bahrainis against the Al Khalifa had filed requests for medical examination of the victims, but they have received nothing yet. Hafidh Al Mulla, one of the lawyers said that they had doubted the "confessions" of the Bahrainis that they had been trained to carry out subversive activities aiming at bringing down the dictatorial regime. He confirmed that the lawyers had seen signs of tortures on the hands and feet of the Bahrainis. They had been deprived of sleep and interrogated at odd hours of the night, often after 3 am. The prosecution department noted the concerns of the lawyers but took no action. Three of the Bahrainis aged 22-28 detailed their ordeal under torture. The lawyers also complained that parading the Bahraini victims on TV is a violation of Bahrain's commitment to the human rights conventions. It is a verdict of guilt outside the due process of law.

It is now clear that the ruling family has, in recent months, been angered by two major developments. The first is the rising tide of anti-Al Khalifa sentiments and protests inside the country. The first two weeks of December saw a sharp deterioration in the security situation with pro-

tests, demonstrations and widespread slogans throughout the country. This is despite the menacing presence of the foreign-staffed riot police and death squads. The second is the sharp increase in the amount of criticism it had been subjected to by international human rights and political bodies, the briefing at the US Congress about the discriminatory policies of the Al Khalifa and the convening of a major seminar at the UK House of Lords to commemorate the Day of the Martyrs. The ruling family's efforts to enhance its image have achieved little, despite recruiting expensive PR companies in UK and USA to market its political policies.

What added to the anger of the Al Khalifa is the recent decline of its democracy ranking issued by the Economist magazine. It placed Bahrain at 130 out of 167 countries. Sweden was placed at the top of the Democracy table as No 1, whilst South Korea was given the lowest ranking of 167. Bahrain is among the lowest ranking figures and is placed within the league of countries with "Authoritarian Regimes". This ranking, alongside the ongoing internal political strife and outside opposition activities, have caused a major psychological problems to the senior figures of the ruling family who had attempted to market their brand of dictatorship wrapped in "democracy" outfits. The UK, for example, has been targeted by the regime's media with fierce attacks for giving asylum to Bahraini activists. The alleged plot to "overthrow" the regime by 15 teenagers is also an attempt to incite the British authorities against the Bahraini opposition. The past six months have witnessed relentless attacks against UK for not believing the Al Khalifa in their claims. It is a serious defeat for Sheikh Hamad and his clique. The situation is bleak, and as the new year approached, feelings of despair and apprehension seem to have replaced hope and positive outlook. It is clear that there has been serious mismanagement of the situation and this could lead to more disastrous consequences to the embattled regime.



Bahrain's HR record bleaker, 60 years after the UDHR

Several calls have been made to participate in major demonstrations on the Day of the Martyrs, 17th December 2008. The Committee of Martyrs and Victims of Torture, which is the main organiser, has urged people to take an active role in turning the anniversary of the killing of Bahrainis by the Death Squads of the Al Khalifa into a Day of Fury in order to attract the attention of the world to the bleak plight of Bahrainis. Senior religious and political figures are taking part in those demonstrations against the tyrannical rule that has claimed the lives of many Bahrainis over the decades and continues to shed more blood of the innocent. The Day of the Martyrs marks the first martyrs murdered by the Al Khalifa on 17th December 1994. Last year, a young Bahraini, Ali Jassim, 22, was also killed, adding more significance to that day. None of the killers has ever been made to account for the crimes of murder or torture.

As preparations get underway to mark that historic day, pockets of civil resistance are emerging in many places of the country. In the town of Al Musalla, to the South of Manama, scores of youth went to the streets near the main roundabout on Friday 5th December to protest the killing and torture of the citizens by the Al Khalifa occupiers. They were confronted by riot police in heavy gear, who used chemical and tear gases against the unarmed civilians. Rubber bullets were deployed as the youth fought street battles with those mercenaries. Images of the confrontations have uncovered the use of illegal arms and a unproportional amount of force as the Al Khalifa occupiers attempt to regain their domination through intimidation and unrestrained use of terror. To see images of the confrontations, please visit: <http://bahrainonline.org/showthread.php?t=223097>

The walls in the town of Al Malikiya, in the South of Bahrain, have been painted with images of the martyrs and slogans calling for removing the immunity granted by the ruler, Sheikh Hamad, to the torturers. In the history of the Al Khalifa occupation of Bahrain, no actions has ever been taken against torturers or murderers despite the abundance of evidence of the use of these illegal methods to quell the people's activism and movement to achieve a degree of democracy and human rights. Some of the slogans painted on the walls refer to the policies of ethnic cleansing, political naturalisation and the lack of independent judiciary.

Meanwhile the lawyers of a group of political prisoners, falsely accused of taking part in the burning of a police car, have threatened to boycott the trial, pre-

sided over by a member of the ruling family, Mohammad bin Ali Al Khalifa, who has failed to head the calls for independent investigations into allegations of torture and abuse against those innocent people. Although he had called for the transfer of those political prisoners from the torture chambers of the investigation department to other cells, they have remained behind the thick walls of this notorious torture place. They have repeatedly exhibited clear signs of torture and abuse, but the Al Khalifa ruler, who is both the judge and enemy, has refused to order an investigation.

To the annoyance of the Al Khalifa senior figures, another Bahraini refugee has been granted political asylum in the UK. This has come shortly after Al Khalifa's foreign minister, Khaled bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, had lambasted the British authorities of undermining the rule of his family by granting asylum to political opponents. It seems that he is still unaware that such outburst of anger only

help to confirm what the opposition has all along said about the arbitrary policies of the ruling family. Instead of dispelling fears, such comments have only confirmed the suspicions of fair-minded people of the horrors that take place behind the iron walls of Bahrain where torture, repression, ethnic cleansing and discrimination, have been rampant.

On the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Day of Human Rights (10th December) the Bahraini opposition has urged the international community to take serious steps to stop the gross human rights abuses of the people of Bahrain. They have also called on the UN Secretary General to put pressure on the ruler of Bahrain to end his reign of terror and restore the constitutional life that he had repealed by this unilateral decisions and tailor-made constitution.

Bahrain Freedom Movement
7th December 2008

Serious backlash to Al Khalifa's ethnic cleansing

The internal strife in Bahrain is showing signs of getting worse on two fronts; the polarisation of feeling on ethnic fault lines between native Bahrainis (both Shia and Sunni) and the foreigners imported by the ruling family, naturalised, employed and re-settled. Last week, a young Bahraini was beaten up by a gang of "new Bahrainis". The incident happened near Roundabout No 19 of Hamad Town. There was a swift reaction on 12th December from hundreds of native Bahrainis (Shia and Sunni) who attacked the newly-built settlements in the area. Riot police were deployed to separate the two groups as the feelings and emotions ran high. Incidents of this kind are widespread as a sense of resentment spreads among natives who suffer from lack of employment and housing, while modern settlements are built for the "new Bahrainis". Many view this policy as a systematic "ethnic cleansing" aiming at disturbing the delicate demographic balance which had existed for hundreds of years. It also confirms the people's suspicions that their occupied country is being systematically abused and plundered as never before.

The policy of "importing" new citizens or as some commentators dubbed it as "designer citizens" has often backfired. In addition to social strife, there has been several incidents in which "new Bahrainis" slapped Sheikh Hamad in the face, causing him enormous humiliation. The case of Michael Jackson who was taken to court in London by of the ruler's sons was a severe blow to that policy. Sheikh Hamad ordered the immediate withdrawal of the case from the court as it exposed the extent of corrup-

tion of Bahrain's ruling family and how people's wealth was being plundered. No details were leaked about the settlement, but some sources have suggested that Michael Jackson emerged the winner from the case as Abdullah bin Hamad Al Khalifa suffered a humiliating psychological defeat.

The second case took place recently when Kenyan-born runner Youssef Saad Kamel revoked his Bahraini residency and accused the Al Khalifa of withholding bonuses, lack of respect and encouraging him to lie about his age according to Kenyan officials said on Wednesday. Kamel, who finished fifth in the Beijing Olympics men's 800 metres final, made the allegations in a Dec. 9 letter to Athletics Kenya. "This is to inform you that I...have decided to revoke my residency with Bahrain with immediate effect," it said. "I also object to the recruitment of underage Kenyan athletes by the Bahraini Athletic Association," the letter said.

"I would like to draw your attention to my first Bahrain passport which shows I was born in 1987, while my date of birth is 1983...This change was done to enable me represent Bahrain in the junior category of IAAF Championships which I declined because the Kenyan authorities would have raised objection." The head of Athletics Kenya, David Okeyo, told Reuters Kamel's letter had been forwarded to the Kenyan government, Bahraini authorities and International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) "for further action". He did not elaborate.

Meanwhile a solid programmed of action

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AP: Police disperse Bahrain protest

MANAMA, Bahrain (AP) — Witnesses say Bahraini security troops have fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse thousands of protesters demanding Arab governments take action to end the closure of the Gaza Strip.

The witnesses say a number of people, including women and children, were wounded by rubber bullets and others overcome by gas. The witnesses spoke on condition of anonymity fearing reprisals by authorities and could not give exact numbers.

Ibraheem Sharif, an opposition leader, says more than 10,000 people were attending the rally Friday.

Interior Ministry spokesman Maj. Mohamad Bin Dina denies rubber bullets were used, saying tear gas was fired when some demonstrators began destroying public property and throwing stones at police.

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sands of protesters in Manama, Bahrain. The massive rally, peaceful until degenerating into chaos near the end, stemmed from a call by Lebanese Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, who urged people across the Arab and Muslim world to demonstrate Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip.

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New Raid on Public Electronic Forums

The Bahrainonline.org and Shaheed-bh.org are among the well known state-targeted public forums in Bahrain. For more than tenth time since its launch, the Authorities have recently prevented direct access to these public sites inside Bahrain. The administration teams of these sites have reverted to provide different addresses for public to access their site, the last of which are 208.100.39.36 for Bahrainonline and shaheedawal.org for Shaheed-bh, respectively.

Bahrainonline is one oldest and largest public forum in Bahrain, as well as the earliest to be targeted by the local Authorities. It is an independent electronic forum and is a swift source of information and news exchange in Bahrain as well as a host for articles and reports considered subversive to the Authorities. During the first quarter of 2005, it was barred and its administrators were incarcerated and prosecuted by the Authorities on charges of inciting hatred but later released on bail and ban from travel after international and local protests. In addition to proxies, the site was so famous as indicated by the numerous access addresses introduced during that period. Shaheed-bh, or "Martyr" forum is dedicated for martyrs and victims of torture in Bahrain, and contains more offensive language against the local ruling Authorities, and hence its administration seeks anonymity. In addition to the news and articles, the site contains archive of those who were killed during the protests in the nineties as well as record of those detained and imprisoned since incidents of December 2007 and until this moment.

Electronic sites, among them these leading forums, are used by the opposition societies, human rights groups and societal organizations to publicize and advertize for their events and postures. They are also considered as an arena through which public views are influences, hence its participants were not only those mentioned above, but anonymously many of those also considered loyalists, if not governmental. There are over 535 local electronic sites in Bahrain in 25 different themes, of which 111 are public forums and 60 sites are allocated to villages and towns, whereas the Governmental organizations amount to 59. There are about 200 blogs blogging, mostly unanimously for security reasons (fearing the Authorities attack). Last year, a known blogger, Mahmood Den, was taken to court by the Bahrain Minister of Municipality for charges of defamation.

The Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), as per Mr Rajab, expresses its concerns about the persistent measures taken by the Bahraini Authorities to block flow of information by preventing access to electronic sites and popular forums. Such attitude is in breach of Article 19 of the CPPR conceded by Bahrain on September 20, 2006".

Serious backlash, *Continued from p2*
to commemorate the "Day of the Martyrs" on 17th December has been announced by the Committee of Martyrs and Victims of Torture. It includes a mass demonstration on the day, a visit to the graves of the martyrs and their families and public gatherings and pickets to call for the punishment of torturers. Sheikh Hamad had issued the notorious Law 56/2002 that had granted impunity to those involved in torture. Despite international pressures to repeal this act that is in clear contradiction to Bahrain's commitments under the Convention Against Act (CAT) that it had signed in 1998, Sheikh Hamad has insisted not only on protecting torturers, but in some cases, rewarding them through promotions.

In London, the Bahraini opposition has also planned an action plan. On Monday 15th December they will picket the reception party organized by the Al Khalifa Ambassador at the Dorchester Hotel. Bahrainis and their supporters will stage the picket to draw the attention to those "guests" to the atrocities being committed by the Al Khalifa against the people. On Thursday 18th December, a major seminar will be held at the House of Lords, called for by Lord Avebury, the co-Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee. It will be held at 11.00 am at Moses Room. Several Bahraini non-Bahraini activists are expected to address the seminar. To inquire about seminar, Lord Avebury many be contacted on 020 7274 4617, or ericavebury@gmail.com.

Bahrain Freedom Movement
14th December 2008

Lord Avebury reflects on last year's developments in Bahrain

Bahrain seminar, 11.00 Thursday December 18, Moses Room

This week Bahrain was hosting a regional security summit, and the Foreign Minister, Sheikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Bin Mohamed Al Khalifa, a close relative of the King like most leading members of the government, gave the keynote speech. He had the nerve to say that in Bahrain "individual rights are protected, and ...the fundamental principles of democracy, the rule of law, and economic freedom prevail". As we have noted on previous occasions, one of the principles of democracy is that the people have the right to change the government through the ballot box, whereas in Bahrain, the electorate has no right or power to dislodge the ruling family. The Prime Minister, the king's uncle, has held office as Prime Minister for 38 years, a world record. The king himself appoints all the Ministers, under a constitution that preserves the hereditary dictatorship. Another principle of democracy is that the majority decide public policy. Again as we have noted before, on Bahrain the Shi'a did constitute 70% of the population, but they hold less than 13% of the top positions in government departments. I say 'did', because the ruling family has a long term strategy of encouraging immigration by Sunnis and emigration by Shi'a, in a unique piece of demographic engineering that was reported by Human Rights Watch and others. In the census of 2001 there were 406,000 citizens, and this has leapt to 529,000 by the end of 2007. Although there are reports on how this is organised from reputable international organisations like the Islamic Human Rights Commission, the Asian Commission on Human Rights and the International Crisis Group, up to now there has been no systematic collection of the evidence, as I suggested when we met in August. I repeat: the conspiracy to change the cultural identity of a population is a crime against humanity that must be exposed, and the process of setting up a mechanism for receiving testimonies in confidence and publishing them on the web is now in train.

Collecting and publishing this material has to be done abroad, since freedom of expression is another of the rights which are not protected in Bahrain. Last week a writer and journalist, Maryam al-Shoroogi, was charged with sedition for an article she wrote on discrimination in public employment, based on her own personal experience. Whistle-blowers who report inconvenient facts are generally liable to prosecution, but we do know how the conspiracy is organised from the report by Dr Saleh al-Bander, a British citizen

who was expelled when he published details of the plan master-minded by Sheikh Ahmed bin Atiyatalla Al Khalifa, yet another member of the royal mafia.

When three prominent human rights activists spoke at a meeting in Washington DC about the exclusion of Shi'a from higher education and public sector jobs, they were branded as 'traitors' and 'stooges of the Unuted States' on returning to Bahrain, and the Interior Minister, one more al-Khalifa, called for the enforcement of Article 34 of the Penal Code, which provides that a person who criticises Bahrain abroad is liable to three months imprisonment and a fine. I wrote to the Foreign Office Minister who deals with Bahrain, Bill Rammell MP, and he said our Ambassador was seeking a call on the Interior Minister to discuss his Article 34 demand, and also the wider issues of Bahrainis speaking at conferences abroad. But the British Consulate in Manama is an accomplice in making it difficult for human rights activists to speak at overseas meetings, by delaying the granting of visas, as with our speaker from the Bahrain Youth for Human Rights today. This is not the first time our invited speakers have had delays in getting their visas, and as there is no record of any of our speakers over many years complying with the immigration rules, one is tempted to suspect collusion between the consulate and the Ministry of the Interior.

Our Minister said he wasn't aware of the coordinated smear campaign against Nabil Rajab, chairman of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and his two colleagues, who attended the Washington meeting. Human Rights Watch, IFEX, the network of free expression groups, and Frontline Defenders, have all carried notices about the threats, and its clear that the regime's plan is to intimidate human rights activists in the hope of silencing them without having to use more drastic tools of repression.

In the same way, the al-Khalifas use the monopoly service provider Batelco to

block websites that deal with human rights abuse in Bahrain, including the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. The al-Bander report also shows that large sums of money are paid to organisations running websites and Internet forums which foment sectarian hatred, and to GONGOs – Government Organised NGOs – such as the Jurists' Society, the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, the Bahrain First Society and the Bahrain Political Society. The regime is also spending money on a US lobby firm, Patton Boggs, to peddle the line that the Shi'a are getting a fair deal in Bahrain.

Unfortunately, it has turned out that the UN's Universal Periodic Review, which was intended to be the mechanism for identifying and rectifying human rights abuses in every country as its name implies, is ineffective. In the case of Bahrain, there were submissions from 12 'stakeholders' with serious criticisms of inequality and discrimination; violations of the right to life, liberty and security of the person; maladministration of justice and breaches of the rule of law; denial of freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and right to participate in public and political life, and the right to an adequate standard of living. But the report which followed doesn't have a single word to say on any of these matters. It simply repeats some of the minor recommendations made by other member states, such as that Bahrain be invited to inform the Human Rights Council in four years time what plans it has to pass laws for the protection of domestic workers, and that the draft press law ought not to unduly restrict freedom of expression.

We just held the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was the occasion for much self-congratulation. It would have been far better, to have recognised the insufficiency of the UN processes it has taken the world all that time to create,

and to underline the necessity of holding seminars like this, to allow genuine debate on the persistent and endemic human rights crises that still undermine many people's freedoms. The submerged half of Bahrain's population looked in vain to the new system in Bahrain, but until there are the fundamental changes to their own system of governance they will continue to rely on us to keep their flag of liberty aloft.

