

Mar 7 2011

An Arabia without Sultans? Reflections from Bahrain

Silvia Peneva

By Neil Ketchley

The fences snake for miles, often with no discernable entrances. Sometimes they are ornate brick constructions, with large blazing lamps every metre or so. Often they're just anonymous metal sheeting or chain-links anchored by metal posts. Every year the fences advance, claiming more land. Sometimes you can see over or through the fence: a street with a tarmacked road. Last year the fence was on the other side of the street, the road accessible to locals. Now the fence has moved with no reasons given and no public notice made. Now nobody can use the tarmacked road.

This scene could be from the illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied West Bank. But it's not – this is Manama, the capital of Bahrain, and the fences are erected on behalf of the al-Khalifa ruling family who arbitrarily claim the land for themselves.

Bahrain, a small collection of islands sitting on the eastern-edge of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf and linked by a causeway, has no beaches. Or of course, it has beaches, but they're not publicly accessible. For the last twenty years, Bahrain's beaches have been grabbed by the ruling family or sold to private owners. Less than 5% of the beaches on the Bahraini coastline are open to the public.

A similar situation exists in the desert. Camping season (roughly the Northern Hemisphere's winter) is a big deal in Bahrain. Large sections of Bahraini society make the drive to the desert, settling around the gas and oil installations, the gas flares and the pipes that criss-cross the desert floor. Some set up camps there, with large tents surrounded by wind-breaks, made, when I was recently there, from the tarpaulin-like posters of various politicians who had run for the sham Bahraini parliament. The corporates are also in on it. With wind-breaks made from dried palm tree branches, the various state-run and foreign companies offer employees camp fires, restaurants and quad bikes. There are fences here too. When we ride into the desert our local guide points out the new ones: whole corridors of the desert sectioned off where previously people had been free to roam. Sometimes the reason evoked is to give the Sunni-dominated military or National Guard (controlled exclusively by the ruling family) more training area. Often no reason is given, just steely, fresh fencing.

Reclaiming land from the sea – key to the long-term development of the islands – is paid for from the government budget. The ruling family then sells off the land to private developers and pockets the money. Driving through the up-market residential areas near the capital Manama, houses are constantly being bought and then demolished. One house, near to where I am staying, has been brought by a wife of the King. The wife has had the land re-designated as being suitable for multi-story development. The house will be knocked down and then sold on to a private developer at three times the price of the original sale. Driving through Manama, you lose count of the large-glass fronted, corporate buildings owned by the Prime Minister or another of the Royals.

There is no notion of common ownership in Bahrain. Bahrain does not belong to Bahrainis. It belongs to the Royal Family, to be parcelled out through the various webs of patronage that run, often, from the Office of the Prime Minister, Khalifah ibn Sulman al-Khalifah, and the uncle to the reigning King Hamad ibn Isa al-Khalifah. No independent oversight exists. The Parliament, seconded to the King's appointed Shura, is toothless and has no real legislative powers.

The Bahrainis I spoke to talked of their hopes of Bahrain becoming a model for the Gulf. Not just a business-model – 'business-friendly Bahrain' as the visa stamp reads – but a model for a constitutional monarchy, with an empowered elected Parliament. Often they demand the resignation of the Prime Minister who has held office for over 40 years.

When I visited the demonstrators around the Pearl Roundabout two weeks ago, there was no sense of the sectarianism that is often pushed aside by the Royal-family controlled press and 'Bahrain TV' with its procession of apologists for the status quo. 'We are all Bahrainis' the demonstrators sang, as families lounged on the grass or sat in tents, women smoked shesha pipes and children ate their popcorn and pink candy floss. This inclusiveness particularly scares the land-grabbers. The Shia' are the nominal majority of indigenous Bahrainis and much effort is made in portraying them as an Iranian fifth column out to get the Sunni Royal Family. One particular threat to the family's power is perceived to be Sunnis joining the protests in large numbers. The British-trained Prime Minister is especially identified with this policy of divide and rule. Alongside pressure from the other



Protests at Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain. Photo: guardian.co.uk

Gulf States (and especially Saudi), the use of disproportionate violence and rhetoric of sectarianism early on may well have been to dissuade Sunnis and moderates from publicly demonstrating. Still, as one Bahraini told me, the unemployment and corruption affect everybody. The question is not your religion, it's how close you are to the people in power.

A few hours after I visited that demonstration for the last time, it was surrounded by police and then attacked with live ammunition, tear gas and rubber bullets. The state had promised the demonstrators a full three-day period to occupy the roundabout. They attacked on the morning of the third day – at about 4am. The demonstrators weren't prepared.

I made my way back to the roundabout, sneaking through a car park near to my hotel. The tents and sound systems were being ripped down. The cars of demonstrators, parked casually by the side of the road, were being towed. Clouds of tear gas still hung in the air. I only learnt later that a number of these peaceful demonstrators had been killed. New areas of Manama were being blocked off by then, this time not with chain-link fencing, but with British and American-supplied tanks and armoured personnel carriers. But something else much more important had happened that day: the chants had changed. I had heard it on streamed videos and via satellite television, but never in person, and over and over again:

الشعب يريد اسقاط النظام!

(The people want the overthrow of the regime!)

Neil Ketchley is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Government at the LSE. For 2010/2011, he is a Leverhulme Scholar at the L'Institut français du Proche-Orient in Damascus, Syria.

This entry was posted in [Bahrain](#), [Middle East](#), [Shia/Sunna](#), [Shifting Sands](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).