

Political Crisis in the Persian Gulf: Monarchy vs. Democracy in Bahrain

The Ills of Sectarian Gerrymandering

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“The way the ongoing security campaign has been handled and the rights violations that accompanied it have in one week destroyed 10 years of progress in this country.”

– Sheikh Ali Salman, head of Bahrain’s main Shia opposition party, Al-Wefaq, 21 August 2010

A brutal crackdown on Shia Muslim civil right activists in the Persian Gulf nation of Bahrain is entering its third week. It not only threatens to undermine important upcoming parliamentary elections, but the widespread protests it has engendered may force the government to finally address the civic, political and human rights of the island’s long-oppressed Shia population.

To understand the root cause of the latest strife in the country’s long history of domestic unrest, one need only appreciate a simple, fundamental and incontrovertible demographic reality: the country’s overwhelming majority Shias are effectively subjected to the rule of an unelected Sunni monarchy—the Al-Khalifa family, led by the King of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa. Notably, and as will be discussed, the security services employed by the government and tasked with suppressing internal dissent are composed nearly entirely of *non-Bahraini* Sunnis.

Third-class citizens

As a consequence of this striking incongruity between monarchy and citizenry, and to ensure the continuity of dynastic rule—aided in no small part by the United States Fifth Fleet headquartered in the capital Manama—Bahraini Shias have been politically and socioeconomically disenfranchised, excluded from the security sector and treated as third-class citizens.

In 2009, Nabeel Rajab, president of the [Bahrain Center for Human Rights](#) (BCHR), released results of the organization’s [second report](#) on institutionalized sectarian discrimination in Bahrain. Despite forming more than two-thirds of the population, the BCHR found that Bahrain’s Shia:

- Fill only 13 percent of senior positions in the country. Most of these posts are based in service or non-prevailing institutions.
- Fill none of the senior posts in the following institutions:

1. Ministry of Defense
2. National Guard
3. Ministry of Interior Affairs
4. Ministry of Cabinet Affairs
5. The General Organization for Youth and Sports
6. The Royal Court
7. The Crown Prince Court
8. The Central Informatics Organization
9. Survey and Land Registration Bureau
10. The Supreme Defense Council

· Form five percent of the judiciary corps, 16 percent of the diplomatic corps, seven percent of the Ministry of Transportation, 18 percent of the Constitutional Court, 10 percent of the Ministry of Finance and six percent of the Ministry of Information.

The religious schism is itself not the primary issue, of course. Rather, the complete marginalization of the Shia and their lack of meaningful representation in the government are at the heart of all problems. Add to this the attempts by the Al-Khalifa regime to deliberately alter the sectarian balance of the country in their favor—sectarian gerrymandering if you will—and you have the recipe for political and social volatility.

In January 2009, thousands of Bahrainis peacefully protested against the Kingdom's citizenship laws, the Arab world's equivalent of Israel's infamous Citizenship Law. The laws permit Sunnis from other parts of the Muslim world to become expedited, naturalized Bahraini citizens in order to manipulate the confessional makeup of the populace in favor of Sunnis—the Al Khalifas' only real constituency. The *New York Times*, in a very fair Aug. 26 piece titled "[Crackdown in Bahrain Hints of End to Reforms](#)," cites Shia opposition groups' estimate that 65,000-100,000 Sunnis were added to voter rolls over the last decade.

This is not an insignificant figure; although the total population in Bahrain is approximately 800,000, only 530,000 are nationals and able to vote.

The BCHR has long [documented](#) the country's human and civil rights abuses. It determined that of the 1,000 employees working for the National Security Apparatus (NSA), more than two-thirds are non-Bahraini (Jordanians, Egyptians, other Arabs, Pakistanis) and overwhelmingly Sunni. Bahraini Shia citizens constitute less than five percent of the NSA and occupy only low-level positions or serve as paid informants. The paramilitary Special Security Forces (SSF) acts under the supervision of the NSA and numbers 20,000—90 percent of whom are non-Bahraini. Indeed, the SSF does not include a single Bahraini Shia member.

By royal decree, the NSA and SSF may arrest and interrogate anyone they wish, are immune from prosecution and not subject to oversight from a monitoring body. According to the BCHR, they are responsible for arresting hundreds of activists, torturing citizens and running

smear campaigns that result in the detention and imprisonment of anyone suspected of opposing Al-Khalifa family rule. Adding insult to injury, NSA and SSF forces are housed in upscale Manama neighborhoods while Bahraini Shias remain largely impoverished and face a chronic housing shortage.

The arrest and torture of Dr. Abdul Jalil al-Singace

With the above in mind, we return to the present crisis. On Aug. 13, after returning from a London conference where he criticized Bahrain's human rights record, Dr. Abdul Jalil al-Singace, spokesperson and director of the human rights bureau of the opposition Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy, was arrested at the Manama airport for "inciting acts of violence" and "destabilizing the country."

Three more activists were arrested the following day, including two clerics. An unidentified NSA official told the state-run Bahrain News Agency that the four were being held for attempting to form a network "created to undermine security and stability of the country" and carrying out "illegal practices and other acts that would harm the stability of the Kingdom of Bahrain and its civil peace ... "

Four more high-profile figures were apprehended in the following days, bringing the total to eight and stoking tensions even further. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) condemned the arrests.

The arrests immediately [instigated sectarian riots](#). The subsequent security crackdown has led to the detention of more than 200 people, mostly human rights workers but also non-activist young men. All are being held with charge in unknown whereabouts and have had no access to legal counsel.

[Human Rights Watch](#) has called on Bahrain's government to either formally charge or release those detained. Jon Stork, deputy Middle East director of HRW, said in a statement, "If the government of Bahrain can show these activists are engaged in criminal behavior, why is it resorting to vague and anonymous allegations?"

In early 2010, Stork's organization came out with a landmark report on the use torture in Bahrain: [Torture Redux: The Revival of Physical Coercion during Interrogations in Bahrain](#).

Unfortunately the practice continues.

It is never easy to read accounts of torture, let alone one experienced by a handicapped man. Dr. al-Singace's statement to the public prosecutor of what the security service did to him can be read [here](#).

The threat of October's elections

The proximity of the arrests to next month's parliamentary elections, scheduled for Oct. 23, is no coincidence. The Shia still hope to win representation in districts that have been gerrymandered to give Sunni candidates a decided advantage.

Bahrain's main Shia political party, Al-Wefaq, holds 17 of 40 seats in the Council of Representatives. They form its largest bloc and are the only Shia party not boycotting the elections. Bahrain may have the trappings of a constitutional monarchy, but the parliament's powers remain severely curtailed; legislation passed must first be approved by

an upper house Shura Council whose members are appointed by the King.

As parliamentary elections near, Bahrain's public prosecutor has banned all media outlets from reporting, publishing or broadcasting any news related to the unrest. Local websites documenting the violence have been blocked or heavily censored.

Ironically, the nation's parliament was created eight years ago under a new constitution in a "reform project" meant to placate longstanding Shia complaints of discrimination and marginalization. Despite the protection provided by the Shura Council and a concerted, deliberate effort at sectarian engineering, it is clear that the current campaign against civil and human right advocates, opposition figures, clerics, and ordinary citizens belie how threatened the al-Khalifas feel by the upcoming ballot.

There are now daily clashes between Bahraini Shia protestors and the non-indigenous, Sunni-led security forces. The media is fully censored and the number of detainees continues to rise. Whether the country will be able to hold the October parliamentary contests remains to be seen.

Sectarian engineering and gerrymandering has polarized Bahrain and destroyed the very fabric of society. The political and social turmoil it now faces can only be described as monarchy vs. democracy.

Sheik Mohammad Ali al-Mahfoodh, a Shia cleric and opposition leader, came to a very straightforward conclusion:

"The King said 10 years ago we would have freedom. The experiment is now over."

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