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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

BAHRAIN / A deadlock in the social contract

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Almost three weeks have passed since the protest movement began in Bahrain, following the turmoil in other Middle Eastern countries at the beginning of 2011 and the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents. Probably due to it being part of this unexpected regional upheaval, the international press is paying an uncommon amount of attention to the events taking place in Bahrain. However, it should be borne in mind that calls for political reform are not new in this country, where pro-democracy movements even precede its independence from the UK in 1971.¹

It is true that a larger percentage of demonstrators are from the Shia community, but this is due to the fact that they represent almost 70% of the population and to the historic discrimination they have been subject to by the Sunni ruling elite. It does not mean there is a religious conflict between both confessions or that there is a Shia or Iranian² agenda behind the protests (as some media reports and the government itself have been claiming). The petitions being made by all the opposition groups are the same and, in fact, coincide with those being made elsewhere in the region, since the grievances they face have more in common than less: a growing youth population, very high unemployment rates, significant inflation during the last years, government corruption, nepotism, etc. Another factor to look at, as a Gulf and therefore rentier state, is the current state of the social contract which is supposed to exist between the rulers and the citizens. In this respect, the Bahraini authorities seem to have failed their people, since they have systematically benefited the Sunni elite in the redistribution of wealth, and discrimination against the Shia has been widely verified. In addition there is the nationalisation of Sunni foreigners to reduce the Shias' weight in the demographic balance.³

In an attempt to avoid the holding of a "Day of Rage" which was called for 14th February,⁴ King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa announced that each family would receive an amount of almost 2,000€ to commemorate a decade of reforms, but this did not refrain the people from demonstrating in the streets to call for their rights to be recognised. Following the usual repression techniques of authoritarian regimes, the police cracked down on protestors, causing several deaths and many injuries. But rather than giving in, protestors continued to demonstrate and, evoking Liberation Square (Tahrir in Arabic) in Cairo, they congregated at Pearl Square (Lulu in Arabic) on 15th February.

In a strange move, the King made an appearance on national television expressing condolences to the families of the dead, in which he announced that those cases would be investigated, and in which he affirmed that the reform process would not stop. However, after a calm day of funerals followed by protests, in which the most repeated slogan was "Neither Sunnis nor Shiites, we are all Bahrainis", security forces including the military entered Pearl Square

¹ Political demands have been constant since the 1973 and first Bahraini constitution was abrogated and the elected parliament suspended in 1975. Since then until the promulgation of the current constitution in 2002, the country was ruled under a state of emergency. King Hamad reached power in 1999 with promises of initiating a reform project, but those implemented until today have not satisfied Bahrainis, mainly because the bicameral system adopted guarantees the veto power of the regime. For more details see a Crisis Group Report [here](#).

² A recent US cable released by Wikileaks shows the lack of evidence to prove that the Iranian regime is actually behind the political demands of the Shia opposition in Bahrain. See The Guardian's article on this issue [here](#).

³ These allegations were made in September 2006 in a 240-page document authored by Dr Salah Al-Bandar, an adviser to the Cabinet Affairs Ministry, who was later deported to the UK. The full report is available at: www.bahrainrights.org/files/albandar.pdf

⁴ Facebook page calling for protests: "[14th February 2011. Revolution Day in Bahrain](#)".

around 3am on 17th February and dispersed the people by force, causing four deaths and hundreds of injuries, including children. With the square taken by military tanks, police cars and armed agents, clashes continued to take place the next day between protestors and security forces in other parts of the country.

In the face of those events and after the US administration and several European governments condemned the use of violence on peaceful protestors, the government announced that Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa would begin a process of dialogue with all parties in order to find a peaceful solution. The army was ordered to withdraw from the streets, and demonstrations went back to Pearl Square. Slogans became a bit more categorical at that point, with some claiming that they were no longer afraid and wanted real change, and others even calling for the removal of the Al Khalifa ruling family.

There have also been some pro-regime demonstrations in front of al-Fatah mosque (led by Shaikh Abdullatif al-Mahmood⁵), but the majority of Bahrainis have joined the pro-reform ones led by the leftist *Wa'ad* movement (formed by both Shias and Sunnis) and al-Wifaq, and which integrate members of most opposition groups. The main seven political associations⁶ (including al-Wifaq) created the "National Coalition" to bring protesters' demands to the government, but announced they would not begin talks until several steps were taken by the government to reflect their intentions. After several days of discussion, and following the release of around 300 political prisoners,⁷ the coalition presented a unified list of demands to the government:

1. The release of all political prisoners and an end to court proceedings against them.
2. An immediate, impartial and independent investigation of the seven protesters' deaths since February 14.
3. Objectivity and neutrality in the official media.
4. The resignation of the government and formation of an interim government.
5. The drawing up of a contractual constitution by an elected constitutional assembly, paving the way for a constitutional monarchy and elected government.
6. Amending the electoral system to ensure just and fair representation of all political and societal components.
7. The leadership should provide guarantees that any agreements will be honoured.⁸

What is in question now is whether the regime will respond to each of these demands or not, and if the opposition will accept a half-way solution. An announcement was made on Saturday 26th February confirming that the cabinet had been reshuffled⁹ (and that citizens' monthly housing costs had been reduced by 25%), but opposition leaders said the reshuffle was "superficial and unlikely to hasten direct talks", and the 18 lawmakers from al-Wifaq officially submitted

⁵ Leader of the Islamist Al-Minbar Islamic Society (Bahrain's Muslim Brotherhood branch), who has become the spokesperson of what is being called the "The committee of National Unity".

⁶ Political parties are illegal, but societies work as de facto parties. The main opposition societies are: al-Wifaq National Islamic Society (Leading Shiite society); Islamic Action Society – *al-Amal* (Shiite "*shirazi*" Islamists); National Democratic Action Society – *Wa'ad* (Leftist-Liberal); Nationalist Democratic Assembly – *al-Tagammu* (Ba'athist); Democratic Progressive Tribune – *al-Minbar* (Former communists); National Democratic Gathering Society – *al-Watani* (Former *Wa'ad* members); Brotherhood Society – *al-Ikhwa* (Shiite of Persian descent).

⁷ Including 23 Shia political activists who were detained prior to October 2010 elections.

⁸ <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=300342>

⁹ For details and reactions see the Global Voices section on Bahrain 2011 protests [here](#).

their letter of resignation to parliament on Sunday 27th February. It is clear that previous means of legitimisation and re-legitimisation will no longer work, and that political activists will not be quietened down with cosmetic reforms anymore. However, a full response from the government to all the requirements is also unlikely. The latest of a series of daily protests took place in front of the Ministry of Interior on 2nd March, after some other gatherings outside government buildings. Following Shaikh Abdullatif's speech on Wednesday 3rd, some Sunni-Shia clashes were registered in Hamad Town, south of Manama. The next day, opposition groups announced they were prepared for entering the dialogue with the ruling family. Yet, there has still been no formal dialogue between the government and the opposition.

Many protesters have expressed concern about the possibility that the government is once more playing the divide and rule game, and that the parallel establishment of the "Committee of National Unity" could be intended to incite sectarian division or fear. On the other hand, there is concern over the role of *Haq*¹⁰ leader Hassan Mushaimaa (also pardoned by the regime and allowed to return to the country), whose anti-regime discourse could escalate tension between protestors and the government. With regards to this situation, the coalition of opposition groups is convinced that success will only come through unity and with the maintenance of the Al Khalifas. They are struggling to persuade demonstrators to moderate demands for regime change, as are many youth *netizens* who are calling for unity of all Bahrainis through blogs, Facebook and Twitter.¹¹ Moreover, division might also be present within the regime, with one sector of the Al Khalifas willing to adopt conciliatory measures (probably behind the Crown Prince) and another wanting to perpetuate the *status quo* previous to the Jasmine Revolution (behind the septuagenarian Prime Minister who has been in power since 1971).

On the whole, a prolongation of the crisis would radicalise the extreme positions of both the opposition and the government, and could lead the country to more violent clashes. In that scenario, the most probable outcome would be the fierce repression of protesters and a return to the state of emergency in order to keep the Al Khalifa dynasty in power. The alternative of witnessing their overthrow is almost completely ruled out, given the unconditional support of Bahrain's powerful neighbour, Saudi Arabia, and of the other Gulf monarchies. However, what is not yet absolutely guaranteed is if Western allies will occupy the position of supporting violent authoritarian regimes for much longer, given the criticism to which their foreign policies are being subjected to these days (and even if the US Fifth Fleet is based in Manama).

The unbeatable nature of the current protest movements lies in the shared perception acquired by the Arab peoples (and which is expanding around the world) after the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, that they have the strength and the power to bring about change. Thus, to achieve a peaceful outcome, the Bahraini protestors will probably have to relinquish some of their petitions or at least moderate their voices, while the regime should accept that the moment to give up some power, and to integrate all political tendencies in the decision-making process, has arrived. In the face of these circumstances, not only Bahrain, but all the Gulf States will have to ponder thoroughly any move they might make.

¹⁰ Haq Movement for Freedom and Democracy is an illegal opposition political organization, some of whose leaders broke away from al-Wifaq because they were in favour of boycotting the 2006 elections. However, the group does also include non Shia members like Ali Rabi'a (a communist) and Sheikh al-Jowder (a Sunni cleric).

¹¹ Using the *hashtag* #UniteBH. See [here](#).