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## After the Arab Spring: power shift in the Middle East?: Bahrain's aborted revolution

### Report

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# ➤ Bahrain's Aborted Revolution

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

**The uprising in Bahrain that began on February 14, 2011 has been contained but not resolved. While the immediate danger to the position of the ruling Al-Khalifa family has passed, the demands of the protestors have hardened with the failure of the regime to offer meaningful concessions to political reform. Caught in the crosshairs of regional and international geopolitics, the aborted Bahraini revolution and the crushing of the pro-democracy movement holds significant lessons for the prospects for peaceful political reform in any of the other Gulf monarchies predicated on a genuine sharing of power and control. Over the last decade, many scholars and analysts have tried to assess Bahrain's emergence as a major actor in the global arena by looking at such material indicators as economic growth, military expansion or demographic evolution.**

## REVOLUTION AT THE PEARL ROUNDABOUT

Bahrain has a long history of popular opposition to the Al-Khalifa dynasty rooted in policies of unequal and selective development. Periodic outbreaks of major social unrest have alternated with periods of détente in cycles dating back to the 1920s. The 2000s witnessed a continuation of this cyclical process as King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa unveiled constitutional reforms that promised much but ultimately delivered little of substance. In 2001, the draconian 1974 State Security Law that had provided cover for the suppression of political opposition and massive human rights violations was scrapped. Constitutional changes were laid out in a National Action Charter that was approved by an overwhelming 98 percent of Bahrainis in a referendum on February 14, 2001, paving the way for the return of an elected assembly in 2002, 27 years after its suspension in 1975.

However, the promise of a unicameral elected legislature was immediately diluted by the addition of an upper house of royal appointees. Low confidence in the sincerity of the political opening led to a range of political societies, spanning the ideological and religious spectrum, boycotting the 2002 election. Although most societies participated in the 2006 and 2010 elections, the former was marred by allegations of systematic fraud and gerrymandering, while the latter followed a heavy-handed clampdown on opposition and human rights activists. Widespread accounts of arbitrary detention and allegations of torture signified a return to the repressive ways of the regime's past. Meanwhile, socio-economic discontent was bubbling up, propelled by high levels of unemployment, the inability of economic diversification to generate sufficient jobs or economic opportunities for Bahraini youth, and popular anger at perceived corruption at the heart of government.

It was in this context of rising tension that Bahraini organisers planned a day of protest on February 14, 2011. The date was symbolic, as it marked the tenth anniversary of the referendum that approved the National Action Charter. It also followed in the wake of the popular uprisings that swept away the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. The inspirational sight of largely non-violent demonstrations defying political suppression and refusing to submit to the security regimes that had kept authoritarian leaders in power for decades was transformative. Emboldened protestors voiced demands ahead of the February 14 day of protest for greater political freedom and equality for all Bahrainis.

These targeted the regime's policies of fomenting sectarian division to inhibit the emergence of any popular cross-community opposition movement.

Although initially small in scale and predominantly confined to Shia villages outside Manama, the demonstrations gathered momentum after Bahraini police killed two protestors. They also migrated to the heart of the capital's Pearl Roundabout, close to the flagship Bahrain Financial Harbour. Ominously for the regime, the demonstrations quickly assumed popular overtones as Sunnis and Shias alike gathered in unprecedented numbers and chanted slogans such as 'No Shias, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis.' By the evening of February 16, tens of thousands of overwhelmingly young Bahrainis were camped in Pearl Roundabout and shouting 'Down, down Khalifa!' This dramatic escalation directly threatened the domestic legitimacy of the Al-Khalifa, and panicked the regime into a brutal response as forces stormed the roundabout in the middle of the night and opened fire on sleeping demonstrators.

As the protests moved into a new post-clampdown phase, the regime reacted by sponsoring counter-demonstrations to try to fracture the social movement confronting them. Thousands of pro-government supporters gathered at the Al-Fateh Mosque in Juffair on February 21 to declare their support for the regime. Notably, they included large numbers of non-Bahraini expatriate workers and naturalised citizens whose livelihoods depended upon regime goodwill. In response, an estimated 200,000 people (one in six of all Bahraini citizens) participated in a pro-democracy march to the Pearl Roundabout on February 25, as two massive columns of protestors converged on the roundabout to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister, Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa.

With the position of the ruling family clearly jeopardised, negotiations between the regime's leading modernising force, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, and the largest opposition political society, Al-Wefaq, commenced in March. Despite coming close to an agreement based around a set of agreed political reforms, the talks broke down, and on March 14 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) sent in its Peninsula Shield Force to help restore stability

in Bahrain. In reality, this consisted of 1000 men of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and a contingent of military police from the United Arab Emirates. They provided the essential backbone while the Bahrain Defence Force pursued and arrested thousands of people across the country.

A state of national emergency was declared the following day, which lasted until June 1, and there followed a brutal crackdown as the Bahraini government mercilessly pursued all forms of dissent; detaining doctors and lawyers merely for treating or representing detainees, suspending opposition political societies and arresting their leaders, and detaining a founder of Bahrain's major independent newspaper Al-Wasat, who subsequently died in custody. Hundreds of mostly Shia workers were dismissed from public and private sector positions for 'absenteeism' during the demonstrations. Widespread tactics of intimidation also included the destruction of Shia shrines and posters showing prominent Shia leaders with nooses around their necks.

Simultaneously, the Bahrain National Guard embarked on a hasty recruitment drive in Pakistan to augment its limited manpower with non-Bahraini personnel who had fewer qualms about opening fire on civilian protestors. Meanwhile, the bulldozing of the Pearl Roundabout, with its iconic monument to Gulf unity, represented a crude attempt to destroy the symbolic heart of the protest movement. With this act, the authorities hoped to prevent it from becoming an anti-regime equivalent of Cairo's Tahrir Square, but it noticeably failed to quell the sense of defiance among marginalised communities.

## **THE POLITICAL INQUEST**

Following the lifting of martial law in June 2011, King Hamad convened a National Dialogue and created an ostensibly independent investigation into the springtime unrest. Through these initiatives, the government hoped to begin a process of reconciliation with the opposition. However, their flawed implementation widened the chasm between the Al-Khalifa and their opponents by casting serious doubt on the credibility of the regime's commitment to reform.

Bahrain's National Dialogue convened on July 2 and ran until July 30, 2011. It began under a cloud, following the June 22 decision of the National Safety Court to sentence 13 prominent opposition figures to varying terms of imprisonment. The majority were committed to non-violent protest and many had participated in the political opening that followed the ending of the previous bout of internal unrest in 1999. Their imprisonment illustrated the gloved-fist nature of the regime's approach, jailing some of its opponents while simultaneously reaching out to others.

The National Dialogue suffered a credibility gap from the beginning. Despite winning up to 45 percent of the vote in the October 2010 parliamentary election, the major opposition group Al-Wefaq was only granted five out of 300 delegates. This was consistent with the overall composition of the dialogue, in which delegates representing all Bahraini opposition societies only constituted 11.67 percent of the total. The remaining participants overwhelmingly favoured keeping the regime in its current shape. Core opposition demands including redrawing electoral boundaries for greater proportional representation and creating an elected government were not on the agenda; nor was any discussion permitted of the nature or extent of the ruling family's power.

Al-Wefaq withdrew from the National Dialogue halfway through, with its own judgement to participate being called into question by critics. The Dialogue continued, and concluded with a series of recommendations, including one that the Prime Minister (rather than the King) would appoint the government. As the long-serving Prime Minister (in office since 1971) represented one of the key obstacles to reform, this hardly constituted a political concession. Nor did the Dialogue come to an agreement over the electoral boundaries, another major opposition grievance. Far from drawing a line under the unrest, the flawed process reinforced existing divisions and demonstrated very clearly that critical issues of political contention were simply not up for debate.

The National Dialogue partially overlapped with the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). This was established by King Hamad on June 29 to 'inquire into the incidents' in February and March and their consequences. Its chair was Egyptian Professor Cherif

Bassiouni, who led the UN Security Council commission that investigated war crimes in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Similar to the National Dialogue, the Commission quickly ran into difficulty, as a series of interviews given by Bassiouni appeared to prejudge its outcome and exonerate officials of any responsibility for human rights violations. His comments drew a furious reaction from Bahraini human rights groups and opposition figures, who pointed to statements made by members of the Al-Khalifa praising and (in some cases) inciting the security forces.

Doubtless chastened by the hostility to his remarks, Bassiouni surprised almost everyone with the hard-hitting content of his report when it was published on November 23. In a televised speech in front of the King, Bassiouni stated that the authorities had used torture and excessive force during its crackdown on protestors. He pinpointed a culture of unaccountability among the security services operating during the state of emergency, and accused unnamed officials of disobeying laws designed to safeguard human rights. Most notably of all, he argued that many of the protests did not fall outside of the participatory rights of citizens, and that he had not found evidence of any link to Iranian involvement, contradicting regime narratives that ascribed the protests to external intervention rather than domestic grievances.

## **BETWEEN REFORM AND REPRESSION**

In response, the King pledged to initiate reforms, and established a National Commission to oversee their implementation. Yet the measures taken to date have left many of the roots of Bahrain's political and economic inequalities unaddressed, and ongoing clashes between protestors and security forces have continued unabated, with more than ten protestors' deaths since November. The result has been the empowerment of radical voices across the political spectrum and the marginalisation of Bahrain's political middle ground. The emergence of radicalised splinter groups means that it is no longer possible to speak of a 'regime-opposition' dichotomy. Elements of the opposition are growing more violent, and calls have intensified from extremist groups urging the regime to crush the opposition once and for all.

Measures that have been taken since November include revoking the arrest powers of the National Security Apparatus after the Bassiouni report detailed its 'systematic practice of physical and psychological mistreatment, which in many cases amounted to torture'; legislative amendments that expand the definition of torture and lift time-limits for the prosecution of cases, pledges to rebuild Shia houses of worship destroyed by the regime during the crackdown; and the announcement of the construction of more than 3000 social housing units. Workers dismissed on grounds of political expression have been reinstated and charges against 343 individuals similarly accused have been dismissed.

While these gestures have opened up new pathways of redress for individual victims of abuse, they also highlight one of the major shortcomings dampening expectations of (and prospects for) deeper reform. This is that the changes rectify specific (or high-profile) instances of abuse, rather than making deep reforms to the structures of political and economic power. Recruiting foreign police leaders (ex-assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police John Yates and former chief of the Miami police John Timoney) to re-train Bahrain's security services may play well in London and Washington, but it leaves unresolved the structural exclusion of large numbers of Bahraini citizens from an organisation many perceive as exclusionary and deeply-partial.

These measures also do little in the way of empowering moderates among the opposition or in government, whose leadership is vital to building support for any future political reforms. Tentative moves to re-engage the political opposition lack real meaning while many of its leaders remain imprisoned. Perhaps most damagingly, the culture of impunity within the security services means there is yet to be evidence of any high-level accountability. A trial recently began of five police officers – none of them Bahrainis – charged with involvement in the death in custody of a blogger on April 9, 2011, which was attributed (implausibly) at the time to 'complications from sickle cell anaemia.' It stretches credibility to suggest that the scale and ferocity of the crackdown may solely be ascribed to the actions of (ostensibly renegade) junior personnel.

Accountability cannot be narrowly limited to those who actively carried out abuses. It must include those who ordered and orchestrated the crackdown, and follow the chain of command upward.

## WHAT NEXT FOR BAHRAIN?

Prospects for building a national consensus around reform are further dampened by evidence of growing radicalisation of extremist pro-government groups. A radical offshoot called the Al-Fateh movement has formed out of the pro-government National Unity Gathering, which they accused of being too lenient toward the protesting opposition. Angry supporters of the regime increasingly question why it does not crush the revolt, and instead 'allows' unrest to simmer and damage the Bahraini economy and national image.

As regime support radicalises, the opposition appears to be fragmenting, although there always has been a divide between the 'official opposition' societies and the shadowy 'February 14' youth movement. Little is known about 'February 14'; a recent article by Ala'a Shehabi and Toby Jones for *Foreign Policy* described them as 'a confederation of loosely organised networks...faceless, secretive, and anonymous,' consisting of 'thousands of supporters [who] have abandoned the failed leadership of the country's better established, but listless, political opposition.' It appears they are the vanguard of the protestors who confront the regime security services on a daily basis. It is unclear if those who subscribe to its ideology are necessarily organised through coordinated networks, indeed a great deal of their effectiveness derives from the sporadic, uncoordinated and unpredictable nature of their tactics against security forces. They retain a capacity to mobilise and coordinate larger demonstrations, as they organised a march of over 100,000 people on March 9, 2012 in response to a remark by the King that the protestors only represented a tiny minority of Bahraini citizens.

Given that Saudi Arabia's ruling Al-Saud will simply not allow a fellow ruling family in the Gulf to fall, realpolitik suggests that a political solution will have to emerge from within the existing system. American

and British support for the Al-Khalifa as a longstanding regional ally is a powerful factor insulating the ruling family from the participatory pressures of the Arab uprisings. Put bluntly, pressures for revolutionary change in Bahrain will not be allowed to succeed, short of an (unlikely) game-changing development either in Saudi Arabia or in the current US posture in the Gulf. For the Al-Saud, the Al-Khalifa represent the weakest link in the chain of authoritarian monarchies in the Gulf, while its own Shia communities in its oil-rich Eastern Province are similarly subjected to political marginalisation and sectarian discrimination. Saudi policy is therefore predicated on propping up the Bahraini regime and ascribing its troubles to external (Iranian) manipulation, as this plays well in Washington D.C. Thus, escalating tensions with Iran could not have come at a better time for opponents of reform, as the Americans are not going to abandon an ally (and host of the US Fifth Fleet) at this moment in time.

Yet Bahrain finds itself poised at a profound juncture. It can either move toward deep and lasting changes to the balance of power between state and society, or the regime will have to rely on the use of force against an increasingly determined opposition. The challenge for the government is overcoming memories of the previous cycle of repression (during the 1994-99 uprising) and the subsequent partial promises of reform (2001-10). The longer the old elite remains unaccountable at high levels for the abuses of power over the past year, the harder it will be to convince sceptics of the government's good faith. Calls to violence by opposition and regime hardliners alike make any solution more difficult without a decisive power-shift towards moderate elements.

These depressing developments portend a bleak future for Bahrain. American pressure to halt the banning of Al-Wefaq last spring demonstrates that Western partners can use their leverage to mitigate the worst of the abuses of power. However, the prevailing reaction among US and UK policy makers was epitomised by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's blunt assertion in November 2011 that 'there will be times when not all of our interests align. We work to align them, but that is just reality.' Regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya will not be repeated on the placid shores of the Gulf.

This has implications for the other Gulf States should they experience an upsurge in protest in the future. Their commercial and geo-strategic importance means the West will neither abandon any of its Gulf partners nor make a stand on humanitarian grounds. And while this places Western commercial and institutional partners in a difficult position, caught between their core regional allies and mounting concern at the erosion of human rights and political space, the consequences for Gulf polities are momentous. Officials throughout the region will be observing how cracking down so hard has saved the Al-Khalifa, at least for now. But their survival has come at a very high price economically and politically, and has shattered social cohesion in a country polarised as never before. With a ruling family determined to swim against the tide of the Arab Spring, uninterested in meaningful political compromise and reliant on foreign protection as the guarantor of regime security, ruling elites will be absorbing lessons from the Al-Khalifa's crushing of opposition at the expense of their domestic and international credibility. ■