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BAHRAIN AFTER THE ELECTIONS

Workshop Report
March 2015



LSE Kuwait Programme

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2014 Bahrain held its first parliamentary elections since the anti-government protests erupted in 2011. With the main Shi'a opposition party al-Wefaq's boycott of the elections and the subsequent arrest of its leader Ali Salman, the role of the elections in determining the future of Bahrain was questioned.

On 21 January 2015, the LSE Kuwait Programme organised a workshop entitled 'The Future of Bahrain after the Elections'. Held under the Chatham House rule, the workshop brought together academics, researchers, UK government officials and civil society organisation representatives. This half-day workshop was organised into two sessions, each opened by a presentation by one speaker, followed by a group discussion. This report summarises the proceedings of the event.

THE NOVEMBER 2014 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

The speaker's initial presentation focussed on the following three broad issues and questions:

The results of the elections

What conclusions can be reached from the level of participation? How did political societies perform? How do the results affect al-Wefaq, the largest opposition group, who boycotted the election? How did Muslim Brotherhood organisations perform? What is the significance of the fact that most of the election campaigning focused on pragmatic issues such as services and housing?

The political strategy of the opposition and government after the opposition's boycott

How was the election boycott viewed by the Bahraini public? How significant are the divisions within al-Wefaq? Did the opposition have alternative strategies? What was the impact and purpose of the Government's redistricting of constituency boundaries prior to the election?

The role of the parliament in the future

What can this parliament achieve in the future? Will this parliament cooperate with the government? Is the Bahraini government's strategy to use the parliament to reach out to the opposition? What are the chances of political reconciliation in the near future?

Discussion

Several participants questioned whether any accurate conclusions could be drawn about public opinion from the election result, arguing that the government had manipulated the vote by changing the electoral boundaries and by pressuring people to vote through the mechanism of stamping the passports of those who did. According to several participants, fewer, centralised polling stations were used to give the impression of a higher turnout. One participant argued that all of the above suggested that the elections were rigged, leading to the question of to what extent were the elections rigged. However, it could be argued that simply by analysing the results and outcome of the election, one is legitimising them.

Several participants suggested the election was simply not an important event compared to what had been happening outside of parliament, noting that the Bahraini government had recently arrested two prominent opposition figures, al-Wefaq's leader Sheikh Ali Salman and human rights activist Nabeel Rajab. Furthermore, the parliament itself, unlike the Kuwaiti National Assembly, had relatively little power, and therefore the newly elected parliamentarians would be unable to push for change, even if they wanted to.

There was broad pessimism among the participants of the workshop about the elections being a vehicle for reconciliation in Bahrain. Though the elections were framed by both the government and outside states as evidence of progress and resolution, several participants believed the Bahraini government's strategy was in fact to use the elections to fracture and divide the opposition, aiding further repression. If this was the outcome then, it was argued, Bahraini society and politics are likely to become more polarised as a result.

Al-Wefaq's response to the elections and its future role in Bahraini politics was then discussed in detail. Several participants noted that al-Wefaq may well be pushed aside by more radical, youth-orientated elements of the opposition. This scenario was being made more likely with the Bahraini government continuing to arrest the leaders of the established, non-violent opposition. Hence, by emptying society of people that they can have a conversation with, the Bahraini government is empowering radicals.

Many participants drew attention to the recent announcement that Britain would be establishing a military base in Bahrain, linking it with what they saw as British silence regarding human rights abuses in

Bahrain. It was argued that the announcement would have an important influence on Bahraini politics, in effect strengthening the Bahraini government's position, while indicating to the opposition that they will not succeed in lobbying for international assistance for their cause. Whether and to what extent British diplomats had pressured al-Wefaq to participate in the elections was also discussed.

THE FUTURE OF BAHRAIN

The speaker's initial presentation focussed on the following three broad issues and questions:

Political deadlock

It is unlikely to be a political solution to the crisis in the near future. As long as the current Prime Minister remains in place, there will be little opportunity for compromise.

Economy

Broadly, the Bahraini economy is in poor health, with massive capital flight since 2011. Bahrain's attractiveness for highly skilled expatriate workers has also been badly damaged by the on-going protests. In addition, a continued low oil price would likely put a substantial strain on the Bahraini-Saudi Arabian relationship. Although government statistics note the economy is still growing, the accuracy of these statements can be questioned, arguing that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are effectively underwriting the Bahraini economy.

Security

On foreign affairs, the Bahraini government feels secure, with its alliances with the US and the UK, symbolised by their respective military bases in Bahrain, giving it a free hand to do what it wants domestically. The Bahraini government's repression of the protests will likely continue, leading to the long-term 'securitisation' of the conflict. This strategy will be aided by a plentiful supply of foreign, largely Sunni, military personnel, many of whom may be given Bahraini citizenship – a conscious political tactic of the Bahraini government to reduce the power of the Shi'a opposition.

The speaker argued that the status quo was unlikely to change, except in case of unexpected regional events, such as a regional war, a large increase in the protests

in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia or a significant strengthening of IS in the Gulf. Given these events are possible but unlikely, it is conceivable that sections of the opposition may attempt to militarise the conflict in an attempt to push for change. This outcome, some argued, was encouraged by the Bahraini government's repression of the nonviolent opposition.

Discussion

There was a consensus among participants that large-scale political and economic reform was needed in Bahrain but would not be delivered by the current Bahraini government or the newly elected parliament. Although some differences of opinion within the Bahraini government do exist, these tend to be strategic differences about how to best deal with the protests and 'how to share the cake between the ruling elite'. Focussing on replacing senior individuals was unhelpful, noted one participant, as a change of Prime Minister, for example, would not address the dysfunctional political system in Bahrain. One participant highlighted the difference between institutional reform and democracy, noting that although Bahrain had elections and a parliament it was still ruled by hundreds of royal decrees.

Regarding the economy, several participants noted that Bahrain was no longer in control of its own economy, its economic sovereignty fatally compromised by the Saudi Arabian intervention in February 2011. Today, Bahrain is a de-facto economic ward of Saudi Arabia. One participant argued that if economic sovereignty doesn't exist, neither does political sovereignty.

Several participants raised the possibility that the large-scale naturalisation of Sunnis may leave Shi'as in a minority in the future. This was also fuelling tensions and cleavages in the Sunni communities, the divisions beneficial to the Bahraini government, according to some participants.

There was a consensus among the participants that, moving forward, the Bahraini government was in a favourable position, fortified by the de-facto support of the US and, especially, the UK, and was likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future. With little opportunity for change within the formal political system, it was likely that sections of the opposition may look to more radical, possibly violent, tactics to push for change.