

# Bahrain: Change of the Regime or Changes within the Regime?

## The 14<sup>th</sup> February Uprising

Bahrain has been witnessing an uprising since 14<sup>th</sup> February 2011, the eruption of which had been signaled by a call on Facebook two weeks before. The call promoted two slogans: one, that the protests should be of a peaceful nature; and two, that the aim is to topple the regime. Both demands were in line with their precedents in Tunisia and Egypt, and with the popular

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expression “The People want the downfall of the regime” (*ash-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*). The call came from anonymous persons, but thousands of Bahrainis supported it on the Facebook group entitled “14<sup>th</sup> February Bahrain Revolution”.

The “legal” opposition, namely those oppositional political organizations that are licensed by the government, were perplexed but supported the right to peaceful protests. Two of them, both important ones, the Shia-Islamist Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society and the leftist Waad - National Democratic Action Society supported the call openly in order to avoid a possible rift with the so-called 14<sup>th</sup> February Youth. The non-licensed opposition groupings, namely the dynamic Al-Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy and the Al-Wafa Islamic Trend, were part of the group that initiated the 14<sup>th</sup> February movement. Hence, the

opposition of all shades was in agreement with the uprising, despite differences on the agenda and means of protests.

The first days of the uprisings (14–17 February) witnessed increasingly dramatic developments, which led to an unprecedented situation in the country. None of the concerned parties, neither the opposition nor the security establishment, government or the general public expected such a large turnout of protesters amid tight security measures. Tens of thousands showed up in defiance. Despite the peaceful nature of the protests, it was quelled with ruthless force resulting in deaths and tens of casualties among the protesters. The funeral of a victim at Al-Daih village east of the island's capital Manama on 15<sup>th</sup> February was massive. Thousands advanced towards the so-called Lulu (eng: Pearl) roundabout<sup>1</sup> in Manama.



The circle is a vital intersection of Bahrain's roads network, with empty areas around to accommodate thousands of cars. These areas came to the advantage of the protesters. They seized the roundabout and renamed it, in commemoration of the killed, “Martyr's Circle”.

The army and security forces waged a

<sup>1</sup> Its official name is the GCC-Roundabout (GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council).

### Mostafa Abdulla

Mostafa Abdulla (pseudonym) is a senior Bahraini human rights defender.

dawn raid against the protesters in the circle, killed more persons and wounded hundreds, including medical staff. Waves of protesters advanced towards the circle, and finally, after heavy civilian casualties, gathered there again on the afternoon of 19<sup>th</sup> February. The US pressed the Bahraini authorities to withdraw the army and called for restraint in the use of force. The ordered withdrawal from the circle caused the collapse of security morals, and the troops fled from the advancing masses.

The circle subsequently emerged as the public center of the uprising's activities, similar to Al-Tahrir square in Cairo. Successive funeral processions galvanized wider protests. With time, protests spread to other parts of the country, bringing hundreds of thousands to the streets. A new tactic that evolved in order to enforce demands was to target particular

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ministries or government premises, to move the masses from the circle towards these premises and to encircle them for hours. Among them were the Ministry of Interior and the Council of Ministers, which were pressured specifically with the demand to dismiss the Prime Minister.

### The Background to the Protests

It is the island's majority Shia population (accounting for around 70% of the population<sup>2</sup>) that has been particularly disenfranchised by the regime's discriminatory policies. It is important to note, though, that dissatisfaction with authoritarian rule, corruption, and economic stagnation cuts across sectarian divisions. Attempts to mobilize opposition go back more than ten years when mostly Shiites, but also

Sunnis protested against the lack of political participation and systemic discrimination and corruption during what has become known as the 1994-1998 intifada. The response of the government was violent, and thousands of protesters were detained and opposition leaders expelled.

At the beginning of the new millennium, then Emir Sheikh Hamad Bin Issa Al-Khalifa (who in 2002 declared himself king) promised reforms that would end the political repression that marked the 1990s and that would transform Bahrain's absolute monarchy into a constitutional one. Instead, however, he established a sham parliamentary system and self-handedly issued a constitution that monopolized power in the hands of the elites. The already existing discrimination against the majority Shia population that runs through all sectors of society was even more institutionalized. A consultative council that is appointed by the King can block any legislation issued by the elected lower house. Electoral districts were set up in a way that limited Shia representation. All these steps contradicted his reform promises and served to exacerbate popular hostility.

Within the framework of its controversial "naturalization policy," the Bahraini regime is pursuing, since a long time, the recruitment of Sunni foreigners (including non-Bahraini Arabs and Pakistanis) into the army and police and granting them citizenship, while the majority Shia population remains largely excluded from the countries' security forces. This policy has been deliberately stepped up with the uprising during the 1990s in order to avoid defections from security ranks, and has hence alienated the Shia population even further.

Both Al-Wifaq and Al-Waad boycotted the 2002 elections. In 2006, however, the opposition suddenly decided to run for parliamentary elections with the aim to change politics from "within", which led to the emergence of other, more effective and confrontational platforms for political opposition, including the Al-Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy, which

<sup>2</sup> The Sunni-Shia ratio may have shifted as a result of the regime's naturalization policy of Sunni foreigners.



came to enjoy broad legitimacy in the population but is brutally repressed up to this day.

### The Actors of 14<sup>th</sup> February

The forces for change were a blend of the 14<sup>th</sup> February initiators, political opposition groups, civil society coalitions, and professional associations and unions, mixed Shia and Sunni. Despite the broad diversity in nature, positions, agendas and organization, there was a general consensus on the need for a radical change. The slogan “No Shiites, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis” reflected the broad rejection of the regime’s attempts to portray the opposition as sectarian.

The forces of change can be categorized into two groups:

The first group was formed of the 14<sup>th</sup> February Youth, the unlicensed opposition (Al-Haq , Al-Wafa, and Al-Ahrar), and large number of protesters who called for the fall of the Al-Khalifa rule, and thus refused the dialogue with the regime.

The second group included the seven licensed opposition associations (Al-Wefaq, Al-Waad, Al-Minbar al-Taqqaddumi, Al-Tajammu’ al-Qawmi , Al-Tajammu’ al-Watani, Al-Ikha’ and Al-Amal) and those civil society coalitions, who demanded a truly constitutional monarchy and opted for conditional dialogue with the regime, after it meets certain preconditions and guarantees. These included the dismissal of the government and the formation of a national coalition interim government, the security of the protesters, release of all prisoners of conscience, and an independent investigation into the attacks and abuses committed by the security forces.

### A Growing Sectarian Rift

Apart from applying brute force, the regime moved to rally its supporters, mainly Sunni loyalists, for a counter-rally at Al-Fateh mosque and surroundings after the Friday prayer on 25<sup>th</sup> February. More pro-regime rallies and demonstrations followed in different Sunni-dominated districts.

Despite immense differences in size, sequence, and commitment of the opposition on the one hand and loyalist manifestations on the other, the sectarian Sunni-Shia rift increasingly threatened to divert the conflict away from its original course. Several sectarian skirmishes, both verbal and physical, occurred,

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in which Sunni Arabs that were granted Bahraini citizenship by the regime’s naturalization policy, participated actively.

This motivated the political opposition and Shia clerics to urge their public not to respond to these attacks, and addressed the Bahrainis at large to denounce sectarianism and to preserve national unity. However, the official television and radio, as well as Sunni sectarian channels and websites loyal to the power elite promoted and exacerbated sectarianism animosities and in particular anti-Shiism.

### Responses by the Regime

During the course of events, some important developments unfolded:

After its onslaught on Pearl Roundabout, the regime refrained from using force against protesters and the anti-riot police, which terrorized people and quelled protests, was withdrawn from the streets. On 22 and 23 February 2011, more than 200 persons, mainly

human rights defenders who were charged and convicted (including 25 who were on trial for very serious charges such as terrorism and plotting to overthrow the king), were released. 91 convicted activists remained behind bars.

HM King Hamad announced a gift of 1,000 Bahraini Dinars (approx. 2,600 US dollars) for each family, and the creation of 20,000 jobs. A grand plan to construct 50,000 new housing units in order to fulfill growing demands was also declared.

A partial cabinet reshuffle took place. Four ministers, including two belonging to the Al-Khalifa family lost their positions (Minister of Housing and Cabinet Minister); two Sunni ministers (Minister of Electricity and Water and Minister of Health) were assigned to other ministries; and two new ministers were appointed (a Shia Minister of Labor and a Sunni Cabinet Minister). The Council of Ministers promised to solve the chronic problems of



unemployment, housing and other social issues.

HM King Hamad also assigned his son, Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, to engage in a dialogue with all the relevant parties in order to achieve a political solution to the crisis. At the same time, however, the regime consolidated the National Unity Bloc (NUB), a loyal political Sunni bloc, in order to counter the opposition under one umbrella. The prominent Sunni cleric Sheikh Abdulatif al-Mahmud, who publicly denounced the protests as a "threat to the very existence of Sunnis", was appointed as the head, and all state support and patronage networks were rendered to its service.

### Socio-economic Appeasement vs. Political Demands

HRH the Crown Prince delegated envoys who met with the leadership of the seven licensed political opposition associations on 11 March, with a proposal for dialogue. They responded with their vision for this dialogue. He also addressed the NUB and several public associations, inviting them to submit their visions

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for dialogue. The major ones did present their visions, either as blocs or as individuals. There was a general consensus among the pro-reform grouping on the necessary preconditions for dialogue, as well as on the terms of dialogue for the collective negotiation process. The regime opposed to accept some of the preconditions, such as to dismiss the government, to form an interim government of national consensus, and to draw up a new constitution through the constituent assembly. The NUB responded by proposing a dialogue agenda that includes some reforms, but that neither comments on the preconditions nor envisages constitutional changes.

The positions of the regime and the opposition on the major issues were so far apart, and the gap of confidence, especially on part of the opposition bloc, widened so much, that the opposition started to seek international guaranties and welcomed a Kuwaiti mediation initiative.

On 6 March, thousands of protesters surrounded the Qodebia Palace, the Prime Minister's office, and demanded his resignation. On state television on the afternoon of that day, HRH the Crown Prince admitted the gravity of the crisis and offered his vision of solving it through dialogue with all parties, including

the 14 February Youth. Yet, his speech was short of an indication that the radical changes demanded by the opposition would be addressed.

He refused the demand to dismiss the government and to form a coalition government, and he opposed processions outside the Pearl circle. Instead, he stressed the need to satisfy the demands for jobs, housing, and other socio-economic needs, which could be met with the GCC Marshall Plan – a plan which is underway to support Oman and Bahrain to overcome the roots of unrest, through the improvement of living conditions, job opportunities and housing schemes. What he, and the other Gulf rulers, did not realize was that the root of the protests is a political one and a quest for dignity across all the GCC states.

### Between Negotiated Settlement and Security Crackdown

The race between a negotiated settlement and the security crackdown was accelerating amid grave risks. Three unregistered movements (Al-Haq, Al-Wafa and Al-Ahrar) raised the stakes after the exiled Al-Haq leader Hasan Musheme returned from his exile in the UK after a royal amnesty was issued.

On 11 March, at the Pearl Roundabout, Musheme announced the formation of the Alliance for the Republic, composed of Al-Haq, Al-Wafa, and Al-Ahrar. This happened in agreement with the 14<sup>th</sup> February movement, and fuelled the demand for bringing down the regime, instead of reforming it, among the protesters and the Shia community at large. This was contrary to the proclaimed demand by the six registered opposition associations (a seventh, Al-Amal, had joined the other camp) to reform the regime. The trend among the masses shifted in favor of those forces that brought forth more radical demands.

On the ground, the anti-reform camp expanded its realm and heightened its demands. Its followers occupied part of the Financial Harbor business hub, and closed the King Faisal road, a vital route connecting

Muhraq island, via business and government ministries areas, with highways and roads to the rest of the country and eventually to Saudi-Arabia. In addition to that, every day, a march against a ministry or official agency was organized to paralyze their functioning and to press for the demands. The pressure was intensified with the radical groups declaring civil disobedience. The Teachers Society called for the strike in the education sector. It was triggered by arson attacks that pro-security militia launched at Shia students at Bahrain University and other schools. The safety of Shia protesters and population was increasingly at risk due to militias and security checkpoints. The strike in the education sector was followed by a call for a general strike, issued by the Bahrain Trade Union. This, in addition to road blocks and security threats created a chaotic situation and caused massive economic losses.

Amid this frenzy atmosphere, the squabble among the opposition forces prevailed. The crown prince put forward a “last offer” to the opposition during a meeting with an official delegation of the leaders of the registered opposition. It claimed to respond to some basic demands of the opposition, such as the

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establishment of a representative government, a fair electoral system, a fully empowered parliament, and an investigation into the naturalization policy. However, it fell short of the preconditions, demanded by the opposition in order to engage in dialogue. These included the dismissal of the government, the formation of an interim government, the guarantee of the security of protesters, the formation of an investigation committee that looks into events, a new constitution by constituent assembly, and a time table for implementation. Bowing to the pressure of the radical groups and frenzy protesters, the registered opposition did not



engage in the dialogue according to the crown prince's initiative. The negotiated settlement slipped away, and the security resolve was imminent.

### **Saudi-Emirati Military Intervention and Crack-downs**

On 15 March, Saudi-UAE Forces, alongside a Kuwaiti naval unit belonging to the GCC Peninsula Shield (Dera Al-Jazeera) rolled into Bahrain across the Saudi Arabian-Bahraini causeway. It was mainly infantry and armored force that was deployed in key positions and vital areas. This was designed as a clear warning to the Bahraini opposition, and so as to free the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) to carry out security operations together with the security forces. The opposition did not realize the significance of this development. Instead of taking the initiative of clearing the roads and the Pearl roundabout voluntarily, they organized anti-Saudi protests and issued a condemnation of the invasion.

On the morning of 17 March, joint BDF and security forces, with GCC forces backing in vicinity, launched a massive attack against the protesters occupying Pearl circle, King Faisal Road and the Financial Harbor, and cleared the area in a "cleansing operation," according to BDF spokesman. On the same day the State of Emergency was decreed by HM King Hamad, thus granting the High Commander of The Armed Forces full power to use the army and security forces to impose security. Eventually the Pearl (actually the GCC) monument was brought down in order to erase "the bad memories," according to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Khalid Al-Khalifa.

This opened an unprecedented political campaign against the opposition, even the registered seven, activists, and the Shia community at large. The forces involved were the armed forces, the security, the intelligence and militias. Tens were assassinated, and hundreds were detained or simply "disappeared". Among those arrested were the leaders of the opposition, including Ebrahim



Sharef, a secular Sunni and leader of Waad; Hassan Mesheme, the leader of Al-Haq; and Abdul-Wahab Hosen, leader of Al-Wafa; as well as numerous political and human rights activists, physicians, paramedics, bloggers, and people of all walks of life. Officials call for sanctioning the oppositional associations, for holding accountable its leaders and cadres for their "crimes against the country and the

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people", for penalizing strikers by dismissal or other measures. A process to recruit expatriates in order to replace dismissed employees and workers is already in swing.

This is accompanied by sectarian propaganda attacks. Shia beliefs and the Shiites' loyalty to the ruling families of the GCC, particularly Bahrain, is being questioned, and they are portrayed as plotters, saboteurs and clients to Iran. One of the worst outcomes is the collective punishment of the Shia population and their districts. Operations of siege, search, arrests and attacks are in full swing. Shiites are even being threatened to be evicted from mixed Shia-Sunni neighborhoods. The premises of the opposition as well as the residencies of some of its leaders are being attacked and burned down by militias.

### **Gloomy Scenarios**

It is already grave that, despite the attempts of

the opposition to represent their movement as a national instead of a sectarian one, the protests are being discredited as a Shia-sectarian agitation. The other dangerous development is that the uprising in Bahrain is increasingly being portrayed as part of a plot mastered by Iran and the Lebanese Hizbollah, targeting the

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GCC region as a whole. Fancy allegations of secret military cells and arms are proclaimed by Bahraini officials and echoed in the Gulf. Gulf Air and Bahrain Air had suspended their flights to Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. Due to a travel ban to Lebanon, Bahraini nationals who visit Lebanon have to fear reprisals. Consequently, a campaign to expel alleged pro-Hizbollah Lebanese Shiites as well as pro-Iran Pasdaran has been launched in Bahrain, but might spread to other GCC member states.

Saudi-Arabia, on which Bahrain strongly depends, is not only supporting the oppression

of the uprising militarily, but is also pressuring the Bahraini King to contain Shia and opposition demands. There was a slim hope put on the official Kuwaiti initiative of Emir Sobah Al-Jaber Al-Sobah to mediate between the Bahraini rulers and the registered opposition (headed by Al-Wefaq) and to engage in a dialogue as envisioned by HRH Crown Prince Sheikh Salaman Al-Khalifa, however according to his terms this time. Eventually, however, the Kuwaitis abandoned their initiative as it was refused by the Bahraini rulers.

It will take a miracle to recover the national unity of the Bahraini people. The hopes for a constitutional monarchy are dashed away, while grim authoritarian rule will prevail for years. It appears likely that the opposition will be further marginalized and the persecution of the Shia population will continue.