

Bahrain's persistent troubles

By J.E. Peterson

■ Executive summary

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states appear to have largely escaped the turmoil sweeping through the Arab world since early 2011. But outward appearances are deceiving; nowhere more so than in Bahrain. The Arab awakening did not create the eruption of Bahraini popular protests in February 2011 but, given a century of grievances in the island state, it provided encouragement. The struggle between the regime and ruling family on the one hand and an increasingly restive citizenry does not bode well for the future. Muted criticism from Western countries has only stiffened the tough posture of the hardliners within the ruling family and generated resentment from a growing proportion of Bahrainis. Despite the initiation of a renewed, government-sponsored "dialogue", the chasm between the two sides remains as wide and deep as ever.

Bahrain is the poorest of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states and it has also seen the most dissidence and articulation of grievances of any of the six members. For most of the last two decades, its Shi'a villages have been under frequent or virtual assault and its young men (and women) have intermittently but persistently battled security forces in the streets. It is not a civil war and the situation is not comparable to the bloody developments in Syria, for example. However, the last two years have seen a ratcheting up of confrontation between government and opposition, and of the regime's noticeably harsh response of repression.

Recent developments in Bahrain are not the product of the so-called "Arab Spring". Instead, Bahrain had its "spring" during 1999–2001 when a new ruler initiated dialogue with the largely Shi'a opposition, Bahrainis in political exile were allowed to return, initial moves towards reconciliation were started and nascent political parties, termed "societies", were tolerated. The government favoured Sunni societies, predominantly Islamist, although some differences soon appeared. The principal opposition societies have been the predominantly Shi'a al-Wifaq and the smaller and mixed-sectarian Wa'd.

However, the door to further steps towards reconciliation slammed shut in 2001. The country stumbled through an uneasy stalemate until two years ago when a new round of confrontation began. This period saw a profusion of

demonstrations, the occupation of Pearl Roundabout and its clearance by brute force, the arrest of Shi'a doctors at the country's principal hospital, the arrest of leaders of a splinter group from al-Wifaq and their conviction of treason, charges and counter-charges of attacks on security forces and torture of detainees, trials of human rights activists and the emergence of Twitter and other forms of social media as a means of dissemination of information and for the organisation of protests.

Bahrain's uniqueness among the Gulf monarchies

The argument for the legitimacy of Gulf monarchies is that (a) the ruling families arose out of the tribal framework and (b) this aspect of "traditional" legitimacy is overlaid with the distribution of benefits from oil income (a social welfare system), resulting in an additional aspect of "modern" legitimacy. Although it can be said that this argument still holds true in general, considerable dissatisfaction with the behaviour of rulers and ruling families has been growing as existing systems have become corrupted and tilted towards the interests of elites. The growing education and sophistication of the citizenry in general has produced expectations of greater participation (particularly informal participation through, for example, civil society). Ruling families have been slow or loath to accept such demands.

Bahrain is the weakest link in terms of legitimacy in the Gulf monarchies. Its history differs from the other smaller Gulf states. Rather than arising politically from the indig-

enous social and political environment as happened elsewhere in the Gulf, Bahrain's ruling Al Khalifa family (or simply Al Khalifa) conquered the islands in the eighteenth century. They have ruled since then, in large part with the assistance of other tribes originally from the Najd in what is now Saudi Arabia.

In economic terms, there are almost two Bahraains. One is the glitzy ultra-modern world of luxury hotels, expensive malls, fine houses in new developments around the country and an extensive system of motorways criss-crossing the main island. The other is the world of the Shi'a villages, where government-supplied utilities, roads and other amenities are noticeably absent or poorer than in neighbouring Sunni villages. Bahrain's paltry oil production and the struggle to find alternative sources of income mean that unemployment is inordinately high, especially among young Shi'a.

Furthermore, the divide between ruling family and ruled is greater in Bahrain than neighbouring states. This is, in large part, because of the untrammelled status of Al Khalifa, the senior members of which essentially are above the law. This superior attitude and favoured situation have persisted throughout the two and a half centuries of Al Khalifa rule.

A century of political tension and opposition

There is a long history of political tension and opposition in Bahrain, which gives a gloomy continuity to the difficulties that persist until today. Much of the history of tension centred on labour struggles, such as strikes by pearl divers and later employees of the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) and other, newer, state-supported industrial concerns, in addition to scattered sectarian and ethnic disputes earlier in the twentieth century. (This is in addition to the problems caused by a large imported labour force largely from the Indian subcontinent, which has been a target of resentment by unemployed Bahrainis.) At the same time, there has also been a recurrent political aspect to strikes, demonstrations and articulated grievances. Familiarity with the history of political opposition in Bahrain is necessary for understanding of the present crisis.

The British-imposed abdication of the ruler in 1923 provoked the formation of a Bahraini National Congress that pressed the government for reforms and less British interference. Its leaders were soon exiled to India. A "constitutional movement" appeared in 1938, inspired by similar impulses in neighbouring Kuwait, with both Sunni and Shi'a representation and representing both merchants and BAPCO workers. Its demands were rejected, the BAPCO strike leaders were fired and some activists were exiled to India.

Organised opposition re-emerged in the 1950s when the bi-sectarian Higher Executive Committee or Committee for National Unity was created to voice long-standing griev-

ances and press demands for reforms. While the top British representative in the Gulf sought to mediate between the committee and the government, a demonstration in November 1956 against the British role in the Suez invasion got out of hand and the committee's leaders were arrested. Three Shi'a leaders were imprisoned in Bahrain while three Sunni leaders were exiled to St Helena in the Atlantic.

Opposition in the mid-1960s was orchestrated more by relatively strident nationalist elements, including the Arab Nationalist Movement, Ba'athists and Marxists. A strike against BAPCO expanded into a general strike, which in turn descended into violence, and a number of deaths occurred before the government regained control. Later, some of the opposition were elected to the new National Assembly, created in 1973 after Bahrain received its full independence. Government efforts to force more stringent security measures through the assembly received stiff resistance and as a consequence the assembly was suspended two years later and some of its members were arrested under the new security provisions. Numerous opposition figures either left the country of their own accord or were deported.

Civil unrest continued at subsequent intervals. An attempt by security forces to end a service at a Shi'a mosque in early 1994 touched off another round of opposition, this time focused on rural Shi'a with leadership provided by Shi'a religious notables as well as more rejectionist Shi'a underground movements. Demonstrations were overshadowed by outbreaks of violence combined with increasing government repression. The uprising caused hardships in Bahrain, deterred foreign corporations and individuals from remaining in the country, and compromised Bahrain's global standing. The situation was defused only by the accession of Shaykh Hamad bin 'Isa as ruler in 1999 and his active efforts to redress some of the grievances, to allow freer expression of differences in the media and to permit the free return of many of the political exiles. However, this "thaw" lasted only two years until Hamad proclaimed himself king in 2001. The incipient process of reform remained in stalemate until 2011.

A new round of confrontation (2011–2013)

The demonstrations of February 2011 were less the expression of a reaction to the so-called "Arab Spring" taking place elsewhere, and more the continuation of a long struggle. It is true that the occupation of the Pearl Roundabout was inspired by Egyptians' occupation of Tahrir Square and that popular uprisings elsewhere had an encouraging effect on Bahraini opposition. However, as shown above, there has been a long history of grievances and strong and often defiant reaction to government apathy or hostility. In a more immediate sense, the events of February 2011 and after were the natural, delayed reaction to the disappointment with King Hamad, who seemed to lose interest in carrying out real reforms after 2001.

The reaction of Al Khalifa to the renewed popular opposition in 2011 was extreme and focused on repression rather than reform or dialogue. The security situation reverted to the atmosphere of the 1990s uprising. Indeed, it was even worse, with indiscriminate attacks, both verbal and physical, on extensive numbers of Shi'a, even those who had cooperated with the government, as well as some Sunnis. The regime resorted to demonizing opponents, engaging in naked intimidation through an expatriate-heavy security apparatus, and actively seeking to delegitimise its majority Shi'a population, as expressed through extensive arrests and the destruction of numerous Shi'a mosques. Twenty activists were convicted of seeking to overthrow the state and sentenced to jail terms of various lengths, including eight years to life imprisonment.

The opposition of the past two years, as for the previous 40 years, has been focused in particular on the prime minister (and the king's uncle), Shaykh Khalifa bin Salman. Khalifa, who has become one of the richest men in the Gulf, had fiercely resisted any change throughout his career, regarding it as capitulation. He appeared to be virtually on the point of retirement with his nephew, King Hamad bin 'Isa, in the ascendancy before February 2011. It is possible that Shaykh Khalifa saw in the emerging unrest an opportunity to regain his position vis-à-vis the king, as well as to guarantee his son a prominent position in the government. Therefore, it seems plausible to assume that he arranged with Riyadh for (mainly Saudi) troops from the GCC's Peninsula Shield to enter Bahrain. In addition, he seemed to form an alliance with fellow hardliners, Shaykh Khalid bin Ahmad (the minister of the royal court) and Shaykh Khalifa bin Ahmad (the minister of defence), and to gain some control over the Bahrain Defence Force (previously the preserve of the king and the heir apparent).

The idea of a monolithic Al Khalifa regime should be treated with some caution. Indeed, many Bahraini observers contend that the ruling family has split into opposing camps. The heir apparent, Prince Salman bin Hamad, is regarded as the member of the family most willing to seek dialogue and thus resolution, as shown by his announcement on March 13th 2011 about a willingness to discuss parliamentary reform, naturalisation, corruption and sectarian issues. This initiative was rendered moot when Peninsula Shield units crossed into Bahrain the following day. The king's position is regarded as somewhere between his son and the hardliners. On the one hand, he defused the tense situation in 1999 by taking active measures towards reconciliation, and he has expressed a desire for dialogue at intervals during the 2011–2013 crisis. On the other hand, he abruptly ended any initiative in 2001.

One of the negative effects of the events of 2011 was the polarisation of many Sunnis and Shi'a into opposing and often hostile camps. In part, this seemed to be a deliberate regime strategy to mobilise Sunni support against the Shi'a opposition by inculcating the fear that the Shi'a wanted to replace the monarchy with a republic with Iranian help. Not

coincidentally, a government-inspired Sunni Gathering movement emerged as a counter to Shi'a organisation. Within a few months of the outbreak of the demonstrations inspired by the Arab awakening on February 14th 2011, a 14 February Youth Coalition took shape amongst disaffected and increasingly radicalised Shi'a. Apparently created to coordinate opposition activities at the street level, it remained completely separate in organisation and in goals from the Shi'a opposition societies. Wrapped in secrecy, the coalition established a pattern by which it would identify strategic targets and then alert its supporters by Twitter and other means to form flash mobs to occupy them until police arrived to arrest the occupiers. In the following two years, the coalition continued to act as an organising agent for street protesters and gained significant credibility with much of the disaffected Shi'a youth. As a consequence, al-Wifaq has been in danger of losing control over the more impatient elements of its natural constituency. Although the coalition seems not to have advocated violence, there is a real and worrisome possibility that organised violence may accompany increasing demands for the ousting of the Al Khalifa ruling family.

International responses and backlash

The situation in Bahrain has sparked widespread international criticism by media and human rights groups, even more so than the previous crisis in the 1990s. Indeed, concern has been expressed by individuals and grassroots organisations that would have been hard pressed to identify where Bahrain was prior to 2011. Western governments, particularly the U.S. and the UK, have mildly voiced concern. In retaliation, the Bahraini regime has promoted stories in the Bahraini press attacking the U.S. and the UK, including one in which the UK was accused of acting like a colonial regime. Hardliners within the regime suggested that the U.S., the UK, Iran and Israel were conspiring against Al Khalifa. The previous UK ambassador was snubbed by the Bahraini government on his departure from the country.

The U.S. government has voiced muted criticism in publicly urging the Bahraini government to do more to resolve differences. However, if stronger action has been taken behind the scenes, there is no visible result. Conventional wisdom holds that the U.S. does not wish to upset the Bahraini government (read Al Khalifa) for fear of jeopardising its access to facilities for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. In fact, it is truer to say the shoe is on the other foot. Bahrain sorely needs both the financial stimulation that the U.S. Navy brings to the islands and the political support of the U.S. in its attempt to place blame on Iran. Conventional wisdom also has it that the U.S. is holding back because such a course of action would upset Saudi Arabia. This may well be true but it need only be stressed to Riyadh that significant reforms are necessary in order to preserve the tranquillity of the state in Bahrain, to prevent the spread of unrest to neighbouring GCC states and to present a united front against external threats, all key objectives in Saudi foreign policy.

What can other countries do to help alleviate the situation? Stronger European pressure, both publicly and privately, as well as both multilaterally and bilaterally, may help to convince the Bahraini regime – including the hardliners – that it must take international opinion into account and conform to the rule of law. The alternative is a return to the atmosphere of the 1990s. Most notably, a chorus of extemporaneous and coordinated public statements urging the Bahraini government to carry out all the recommendations of the recent Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry and to institute equal rights and treatment for the country's majority Shi'a is called for. Such actions must, of course, be tempered by sensibilities in Bahrain and a spirit of encouraging cooperation rather than condemnation. The recently renewed prospect of a national dialogue provides a perfect opportunity to urge both sides to work actively towards reconciliation.

The immediate future

On January 21st 2013, King Hamad proclaimed a new initiative for a national dialogue. Such calls had been voiced previously by the crown prince, notably in March 2011 and in December 2012. The first died almost immediately with the dispatch hours later of Saudi and other GCC troops to Bahrain. The second was received coolly and nothing came

of it. Will this third attempt, with the weight and authority of the king personally behind it, prove more successful? Although al-Wifaq and other opposition groups cautiously embraced the initiative, other opponents derided it in demonstrations coinciding with the second anniversary of the February 14th 2011 action, calling it no more meaningful than previous calls and the abortive dialogue that foundered in July 2011. Al-Wifaq's provisional approval of a dialogue seemed to hinge on its demand that the crown prince take part in the talks, rather than the government's conception of its role as being simply a moderator between opposing factions.

In the absence of an agreed-upon framework for the nascent talks, the possibility of any progress in easing the deadlock is purely speculative at present. It is undeniable, though, that previous efforts over the past two years and, indeed, since King Hamad succeeded his father, have not borne much fruit. There is no indication that the hardliners on either side – the hardline faction within the ruling family or the 14 February Coalition and its intransigent street followers – are at all engaged in seeking a real dialogue. Without their cooperation and eventual acquiescence, there can be no reconciliation. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

J.E. Peterson, PhD, is a historian and political analyst specialising in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. He has taught at various universities in the U.S., has been associated with a number of leading research institutes and served in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defence in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. He is the author or editor of a dozen books and has authored many scholarly articles and contributions to edited works.



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