

SHIA AND THE STATE IN BAHRAIN: INTEGRATION AND TENSION

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Introduction

Up until recently, Bahrain was an archipelago of 33 islands, positioned in the middle south of the Gulf. However, figures published in 2008 by Bahrain's "Survey and Land Registration Bureau (SLRB)", said Bahrain is now an archipelago consisting 84 islands, which is a result of the on-going reclamations.

The total area of Bahrain had jumped from 695 square kilometres in the 1980s to 756 square kilometres, and this figure will also change in the coming years.

Bahrain is linked - since 1986 - to Saudi Arabia by a 25-kilometres causeway, and a planned 40-kilometers causeway had been put on hold. Reuters said in a report on 6 June 2010 "a long-planned \$3 billion (BD1.13bn) bridge linking Bahrain and Qatar has been put on hold... The 40km causeway was set to play a key role in improving infrastructure connections between members of the GCC. The project, first announced in 2001, had already been delayed in 2008 to change the project scope to include trains, and late last year the countries said work would start in the first quarter and be completed by 2015."

Bahrain either represents a special case in the Arab Gulf political arena, or it is nothing more than a microcosm of a bigger political scene that will be unfolding in other Gulf countries in the future. In either case, it is an interesting subject matter for political scientists and observers, not least the size of the country and the many issues and characteristics that have deep history and rich variety.

Bahrain is presently a cosmopolitan society with mixed communities. The Financial Times (FT) supplement on Bahrain (31 May 1983) described Bahrain as "a polyglot state, both religiously and racially." Furthermore, FT said "Leaving aside the temporary immigrants of the past 10 years, there are at least eight or nine communities on the island".

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Since 1983, Bahrain's society changed further in line with political as well as economic considerations. Politically, the Government of Bahrain, led by Al-Khalifa family which ruled Bahrain since 1783, embarked on the formation and enlargement of military sector since 1968 depending on people from outside Bahrain, and these were naturalized in the past decade.

Economically, Bahrain needed many Arabs in the education sector, and needed many foreigners, mainly from the Indian subcontinent, for the construction sector, and quite a good number of these had also been naturalized in the past decade.

Currently, when Bahrain is mentioned in the political news it is usually depicted as a country whose majority Shia population is subjected to discrimination, on-going protests some of which ends up with low-level violence, naturalization of large number of people from Syrian desert, Jordan, Yemen, Baluchistan and other places in a bid to change the demography of the country, etc.

All these news, whether exaggerated or not, shed lights on the peculiar aspects of Bahrain, whose current population is around 1.3 million, 48.3 % are nationals and 51.7 % are foreigners, majority of whom are cheap labour from the Indian sub-continent.

Within the segment of nationals, the Shia make-up the largest percentage of citizens, and though a mass naturalization programme has been going on for many years, the Shia remain a solid community sharing a common history and suffering from similar adverse political conditions. This paper focuses on historical and current aspects relating to the indigenous Arab Shia population of Bahrain, known as "Baharnah", and looks at their aspirations to be integrated in the national political process and the tensions resulting from a troubled relationship with the State.

Present Bahrain Society

Present communities in Bahrain may be classified in terms of religion and sects, and may also be classified in terms of their origin. Religiously, the vast majority of Bahrainis are Muslims.

While there is no accurate statistics for number of Shia and Sunnis, a closer look at the 2006 election results indicates that around 62 % are Shia Muslims. The government holds the official line of dealing with all citizens as equals and hence no official figures are provided in this respect. However, the Shia complain that they are subjected to systematic discrimination and are denied from assuming jobs in all military-oriented functions as well as in virtually all strategically important positions in public administration and in major institutions controlled by the State.

Bahrain's social structure may fundamentally change further in the next 20 years. According to a report by "Euromonitor" - see report by Andy Sambidge in "Arabian Business" dated 10 June 2010 – "Bahrain's population is projected to double by 2030, driven by immigration and a growth in expat workforce,". The report said "the Gulf state's population will hit 2.6 million, an increase of 102 percent compared to this year".

The report added that "Asians will make up nearly half of all the country's residents in 20 years time," highlighting that "the number of Asians living in Bahrain overtook that of the local population for the first time this year (2010) and the gap would grow up to 2030".

Bahrain and the Shia

Historically, Bahrain comprised the bigger region of Ahsa, Qatif (both are now in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia), as well as Awal (now Bahrain). In 1521, the Portuguese separated Awal (now Bahrain) from the rest, and since then the name of Bahrain specifically referred to today's Bahrain.

The name "Bahrain" means "Two Seas" referring to the fact that the islands had in the past two sources of water; Sweet water springs and salty water in the surrounding seas.

When opening any book on Islamic history as well as archaeological evidence, it is clear that Shia had been in existence in Bahrain for a very long time, dating back to the early years of Isla - see Al-Jamri (2008) – and the chronology of rulers may give indications on this aspect, as follows.

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Bahrain came under the control of the Qarametah (Carmatians) who were associated with Ismaili Shia between 894 to 1006, and when the Abbasid Caliphate regained control of Bahrain in 1006, Baghdad was then under the control of the Shia Buyid dynasty.

Later in 1076, a local Twelver Shia Al-Aioneon dynasty took control of Bahrain and the coins at that time carried Shia inscriptions, to be followed by Atabeg-Zengi dynasty in the period between 1239 and 1308.

Many Shia philosophers and jurists were known in this period, including Sheikh Maitham Al-Bahrani (died either in 1280 or 1299).

Al-Asfour Shia dynasty controlled Bahrain between 1308 to 1388. According to Al-Watheeqah (1983), the Al-Asfour ruled the bigger region of Bahrain (including eastern Arabia) for a period stretching to 150 years, but their rule in Bahrain had been disrupted, and some historians associate "Al-Jarwan", a branch or cousin of Al-Asfour, with the sharing in the governorship of Awal (modern day Bahrain).

After 1388, turbulent periods brought Bahrain under the control of the rulers of Hormuz, and in 1475 a local ruler, Ajwad bin Zamil Al-Jabri from Al-Jabour / Jabrid), signed an agreement turning himself as a vassal for the king of Hormuz, up until 1521.

Portuguese occupation of Bahrain started in 1521 and ended in 1602. And between 1602 till 1717, Bahrain came under the control of the Safavid Persians. Oman invaded Bahrain between 1717 and 1725, and following a short spell of instability, the Persia Shah Nader took control of Bahrain in 1737. Persia then controlled Bahrain until 1783 when the present rulers, Al-Khalifa dynasty came to power.

In 1820, Britain guaranteed the protection of Bahrain as part of the "General Treaty of Peace" that established British hegemony in the Gulf and to put an end to piracy that threatened trading routes to India. In 1861 Bahrain signed another protection agreement with the British.

Wilson (2010) explained that between 1870 and 1874, the Ottomans put forth claims to Bahrain and to counter these moves, further treaties were signed with the British in 1880

and in 1892. The then ruler of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa bin Ali Al-Khalifa, agreed not to dispose of Bahraini holdings without British consent nor to establish relations with any foreign power without British consent. A British Political Agent was assigned to Bahrain in 1902 (replacing earlier local commercial agents who represented the East India Company in the past) and the British signed a convention with the Ottomans in 1913 ensuring Bahrain's independence from the Ottoman empire. In 1916, the British signed another agreement with Abdul Aziz Al-Saud (future king of Saudi Arabia) protecting the independence of Bahrain.

During all these periods, the Shia of Bahrain experienced self-governance, invasions, occupations and rule by others, but nonetheless their social and religious characteristics remained strong with a sense of deep roots in the history of the country. This is specifically true for the Shia indigenous Arab population (Baharnah).

Farah (1985) – amongst others- refers to the “Baharina” (Baharnah) as the “indigenous inhabitants”, who were “of mixed Arab origins and constituted the largest distinguishable group within the total population”.

Farah (1985) also refers to British documents that estimated the population of Bahrain in the year 1829 as 60,000, with the Baharnah constituting 45,000.

It is not surprising therefore to find that historical references had always associated Bahrain with the Baharnah. Kamal-u-Din (2009), Al-Nuweidri (2004) and others indicate that this group of people trace their ancestors to Arabian tribes such as “Bakr bin Wa’el”, “Tamim bin Morr”, and “Abdul Qais bin Ofsi”.

Historical records agree that the “Baharnah” had adhered to the Shia sect of Islam for more than one thousand years.

An Historic Location for the Pearl Industry

Bahrain is located in a strategic position in the Gulf, and historically this location linked the places from Iraq to India. Historical documents associate Bahrain with fertile lands, fresh water, and pearls diving and all these had made Bahrain a centre of urban settlements throughout history. Some 2300 years BC, Bahrain was a centre of one of the ancient empires

trading between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. This was the civilization of Delmon that linked Bahrain to the Sumerian Civilization in the third millennium BC. Bahrain also became part of the Babylon empire about 600 BC. Historical records referred to Bahrain the “Life of Eternity”, “Paradise”, etc., and in before the discovery of oil in 1932, Bahrain used to be labelled as “Pearl of the Gulf”.

Bahrain was historically considered the most important island in the Gulf. According to Sinclair (1967), Bahrain’s capital, Manama, was a strategic city that had been mentioned as an important trade centre in the fifteenth century

Moreover, Bahrain was an important transit point between Hormuz and Basra, as well as the bridgehead for trade between Hormuz and Hejaz on the Red Sea coast.

Bahrain was also the centre of the pearl industry in the Gulf, and for this reason the island often attracted the attention of its strongest neighbours. Khesro (1989) points out that at the beginning of the sixteenth century the most important element of commerce in the eastern world was pearl fishing, which explains the historical importance of Bahrain.

Khesro (1989) indicates that the pearl divers throughout the Gulf were Arabs who lived on the coast, and it has been suggested that during the pearling seasons about 4,500 ships / boats were active, with more than 30,000 people working in this industry . According to Al-Qasimi (1999), the pearl seasons of Bahrain used to start in mid-May and last until the end of September every year. The pearls were then sold on board the ships, in Bahrain, Qatîf and other towns on the Arabian coast.

Many sources spoke highly of Bahraini pearls, see Barros (1946) and Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal (1853), as the pearls of Bahrain were associated with strength, purity, and clarity of colours, giving them natural beauty that fascinated many explorers and writers who visited the Gulf in different times.

A new research by Al-Salman (to be published) refers to documents stating that at the beginning of twentieth century, about 65 % of the Bahraini pearl dealers were Baharnah (singular: Bahrani). Onley (2007) cites that many of these Shia Arabs farmed the land in winter and dived for pearls in summer.

Bahraini Shia: Akhbarism vs. Usulism

Shia jurisprudence is traditionally divided between two schools, Akhbarism and Usulism.

Cole (2002) says it has long been held that the eighteenth century was pivotal in the history Shia thought and jurisprudence in Iraq and Iran (and of course in Bahrain as well), when the previously dominant Usuli school declined and the conservative Akhbari school came to the fore.

Although the Usuli school recovered and became dominant again in other Shia-dominated countries, the story in Bahrain was different. The schools differed on several key issues, primarily on the sources for Islamic law (Sharia). The Usuli school accepts four sources: Quran, Sunnah of the Prophet and Imams, independent reasoning by jurists, and consensus of the jurists. However, the Akhbari school limits the sources of law to the first two, i.e. Quran and Sunnah. Akhbaris are so called because they depend on “Akhbar”, meaning news and narrations relating to the Prophet Mohammed and the twelve Shia Imams.

Gleave (2001) analyzed the Akhbari school through the works of the Bahraini scholar Sheikh Yousif bin Ahmed Al-Asfoor (Al-Bahrani), who was born in 1695 and died in 1772, pointing out that this school of Shia jurisprudence took an anti-hierarchical stance, rejecting “interpretative practices” and manifested itself in a limitation of the role of jurists (religious scholars) in the collection and distribution of religious taxes, such as “khums” and “zakat”, as well as in the leading of Friday prayers and the demonstration of justice.

However, according to Al-Sitri (2010), that Al-Bahrani school can't be described as a traditional Akhbari school, rather it is a moderate version that started with Al-Bahrani (died 1772) and this heritage continued through other Bahraini jurists, namely Sheikh Hussein Al-Asfoor (died 1802), Sheikh Abdullah Al-Sitri (died 1853) and Sheikh Mohammed Amin Zain-u-Din (died 1998).

Al- Sitri (2010) said that the four Bahraini scholars represented “one school of jurisprudence, that can be considered distinct and different from other schools of Shia jurisprudence”.

This moderate school accepted a lower political role for Shia scholars, and this has been reflected in the fact that Friday prayers continued in Bahrain under the Akhbari scholars up until these days. Leading Friday prayers represents one of the major differences amongst Shia scholars.

Traditionally, the Usuli-dominated Shia circles refuse to allow jurisprudents to lead Friday prayers, saying that the leader of this category of prayers must also wield practical authority. Iranian Shia scholars lead Friday prayers since the success of the Islamic revolution in 1979, but this is because the scholars assume political powers.

The Usuli tradition of abstaining from leading Friday prayers continued to prevail in the Shia world (other than Iran) up until the 1990s when Ayatullah Mohammed Al-Sadr (father of the young religious Iraqi leader Moqtada Al-Sadr) led Friday prayers and established a wide influence in Iraq that persisted well after his death. Later on, another Usuli Shia jurisprudent, Ayatullah Seyyed Mohammed Hussain Fadlallah also established Friday prayers in Lebanon.

However, in the case of Bahrain, Friday prayers had continued for centuries uninterrupted, due to the fact that these prayers were led by Akhbari Shia scholars who allowed the establishment of Friday prayers even if the religious scholars wield no political power.

Being an Akhbari-oriented Shia society, Bahrain religious scholars played a different role in public life generally characterized by a “quietist approach” that preferred to dampen conflicts and to focus on religious affairs and moral issues. However, as in other Muslim societies, religious scholars are to be found in all major events, either participating in leading movements, or in expressing their opposition views, whenever the scholars deem their silence to be threatening deeply held religious and / or social values.

Presently, the boundaries between Usuli and Akhbari schools are blurred, but the roots of the polemic between the two schools are manifested in the orientations of religious scholars. There are several reasons for the blurring of boundaries.

To start with, the last heavy-weight jurist, Sheikh Mohammed Amin Zain-u-Din, died in 1998, leaving a vacuum that had not yet been filled. The senior Bahraini Shia clerics who received religious permissions from Zain-u-Din resorted to other jurists in the holy cities of Najaf (Iraq) and Qum (Iran) to continue providing services for their community.

Moreover, senior Bahraini clerics who followed the Akhbari school couldn't be replenished by younger ones and as they aged or died, the younger clerics who studied in the holy cities of Najaf and Qum followed – by default – the Usuli school that dominates the Shia religious circles.

Impact of British-imposed reforms of 1923

The year 1923 represents a turning point in the politics of Bahrain, for in this year Britain intervened to re-arrange the political system and introduce a central local administration.

However, Britain's involvement in Bahraini affairs goes back to the early part of the nineteenth century. Wilson (2010) affirms that "British activity in the Gulf goes back to the time of the East India Company in seventeenth century when early trading links were established as the Company built up its activity in India. Britain was keen to forestall increased Ottoman activity in this region as well as Russian and French expansion/influence that would threaten India". He also reiterates that "direct relations between Britain and Bahrain go back to about 1814 when Britain gave promises to the Al-Khalifa that the British would remain neutral in Bahrain's disputes with Oman. Omanis had made various attempts to take Bahrain, and continued to do so up until 1828. Egyptian forces withdrew from the area in 1819 and this paved the way for our first treaty with Bahrain and other Gulf sheikdoms in 1820".

Various additional maritime truces were put in place and the British Indian navy enforced this “trucial system”.

For more than a century before 1923, as Farah (1985) explains “Tribal traditions and usages contributed a certain continuity to the operation of government in Bahrain; but at the same time, dependence upon the personal element made the system very fragile”.

Farah quotes “A. B. Kemball” who wrote a “memorandum in the Resources, Localities and Relations of the Tribes inhabiting the Arabian Shores of the Persian Gulf”, dated 6 January 1845 (Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government), in which Kemball describes the situation in Bahrain as follows:

“Since 1839, owing to increased dissensions, and subsequent hostilities between the members and relatives of the ruling family, the population, prosperity and commerce of the island have gradually declined. Numbers of the principal and most wealthy inhabitants, to avoid the effects of increased anarchy and confusion, fled upon the commencement of actual hostilities, to Koweit on the Arabian, and to Lingah and other places on the Persian Coast, where they have since temporarily located themselves, in order to watch the course of events, and return with the first signs of peace and established government, and consequent security to life and property”.

Farah (1985) describes the society during the early decades of the nineteenth century by saying that the “Baharnah”, were at “the bottom of social strata”. Furthermore, these indigenous inhabitants were turned into “virtually serfs”, who “supplied the agricultural work-force for the Shaikh (ruler) and his retinue, held the land they worked usually only in return for unpaid labour (sukhra) and were also assessed for service based on their possessions (e.g. boats and animals). There was little incentive for them to improve their lot and those who did manage to purchase their own gardens, lived in fear that any day a local magnet, including the Al-Khalifa shaikhs themselves, might take it upon himself to appropriate the holding”.

Moreover, Farah explains that if the Bedouin tribesmen stole the property of the Baharnah, the latter could not rely on the political chiefs to obtain reparations on their behalf.

Britain reacted in 1869 to the continued infightings and conflicts amongst the ruling elite by blockading the islands of Bahrain, taking all the rebel leaders into custody and imposing conditions that resulted in the changing the ruler. Hence, the reign Sheikh Isa bin Ali Al-Khalifa was guaranteed and protected for more than five decades up until 1923.

Wilson (2010) says that the resultant relative peace prevailing over the area saw a great resurgence in Bahrain's trade with India, and refers to the British Resident at Bushehr who observed in 1899 "Over the last two decades British trade has flourished in Bahrain and more British companies are turning to Bahrain".

In the 1920s, the political situation in Bahrain deteriorated, and this led to the British intervention to enforce administrative reforms in 1923. The then Political Agent Major Daly forced Sheikh Isa bin Ali Al-Khalifa to pass over the day-to-day running of a newly formed central and modern administration to his eldest son, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa.

Prior to the British intervention of 1923, the Baharnah had erupted in an uprising in 1922 protesting at the ill-treatment and discrimination they were suffering. Al-Tajir (1987) describes the events leading to the uprising, and refers to a decision that "a deputation of Baharnah, accompanied by a number of leading Sunni personalities", sought an audience with the Ruler. During the meeting, the Baharnah submitted eight demands calling for an end to ill-treatment, paying extra taxes specifically imposed on the Baharnah only, ending forced labour "sukhra", etc.

Disturbances and procrastination in responding to basic demands led to instability when other groups in Bahrain clashed on other matters. The British intervened in 1923 and reorganized the affairs of the state. Out of these reforms, there were losers and winners, and the Shia (Baharnah) were considered to be relative winners, as they were no longer officially discriminated against.

However, several influential groups within the ruling circle considered themselves to have lost their privileges and never accepted the changes of 1923. The strength of adversarial reaction can be further understood by the action undertaken by the British Advisor to Bahrain's Government Sir Charles Belgrave between 1926 till 1957 who monitored these

groups and individuals; some of whom had received punishments of imprisonment or banning from receiving any fund from the Privy Purse.

Understandably, these groups and individuals, some of whom were members of the ruling family, hated the new administration and policies introduced by the British Political Agent Major Daily in 1923 and later maintained by the British Advisor Sir Charles Belgrave. When Britain's influence started to decline in Bahrain in the early 1960s (after the departure of Belgrave in 1957) some of those who resisted the changes of 1923 started to reappear on the political stage, and steadily gained back their influence, reaching their peak in recent years.

Shia and Modern Movements

Introduction of modern education and discovery of oil in 1932 led to the initiation of nationalist movements in 1930s and 1950s. In all these movements, the Baharnah (Shia) participated shoulders-to-shoulder with other principal constituents of Bahrain's modern society.

According to Al-Salman (to be published), a group of Baharnah dignitaries were at the forefront of the modern national movement in the 1930s demanding political and judiciary reforms. After discovery and commercial production of oil in 1932 there began a group of eight notable Baharnah to engage with other sections of Bahrain society seeking genuine reforms to lay the foundations for modern democracy in Bahrain. In December 1934 the eight dignitaries (Mansoor Al-Arrayedh, Mohsin Al-Tajir, Abd Ali Al-Ulawait, Abdul Rasool bin Rajab, Haj Abdul Aziz bin Hujair Al-Bori, Ahmed bin Naser, Hussain Al-Madhoob, and Haj Ali bin Abbas Al-Aali) submitted a petition to the then ruler Sheik Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, reminding him that it was due to the backing of the Baharnah that his position as crown prince and then ruler made it possible for the country's stability under his reign, and called for key reforms, namely: reforming the courts of law, and the codification of the provisions adopted by the judges; introducing proportional representation so that the Baharnah's representatives in municipal and "Tijarah" councils are increased, and to provide schools for the Baharnah.

Rush (1991) points out that the reports exchanged between the British Political Agent in Bahrain and the British Political Resident in Bushehr (Iran) stated that these demands represented a shock to the political establishment especially as it became clear that these eight notables enjoyed the support of the Baharnah population.

Al-Salman (to be published) refers to the British “India Office Records”, see (I. O. R/15/2/176), which says that the Sunni and Shia (Baharnah) notables joined forces in 1938 when a Sunni dignitary, Yousif Fakhro, called for a meeting with some elders of the Baharnah, namely Mohsin Al-Tajir, Seyed Saeed Sehed Khalaf, Mohammed Ali Al-Tajir, Seyed Ahmed Al-Alawi, to come to an agreement regarding the issue of who should be crown prince. The meeting was supporting by Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, whose position needed re-confirmation and support in the light of differing trends within the ruling family. The Baharnah notables used this opportunity to press for modern political reforms.

At that time, a modern working class in the oil industry agitated for democratic / political reforms to augment administrative reforms of 1923. Sport, social and cultural clubs proliferated in the 1930s helping to bring Bahrain’s new intelligencia with the latest developments in the world.

Hence in parallel with other events in 1938, a new class of leaders, primarily from Sunni and Shia merchant families, led a national movement and labour strikes in the oil company (BAPCO) calling for the formation of an elected legislature, legalizing labour unions, reforming judiciary and police force, amongst others. The 1938 movement was crushed and three of its leaders were exiled to India.

In the years 1954 to 1956, a more serious and larger movement surfaced in Bahrain, led by intellectuals, merchants and religious men, from both the Shia and Sunni sects. Again, the movement was crushed and a state of emergency was declared by the end of 1956. Furthermore, three of the leaders were exiled to St. Helena island and placed in the same jail used for the imprisonment of Napoleon Bonaparte.

The 1938 and 1954-56 movements were nationalist / patriotic movements inspired by the events and political developments of the time. These movements managed to bring together both Shia and Sunni people of Bahrain under one umbrella calling for democratic reforms.

The Shia After Bahrain's Independence

Bahrain gained its independence from Britain in 1971, and as explained by Wilson (2010), "Britain was going through an earlier financial crisis in the late 1960s and Prime Minister Harold Wilson made the surprising announcement in 1968 that Britain would be withdrawing East of Suez – in effect closing military bases in the Middle East and Asia and paving the way for Gulf countries to gain their independence".

Wilson (2010) goes on to say "prior to independence, the UN had undertaken a referendum in Bahrain, at British request, to quash once and for all Iran's claim to the territory. The UN found overwhelmingly that Bahrainis wanted full independence and Iran's claim was soundly rejected. The earlier treaties with UK were replaced by a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Political Agency becoming the British Embassy".

A key element in the success of UN referendum on the status of Bahrain was the fact that the Shia had favoured the outcome. The then ruler of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, visited top Shia leader – based in the holy city of Najaf in Iraq – Ayatullah Mohsin Al-Hakim in 1968 and expressed his keenness to consolidate relationships with the Shia.

In 1972, a Constituent Assembly was elected to draft the first constitution of the State of Bahrain, to be followed by the 1973 election of a National Assembly. The Shia participated in both elections, in the National Assembly they were to be found in the three main parliamentary blocs; "People (leftist) Bloc", "Religious (Shia) Bloc" and "Middle (merchants and liberal) Bloc".

It is to be noted that Britain controlled the civil service up until 1971, and the top bureaucrats at that time were about equally shared by both Shia and Sunni communities. However, according to the author's assessment, the share of top positions between Shia and Sunni bureaucrats declined from about 50 % Shia in 1971, to 17 % Shia in 2000, to less than 10 % in 2010, indicating a persistent trend in removing Shia from top positions.

Moreover, the military service was created in 1968, around the time when the British announced their intention to withdraw from the Gulf region, and although the Shia had stood firmly to ensure the success of the UN resolution to quash Iranian demands in 1970, the Shia were generally not allowed to join the military service. One explanation might be that those

anti-Shia forces who opposed the 1923 reforms became more influential in this new national service.

Impact of Iran's Islamic Revolution

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran attracted many people around the Muslim world, and particularly the Shia. A new phase in Bahrain politics began when the authorities announced in 1981 that it had foiled an Iranian-backed attempt to topple the regime, and thenceforward started long years of oppression directed against the Shia.

It is the view of the author that the Islamic revolution in Iran has merely amplified an already existing problem, particularly in relation to the indigenous Shia Arab population (Baharnah). This is not to belittle the sufferings undergone by other Shia, such as the "Ajam", who originally descended from Iran. The fact of the matter is that most Baharnah were subjected to an official policy of discrimination up until 1923, and the dramatic changes in that year made some influential groups unhappy. Therefore, a golden opportunity was made available to bring back as many of the pre-1923 policies and practices, though they might need different dressing.

Iran's negative relations with the West made it easier to link any Shia to Iran, and hence win Western powers' support for crackdowns and oppressive measures.

This is not to deny that some youths may have been attracted to anti-State activities that could be associated with violence. It is also possible that some of the claims levelled by the Bahraini authorities against certain individuals and small groups might be true, in that there was some link with Iranian elements in 1981, and possibly on another occasion some years later. But the fact of the matter remains that the vast majority of the Shia in Bahrain had raised basic demands pertaining to social justice, more democratization and in some cases more Islamization. These demands were not specific to Shia groups, for the Sunni and liberal forces shared many of the often declared demands for restoring the parliament that had been dissolved in 1975, freeing political prisoners, restoring constitutional rights and addressing mundane issues such as housing and unemployment.

Confrontations between Shia youths and the security forces began in 1979 following the arrest of some clerics, and in April 1980 two youths were killed while in detention, signalling the beginning of a very long conflict that continued up until 2001, when several political reforms were initiated.

During the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq war cast its shadow on most local and regional issues. And hence when Iraq was progressing triumphantly, the Bahraini authorities were tightening their grip on the Shia population, and when the war turned in favour of Iran, the Bahraini authorities would send conciliatory signals.

One of the “side-effects” of the war is the Shia religious institution in the holy city of Najaf in Iraq was restricted under the ex-Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, and hence Bahraini Shia wishing to study religion headed towards the holy city of Qum. Obviously the environment of Qum had influenced many Bahrainis who studied there. But it must be noted that the government of Bahrain banned the vast majority of those who studied in Qum from returning to Bahrain. Some of these student managed to return home in the early 1990s, but the majority had to wait until 2001 when political exiles were allowed to return.

Between 1994 and 1999, Bahrain witnessed a Shia uprising (intifada), that won the support of Bahraini intellectuals of all types, and received wide coverage in the international media. During these years, some 40 Shia were killed, as well as possibly a dozen policemen and a score of foreigners. Some ten thousand people were interned (in and out of prisons) during this period, and many people lost their jobs or education as a result of the clampdown. London became an important centre for the Bahraini opposition to conduct political and media campaigns. During this period, the author was a spokesperson for the opposition.

The Shia and the National Charter of 2001

The situation in 2001 changed upon the announcement of a series of reforms aimed at redressing key issues pertaining to democratic demands. Several changes were taking place since 1999 when the late Emir, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa died and his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa assumed power.

By the end of 2000, a committee was created to draft a “National Action Charter”, which explained the intentions of the new Emir (ruler) to introduce two fundamental changes

in Bahrain's constitution before restoring the dissolved parliament. Firstly, Bahrain's political system was to change from an "emirate" to a "kingdom", hence the name of the country would need changing from "State of Bahrain" to "Kingdom of Bahrain", and the title of the ruler would need changing from "Emir of Bahrain" to "King of Bahrain".

The second change introduced a bi-cameral parliament, an elected lower house and an appointed upper house.

The opposition presented several counter arguments, and in response some changes were made. Firstly, the introduction of the first draft was considered unacceptable representation of Bahrain's history. Several members appointed in the committee to discuss the draft resigned. This introduction was later modified.

Secondly, the "National Charter" was initially going to be presented to a selected assembly of around 1000 people who would approve the new changes. Due to criticism by the opposition it was decided to hold a referendum on the draft charter.

The 46-member appointed committee started meeting on 2 December 2000 and on 23 December 2000 (after three weeks) they decided to present a final draft to the Emir (later King). However, since a referendum was to take place within few weeks after the completion of the draft (referendum took place on 14 February 2001), Bahrainis entered a new phase. The new Emir (later King) Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa visited, for the first time, three public places, in the Shia district of Nuaim in Manama (where he met with senior Shia leaders) on 10 February 2001, the Sunni-dominated city of Muharraq on 10 February 2001, and the Shia-populated island of Sitra on 11 February 2001. In all these places, there were warm receptions from the people.

During the Nuaim meeting, one senior Shia religious leader presented the criticisms of the opposition on the National Charter, and requested assurances. In response, Emir (later King) Hamad added his memento on the written page of criticisms. In Sitra, Emir Hamad's car was surrounded by people who chanted slogans of support. This very area witnessed the deaths of citizens, policemen and foreigners during the uprising (intifada) that started in 1994 and continued until the end of the 1990s.

To gain more support, the authorities permitted two prestigious clubs, “Alumni Club” and “Uruba (Arabism) Club”, to organise public seminars (on 14 January 2001 and 4 February 2001 respectively) allowing speakers and audience to call for an end to the emergency “State Security Law”, to free political prisoners and allow exiles to return home.

Earlier, the house arrest imposed on the Shia leader, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al –Jamri was lifted on 23 January 2001, the release of political prisoners started, and political exiles were later told they could return home without fear of persecution.

The released political leaders demanded a meeting with the Emir (later King) Hamad to clarify key issues, and as a result of this meeting the then-Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs, Sheikh Abdulla bin Khaled Al-Khalifa (who also headed the National Charter Committee) issued a statement (published in local newspapers on 9 February 2001) confirming that the new political arrangements will not invalidate the 1973 constitution and that the upper appointed house will be for consultation only.

Following on from that clarification, the Shia leaders led prayers and spoke in all public places calling on their supporters to vote “yes” for the National Charter. As a result of this campaign, the National Charter received 98.4 % approval on 14 February 2001. On 16 February 2001, the Emir issued decrees suspending the “State Security Law” and dissolving the “State Security Courts”.

The Shia and the ruling Al-Khalifa family entered a “honeymoon” period, and many have believed that at last the strained relations had become part of a troubled history, especially as the Shia had proven yet again that they had no problem in legitimizing the political system (as they did in 1923 and in 1970), and hence the year 2001 was supposed to herald a new and long-lasing era for all parties involved.

The Shia After 2001

The Shia’s positive participation in the referendum on the National Charter in 2001 ensured its success. In return, all political prisoners were released and exiles were allowed to return. Moreover, restrictions on public meetings were lifted, the State Security Law was repealed, and emergency courts were dissolved.

Bahrain at that time was also awaiting the verdict of the International Court of Justice to rule on the sovereignty of Hawar islands which Qatar had submitted a counter claim. The international court ruled on 18 March 2001 that these islands belonged to Bahrain, but took away some small islands and reefs from the sovereignty of Bahrain in favour of Qatar. The maritime borders were finally settled between the two neighbouring countries. The Bahrain-Qatar dispute underwent many awkward periods and at one time it was thought that a military conflict might be ignited following an intensive propaganda war. This border dispute was one of the factors for speeding up the reforms witnessed at the beginning of 2001.

Now that the dispute with Qatar had been settled, and the internal political environment was becoming tranquil, the mood changed dramatically. Following the release of political prisoners, political exiles started returning home, and the virtually all the months of 2001 witnessed a series of continuous celebrations all over the country.

This period also witnessed the formation of what were later called “political societies”. The government refused the naming of groups as “parties”, since a party’s main aim is to run a government. The then-minister of cabinet affairs, Mohammed Al-Motawa, explained at a later stage the government’s view at that time, saying “we do not mind that these societies concern themselves with political issues, but they are not allowed to practice organized political action” (See Bahrain News Agency 14 July 2002).

The honeymoon period came to an end exactly one year after voting on the referendum, on 14 February 2002. On this day a new constitution was issued, the name of the country was changed to “Kingdom of Bahrain”, and the title of the ruler became from then onwards “King of Bahrain”.

The issuing of the 2002 Constitution came as a surprise for several reasons. Firstly, a confidential (appointed) committee met and agreed everything without the involvement of anybody representing the people (through election). Secondly, an Egyptian advisor, Dr. Ramzi Al-Shaer had the greatest influence on formulating the articles of the new constitution, and these articles indicated a direction contrary to the pledges publicly made by the Justice and Islamic Affairs Minister on 9 February 2001.

The issuance of the 2002 Constitution resurrected many of the doubts raised by the opposition in an earlier period. A principal difference in the 2002 Constitution is the emphasis that the King is the source of all powers, which is contrary to 1973 Constitution that stipulated a shared responsibility between the ruler (Emir) and the National Assembly (parliament). And because the King is considered the principal cornerstone in the political system, it was deemed satisfactory (by the authorities and their advisors) to issue a unilateral constitution without the need for approval by an elected or partially-elected body. The 2002 Constitution gave legislative powers to the appointed upper house (Majlis al-Shura), and indeed it has more powers in this regard than the elected lower house (Majlis al-Nuwwab).

The Shia leader, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, said in a public gathering after the issuance of 2002 Constitution on 14 February 2002 that “this is not the type of parliament we had demanded”. However, the health of Al-Jamri deteriorated in May 2002, and he suffered from a series of strokes which incapacitated him until his death on 18 December 2006.

It is worth noting that Al-Jamri had been jailed between April 1995 till September 1995, then from January 1996 till July 1999, and later placed under house arrest between July 1999 till January 2001.

Al-Jamri, a graduate of the Najaf religious institute in Iraq, was an elected member of the 1973 parliament (National Assembly) and he was also one of the chief architects of two national petitions in 1992 and 1994, sponsored by virtually all sections (Shia and Sunni) and trends (Islamists and liberals) of Bahrain’s society. The petitions called for the restoration of the dissolved parliament and to free political detainees, allowing exiles to return and establishing a dialogue for political reconciliation. His leadership of the Shia population since the early 1990s provided the basis for moderate and pluralistic approach that had been adopted by the Shia opposition groups alongside others.

The departure of Sheikh Al-Jamri from the scene in May 2002 paved the way for the resurgence of another prominent Shia leader, Sheikh Isa Ahmed Qassim, who carries a heavy-weight history of involvement in politics. To start with, Qassim was a member of both the 1972 Constituent Assembly that ratified the 1973 Constitution and was also a member of the 1973 parliament (National Assembly). Qassim was at that time the head of the Shia “Islamic

Enlightenment Society” formed in 1972 to oversee the religious and cultural activities in Shia areas.

More importantly, Qassim was also head of the clandestine “Islamic Da’awa Party” of Bahrain between 1978 and its dissolution in 1984 following a massive security crackdown on its activists. This clandestine party was a branch of the “Islamic Da’awa Party” of Iraq, and had been established in Bahrain in the mid 1960s by Shia clerics and university graduates who completed their studies in Iraq.

Qassim left Bahrain in 1991 to continue further religious studies in the holy city of Qum (Iran), and only returned in Bahrain after the voting on the National Charter in February 2001. While Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri led the political movement in Bahrain in the 1990s, Qassem generally kept silent. Although he disagreed with the 1992 and 1994 petitions, he nonetheless kept his opposing views to himself, partly as a sign of respect for Al-Jamri, who was his life-long friend since the youth days when they both studied in the holy city of Najaf (Iraq) in the 1960s.

When Al-Jamri was incapacitated in May 2002, Qassim became the most influential religious-political personality amongst the Shia of Bahrain. His decade-long “further studies” in Iran upgraded his level in the religious circles and some assign the title “Ayatullah” to his name, although he did not offer himself as a source of religious imitation. It is also believed that Qassim, unlike Al-Jamri, is not enthusiastic about close cooperation with liberal and secular forces in the opposition. The fact that he spent a long time in Iran meant that eventually he sympathised with the prevailing idea of “Welayat al Faqih”, the cornerstone of the 1979 Iranian constitution which gave Shia jurists wide-ranging powers over public life.

However, before the incapacitation of Al-Jamri, the Shia political society, “Al-Wefaq” had been formed in November 2001, bringing together conservatives and technocrats, for the purpose of campaigning and winning municipal and parliamentary elections as and when it is decided to enter into this field. The “Al-Wefaq Society” is led – since its formation - by a young cleric, Sheikh Ali Salman, who is considered to be a disciple of Sheikh Isa Ahmed Qassim.

From a practical point of view, Al-Wefaq Society coordinated alliances and conducted a moderate and patriotic agenda that manifested itself on many occasions. The society participated in the municipal elections in May 2002, but boycotted the parliamentary elections in October 2002, protesting against the way the 2002 Constitution had been formulated and issued. Nonetheless, they changed their views In 2006 and decided to participate in both municipal and parliamentary elections, winning virtually all seats in the Shia-dominated constituencies. All along, Al-Wefaq Society coordinated its actions with opposition societies of liberal and secular leanings.

However, the underlying factors that characterized the politics of Bahrain remained largely unchanged. In fact, a new development has taken place since 2005/2006 when a new class of “State officials” started to emerge. These are young university degree holders, who are linked together by a network of relationships. Many of them are characterised either as tribally-oriented or religiously-oriented, but all share common features. They don’t feel associated with what happened in 2001 or the years before 2001, more driven by a hard-line Sunni (usually anti-Shia) agenda, and are supported by very influential people in the political establishment. This in part explains the ongoing tension between the Shia and the State nowadays.

END NOTES

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