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**The King's Dilemma: Obstacles to Political Reforms in Bahrain**

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**Workshop 5**

*Gender Inequalities, Sectarian and Ethnic Minorities: The Outcasts of the Gulf States*

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**Abstract:**

**The King's Dilemma – Obstacles to Political Reforms In Bahrain.**

This paper reviews the political reforms carried by Shiekh Hamad on assuming power in Bahrain in 1999. These reforms, presented as a series of royal concessions, *makramas*, included abrogation of state security laws and a general amnesty for political prisoners and exiles. These were followed by more substantial moves including granting political rights to women and easing restrictions on the right to form associations. Yet, reforming a patrimonial regime is proving more intricate than initially assumed. Like other undemocratic conservative rulers grappling with perils and promises of modernisation, Sheikh Hamad is confronted with the fundamental dilemma of balancing traditional and modern sources of his authority. His reforms face some recurring obstacles that confront patrimonial states, including the weakness of political organisations; the strength of alternative networks and corporatives; constriction of the political field; constrained civil society; state-controlled media; confidence in sources of external support. The king's dilemma is complicated further by regime's long history of misrule, inherent structural inequalities, competing tribal and communal cleavages, as well as lack of mutual trust. The papers is organised as follows. First, a review of the immediate backgrounds to these reforms followed by a presentation of major components of the reform package. Second, a discussion of how vagaries of the reform process are affecting various disadvantaged social groups. The final section discusses some major factors facilitating and/or constraining the king's ability to respond to incompatible demands by his two competing constituencies: the traditional and the modern.

## The King's Dilemma – Obstacles to Political Reforms In Bahrain

### **Introduction**

On March 6, 1999, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa succeeded his late father as a ruler of Bahrain. The sudden change of guards gave the opposition an opportunity to initiate several conciliatory gestures including public statements of condolences and a call for a 'temporary cessation of all protest activities'. Following the traditional forty-day mourning period, the new Amir spoke to his people. In this and several subsequent speeches the Amir began to sketch out his ideas for political reforms. Bahrain, he said, "is entering an era of change for the better in all areas...". The people were promised that Sheikh Hamad's top priorities are "achieving national unity and internal security, through the solidarity of all Bahrain citizens, without discrimination, whatever their origin or creed".

This paper reviews the process political reforms carried out by Shiekh Hamad since assuming power in 1999. The review is organised as follows. In the first section I consider the immediate backgrounds to these reforms followed by a presentation of major components of the reform package. The third section discusses how far the royal vision has been implemented and what contributed to its achievements and failures. In this final section, I discuss some of the factors facilitating or constraining the King's ability to satisfactorily respond to incompatible demands by his two competing constituencies: the traditional and the modern.

### **The King's dilemma**

Opposition groups met Hamad's maiden speeches with little enthusiasm. Similar promises were repeatedly made in the past. Each time such promises were made the future seemed so bright and the country would soon move away from being ethnically segmented and unequal into joining the ranks democratic nation-states. Notwithstanding their initial scepticism, leading opponents of the regime reciprocated the Amiri declaration of good intent by

expressing their own hopes that the new Amir would follow some, if not all, of the footsteps of the newly crowned kings of Morocco and Jordan. Like those monarchs, the somewhat wishful reasoning went, Hamad needs to start afresh and will need to mobilize popular support if and when he decides to stand up to the more militant flanks of his family.

In an insightful review of the African processes of political reforms, Célestin Monga<sup>1</sup> identifies eight phenomena that hinder democratic transition. These are: the weakness of political organisations; the strength of alternative networks and corporatives; constriction of the political field; constrained civil society; state-controlled media; confidence in sources of external support; institutional corruption, and clientalism. The evolving situation in Bahrain exhibits most of the problems listed by Monga. Reforming a tribal patrimonial regime as the al-Khalifa's in Bahrain is also proving to be more intricate than those involved have initially imagined. Here one finds some of frequently discussed social and political structures that both hinder and undermine endeavours towards democratising reforms elsewhere in the Third World - a long history of misrule and mismanagement of resources, competing tribal, communal and religious cleavages, as well as lack of mutual trust among political actors seeking reform.

Admittedly, remedying some of these problems can take several generations of political reformers. However, some of the obstacles are so acute in Bahrain that one cannot imagine the launching of a serious political reform, let alone a process of democratisation, without first resolving them. In the following I will discuss the effects of some of these obstacles on the pace of political reforms in Bahrain.

In *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel P. Huntington<sup>2</sup> describes a fundamental dilemma with which traditional monarchs are confronted with as they grapple with perils and promises of modernisation. The King's dilemma is generated by the unresolved imbalance of power between modern and traditional sources of his authority. Basic components of this dilemma are determining the role and extent of centralisation of power in a modernising monarchy. While centralisation is a prerequisite tool to promote social, cultural and political reforms, it makes difficult, if not totally impossible, the inclusion of emerging groups produced by processes of modernisation into the legitimate polity. The participation of these groups in politics could come only at the price of the monarchy. To solve his dilemma a modern monarch must find golden formula that simultaneously a) preserves most of his traditional authority, while accepting imperatives of modernisation, and b) reduces the disrupting challenges from his traditional opponents as well as emerging modern constituencies. The king's dilemma is summarised in two questions: must a modernising

monarch be the victim of his own achievements? Can such a monarch succeed as a moderniser without loosing his monarchical authority? <sup>3</sup>

Hamad, like many would-be reformers, was hesitant at first. During the first eighteen-months of his reign he appeared indecisive while trying to please his competing constituencies. He seemed unable to decide whether it was more prudent to maintain the status quo with slight necessary modification in style and public image; or to actively pursue policies aimed at restructuring the regime he has inherited, and in which he has played a prominent role since 1968 when he was entrusted with building the Bahrain Defence Force, BDF.

His most immediate concerns emanate not from leaders of the opposition or their young followers whose actions have occasionally turned streets and alleys of Bahraini towns and villages into battlegrounds. Opposition leaders have publicly promised to refrain from street actions that plagued the country since December 5, 1994, the date of the 'uprising' that continued throughout the final years of his father's reign. Instead, Shiekh Hamad seemed more concerned with his own backyard. An immediate objective was to secure his position within the ruling family and to reassure himself of continued loyalty of tribal elders, clerical establishment and the notables.<sup>4</sup>

Winning the ruling family over is not self-evident nor it is a simple matter that can be taken lightly by a new ruler in Bahrain. It is his core constituency and its most secure pool of recruits to administer the state and staff its security forces. But the ruling family is not a monolith. Tradition as well as political and economic factors contributes to its complex hierarchy. Types of privileges as well as level of access to political powers are determined by an al-Khalifa position with that hierarchy. Relations between, as it were, the rank and file of the al-Khalifa and its ruling core have been formally managed, since 1932, through the 'Family Council'.<sup>5</sup>

While the ruling family remains the firm foundation of the regime and its ultimate power base, the actual exercise of power is centralised within a *ruling core*. Contraction or expansion of this core is subject to vagaries of balance of power within the ruling family. Existence of the *ruling core* is acknowledged in official communiqués, and in Bahraini media through a familiar euphemism - '*the political leadership*'. Since March 1999, *the* ruling core, in Bahrain is made up of the Amir, his Crown Prince, and his uncle, the primes minister, Khalifa bin Salman. Official portraits of the threesome adorn every public office in the country.

The clerics-ruling family relationship continues in spite of the occasional rupture caused by activities of underground religionist groups, including recent graduates from seminaries in *Qum*, *Najaf* and *Cairo*. For the leading members of the clerical establishment, the relationship provides them not only with access to the centre of power but also provides them with sufficient goodwill to act as intermediaries on behalf of their own constituencies. Benefits secured through such intercession range from securing employment, housing loans or plots of land, to release from detention. The influence of leaders of the clerical establishment in some rural areas and residential urban quarters helped in reducing, if not totally eliminating riots and other forms of public protest that engulfed the rest of the country since 1994.

Clerical and tribal corporatives, although important and relatively stable, are not the only internal sources of regime's legitimacy. A result of the regime's total control of rent and its circulation is making loyalty to the regime a question of social and economic survival. Loyalty to the regime is maintained through an elaborate segmented system of intermediary patrons. On the top of the segmented pyramid of patrons stands the Amir himself, as a supreme patron. He owes his position to several British legacies including the allocation of one-third of oil revenues to the Privy Purse. Land registration ordinances of the 1920s, another British-devised reform, transformed all non-registered and non-claimed lands into 'Amiri Lands'.

The right of notables to participate in public affairs or to function as intermediaries are not a natural component of their status in their communities. Theirs is an assigned role – it is specific, personally and temporally. They were selected not to represent their constituencies, but rather to provide support to the regime and, whenever asked, to advise. Individually, some intermediaries may become powerful patrons of local networks; clans, villages or religious communities but they are expected to claim the right to speak for them or represent them. In spite of this, they have an obvious stake in sustaining the status quo. For, only through preservation of the system could they serve as patrons to the local, and often competing, a network on which their initial claims to notability depends. Over generation, the ruling family has jealously guarded the system of intermediation, while continually changing it, sometimes rotatively. The constant worry of each individual notable is his awareness of the shaky grounds on which he stands. The ruling family obviously needs him, yet he remains dispensable. Those notables who lost favour and were not allowed to continue being members of the stratum of intermediaries, or even to be contenders for such membership, are likely to lose all else.

Hamad spent most of his first year consolidating his reign. To the dismay of his opponents, all of his moves remained within the confines of the *ancien régime*. Following his father's footsteps, the new Amir refused to meet with representatives of the opposition let alone initiating meaningful political dialogues, which lead to national reconciliation. Like his father, he has reportedly stated that he, too, does not receive petitions by groups. Instead, the new Amir concentrated on mobilizing the same external and internal resources of legitimacy that supported his father's reign.

In similarity with other ruling families in the region, al-Khalifa's own internal squabbles represent the single most credible threat to its rule and to its continued prosperity. This may explain Hamad's foremost priority - to preserve the cohesion of his family, care for its domestic peace, and subsequently to establish his undisputed authority within it.

Hamad's moves towards streamlining the affairs of the family were swift. It was increasingly evident to supporters and opponents of the new ruler that he needed to do more in order to balance the powers of his uncle, the Prime Minister, and establish his exclusive authority over the family and the state. In spite of all his efforts, Hamad seems to have reconciled himself, for the time being, with the fact that short of direct confrontation, he needed to decide whether to *cohabit* with his uncle.

Within days of assuming power, Hamad appointed his son as Crown Prince, thus correcting the balance of power within the 'political leadership'. Politically more serious are the measures initiated to consolidate his authority within the '*al-Khalifa Family Council*' itself. As well as appointing some trusted members of his faction, including another of his sons, to various positions in the Council, the Amir raised the monthly stipends allocated for each of the 2500-3000 members of the ruling family, according to an elaborate classification. In the past year, the Amir has put greater efforts in appointing educated men and women, some of who are accomplished professionals in their fields, to senior positions in government and public institutions. His latest appointments led to charges by opposition spokespersons that he has embarked on khalifanizing the state apparatus.

The new Amir has also made several gestures to re-assure tribal and clerical establishments. Both are vital and long-standing pillars of al-Khalifa rule. In both establishments, Hamad benefits from a legacy of British administration that continues to shape the cordial relationship between the ruling family and the clerical and tribal establishments. As often in the past, when faced with tasks of maintaining order, managing discontent, mobilizing support, or shoring up their legitimacy, the ruling family has always enlisted the aid senior tribal leaders and senior clerics. Since assuming power, the Amir has made several public

statements confirming that he appreciates the political fruits of continuing to oblige the clerical establishment. An innovative, if highly bizarre, gesture of generosity across confessional lines was his offering of a lamb and bag of rice to each of several hundred recognised *Hussainiyah*.

In his dual role as the head of a tribal hierarchy and as the head of a regime, the Amir, together with his ruling core, controls public resources and state revenues. The ruling core has an unrestricted discretion that can enhance or weaken the influence enjoyed by the notables. From these resources, it disburses gratuities and favours in the form of employment, cash, and plots of land. Many of these *makramas* require an intermediary intervention by a notable.

Strategies adopted by the regime strongly discouraged the development of collective bodies that by virtue of history, constituency or social and political roles are likely to make their own claims on the regime. An extreme form of these claims is the right to *share* political power with the ruling core. Intermediaries have been, and still are, an important constituency. They are retained in such a fashion as to be available whenever the regime feels the need for support to overcome an opposition or pre-empt its growth. Intermediaries are consistently prevented from becoming power centres themselves. They are consistently also discouraged from making claims on the regime as collectives. They are encouraged to intercede on behalf of individuals who, within conditions of segmented plurality, are counted as their clients.<sup>6</sup> On their part, individuals are encouraged not to depend on a single intermediary but rather seek the mediation of different intermediaries on different issues. This goes some considerable distance beyond the usual system of rotation where a regime routinely and rotatively selects patrons from among its subordinate social elites.

Sustaining vertical segmentation of society has proven itself a useful form of social organisation and, hitherto, an effective vehicle for rule. As shown during the oil-boom years, the regime has effectively used the resources at its disposal to create new intermediaries, retire some old ones and revive others. Intermediaries are made up, vertically, of tribal, religious, confessional groups as well as according to wealth, kinship or residential areas. As local reserve sources for legitimacy of power, competing intermediaries reinforce the regime's policies, including preserving the segmentation of society. Individually these intermediaries have always been exchangeable, and, at times, even dispensable.

To reforming monarchs of 'the second half of the twentieth century' grappling with the pros and cons of reforms, Huntington<sup>7</sup> suggested three possible strategies: First, he may want to introduce a fully-fledged constitutional monarchy where his role and authority is reduced to the minimum possible. This course entails several constitutional changes and a series of



institutional reconstructions in order to make all authority 'vested in the people, parties and parliament'. A second strategy simply entails maintaining the monarchy as the principal source of authority while actively introducing political measures to contain and minimise the disruptive ramifications of modernisation including political contention by emerging elites aspiring to political roles. The third strategic course is simply a middle way between the previous two strategies- combining monarchical power and limited popular authority.

More than three decades later, next generation of reforming monarchs in the region such as the late King Hussain of Jordan, King Mohammad II of Morocco, have shown that variations of those strategies outlined by Huntington, including a combination of the second and third strategies, are both possible and feasible.

It took the new Amir eighteen months before finally making up his mind and deciding to follow the footsteps of King Hussain of Jordan. Like his role model, Shiekh Hamad seems to rely on combining what Michael Mann describes as the despotic and infrastructural powers of states to resolve his royal dilemma. Mann's distinction between despotic and infrastructural powers is roughly as follows. Despotic power refers 'the range of actions which the elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil society groups'.<sup>8</sup> While it varies in real life, a common feature of despotic power is extent to which the state utilizes its distributive capacity to exercise control over civil society. Infrastructural power on the other hand, is "the capacity of the state actually to penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decision throughout the realm".<sup>9</sup> It refers to the ability of a state to get things done, to effectively exercise its authority and achieve its goals within the society. In other words, a reforming monarch is likely to increase his options by combining despotic power- a power over society, with infrastructural power - a power through society.

### **The process**

In his first national day speech in December 1999, the Amir announced a plan to hold municipal elections. He also made several encouraging gestures such as his commitment to grant women the right to vote in municipal elections. These conciliatory gestures confirm Hamad's tactical skill, but they also betray his reluctance to address the deep lying causes of the crises that has plagued the country since 1975.

Hamad seemed to try very hard to please everybody. But he would soon realize that he has ventured into untested waters without first securing, among other things, a popular base of support for his moves. Mistakenly, too, he has raised the expectations of his opponents and supporter alike to levels that he could not possibly carry through without first concluding

internal bargaining process among various factions within the ruling family, and especially with its hardliners led by his powerful uncle.

The following months seemed critical. Hamad may have been re-examining various options on how best to resolve his royal conundrum – to introduce as many reforms as to appease a contentious opposition and as few as not to provoke the most militant faction within the ruling family, his core constituency.

In a speech delivered to members of the *Shura* in early November 2000, Hamad announced his intentions to introduce a series of measures to reform the political system. Keywords in his reform plan were *constitutional monarchy* and *bi-cameral legislative body*. Not until then did outsiders become aware that bargaining within the regime had drawn to a close and that the Amir was about to make up his mind.

On 23 November 2000, Hamad bin Isa commissioned a 46-member ‘Supreme National Committee’, SNC, to draw up *charter* based on “common values and practices” in the country, to put forward proposals for constitutional reforms, and to elaborate on the parameters of the impending liberalisation process. The work of the SNC was quickly concluded. On December 18, it presented to the Amir its final draft of *mithaq al-amal al-watani*, National Action Charter. While formulated in general terms and, at times ambiguous, the *Charter* outlined the Amiri political reform plans.

In its final communiqué<sup>10</sup> the SNC declares that ‘the experience of the State of Bahrain... [during ] the last three decades, requires taking into consideration the latest political, economic, social and legislative developments, and to be able to confront all forthcoming challenges alongside future international developments’. The document also laid down several arguments for political reforms including; 1) that ‘Bahrain has reached high levels of maturity as a country with international relations, and a state with sovereign institutions, based on justice and equality of citizens to safeguard their interests’; 2) that ‘ the Amir possesses the ambition to achieve a democratic way of life, laying down a balanced structure that confirms the political constitutional partnership between the people and the Government, the separation between the three main branches, the enhancement of the mechanism of the judiciary branch, and the establishment of the constitutional court, and the offices of financial and administrative controls’: and 3) that while country is at ‘ the threshold of the third millennium, there is the strong willpower to move into a modern state that has completed its political and constitutional frameworks in order to interact with the latest domestic, regional and international latest developments’ .

In addition to the required political reforms to enhance the 'hereditary constitutional monarchy of the ruling system', the document puts forward one of Shiekh Hamad's key conditions for introducing the envisaged reforms. It states <sup>11</sup>,

There is agreement on the need to modernise the Constitution of the country to benefit from the democracy experiences of other peoples in expanding the circle of popular participation in the tasks of ruling and administration. These experiences have demonstrated that the presence of two councils in the legislative branch allows the combination of the advantages of wisdom and competence of the members of the Shura Council, and the interaction of public opinions from all sides of the elected council.

Following its Jordanian mirror image, the Bahraini Charter has been presented as an attempt to reassert the legitimacy of the ruling family through concessions to opposition demands for reinstating the constitution and for curbing the excesses of the security services. It should be recalled that the Jordanian monarch also commissioned his National Charter in April 1990, in response to a legitimacy crisis made worse by the consequences of a severe and chronic fiscal crisis combined with international pressure and an Islamist-dominated opposition. Authors of both charters defined the state as a constitutional monarchy where government decisions are subject to the approval of a freely elected parliament. Both Charters stipulate that decisions of the elected parliaments are balanced and moderated by an appointed consultative council. Each of the two charters was presented as an integral part of a liberalisation package. The package included a general amnesty granting the release of political prisoners, return of exiles, reinstating activists to their government and semi-government jobs, return of confiscated passports, lifting travel restrictions on prominent political activists, and most significantly, lifting of the state of emergency and repealing of state security laws.<sup>12</sup> In Amman as well as in Manama, the liberalisation package was fashioned as an attractive element in a pre-emptive strategy whose main objectives are to restore calm, and to provide the regime with stability and political longevity without altering any of the pillars of its power.<sup>13</sup>

The Charter states the same guarantees of rights stipulated in 1973 constitution, and reiterates that 'the people are the source of sovereignty'. It solemnly declares that 'time has now come for Bahrain to be among the constitutional monarchies with a democratic system that achieves the aspirations of its people for a better future.'<sup>14</sup>

The deliberate exclusion of the left from those initial negotiations and from all preparatory work and informal bargaining that led to the launch of the Amiri project, led to charges that the proposed reforms were nothing more than a deal between the ruling family and religionist

groups. This and a number of lingering doubts about Sheikh Hamad's real intention, good faith or even his ability to push through the promised reforms were outweighed by hopes as well as by an awareness that they have no other credible alternative. In spite of their misgivings leftist political leaders remained enthused, and were in the forefront in the mobilization campaigns that led to the approval of the Charter. While leaders of NLF and PF have reluctantly accepted being relegated to their marginal role they maintained regular contacts with the Amiri Court. Their points of view reached the Amir through a number of senior members of staff at the Amiri Court.<sup>15</sup>

Since the plebiscite in February 2001, debate among political activists covered a spectrum of topics. Most heated of these debates revolved around two main themes. The first relates to Shiekh Hamad's trustworthiness, his credentials as a would-be liberal reformer, and the extent of his reforms. The second, relates to whether Shiekh Hamad is strong enough to push forward his strategy of reforms in spite of the hard liners within the ruling family and their backers in Bahrain and within other ruling families in the Gulf. On both sets of questions, opinions range from enthusiastic optimism, to decidedly pessimism. Opinion columns in local newspapers and messages on various Bahraini websites often make references to the -glass metaphor - not only whether it is half-empty or half-full but also whether there is a glass in the first place.

It was relatively easier for Shiekh Hamad to convince secular oppositional figures including leaders of the two leftist organisations, the National Liberation Front and Popular Front, of his sincerity and good intentions. By contrast he encountered considerable difficulties to enlist leaders of religionist groups, especially those living in exile. Prominent figures among these remained unconvinced of the Amir credentials as a reformer democrat until the eve of the plebiscite on 14<sup>th</sup> February.

During the first half of February 2001, Hamad came out as an astute tactician. While retaining the support of leaders of major factions within the ruling family, he succeeded in reassuring his interlocutors from the opposition and their increasingly apprehensive constituencies. As a result, the Amir and his interlocutors among leaders of the opposition did not raise the future role of the al-Khalifa Family Council in the proposed reform project. It is worth noting that the ruling family's council, in existence since 1932, was made a formal organ of the state in 1973 with an executive secretariat headed by an al-Khalifa with a rank of minister. It remains to be seen how long these three councils are able to endure each other, and how detrimental their coexistence is to the constitutional monarchy project.

In spite of the persisting national euphoria surrounding it, the *Charter* remains a confusing document. Its vague language became a source of vexation between the regime and opposition. Yet, the Bahraini Charter, like its Jordanian counterpart, has provided the Amir with additional room to manoeuvre and more time to attend to his other pressing business of state, and to strengthen his position vis-à-vis his rivals within the ruling family.

The Bahraini Charter created nearly the same confusion that had hit the Jordanians a decade earlier, with regards to its juridical political status, and its relationship to the constitution.<sup>16[6]</sup> In Bahrain, additional confusion resulted from the ambiguity surrounding the exact mandate of the proposed bi-cameral legislative body. What relationship is envisaged between the elected parliament and the appointed Shura, both procedurally and politically? These and other related issues would re-emerge a year later in the heated debates on whether the constitution decreed on February 14, 2002 is an *amended* or a *new* constitution and whether the Amir has the constitutional mandate to unilaterally issue the new document.

On the eve the plebiscite on 14-15 February 2001, Hamad appeared justifiably triumphant. He had already appeased most critics of the *Charter*, its text and modalities proposed for its adoption. Bahrainis, including most of the opposition networks, offered near unanimous approval. Many, otherwise sober opposition voices started speculating whether 'the era of democracy in Bahrain has finally dawned'. Only a few sceptics actually voiced their misgivings concerning the regime's real intentions - the 'grand scheme of deceit' as described by remnants of radical networks on the extreme fringes of Bahraini opposition. In varying levels of enthusiasm, everyone, from the Crown Prince to the exiled *bidoons*, joined in singing the praise of the Amir, his audacious moves, and the launching of what was designated, rather prematurely, as the 'democratisation process' in Bahrain.

Popular approval of the Amiri moves was evident in the massive turnout for the plebiscite, in which women participated, and in the reported 98.4% in favour of the revised text of the *National Action Charter*. Although it may require some scrutiny, these amazing figures attested to the general mood prevailing at the time in Bahrain.

I do not think many of the regime's opponents have seriously believed that Sheikh Hamad is a newborn democrat and a paragon of good governance, but they and other Bahrainis participating in the plebiscite were hopefully casting their votes for much more than a document or its sponsor. In the Charter, they seemed to see a serious opportunity to get out of the decades of insecurity, economic stagnation, discrimination and systematic violations of human rights, to revive the 'democratic experiment' that was put on hold since August 1975. Everyone was declared a winner. To his by now loyal opposition Hamad offered to give back

the parliament in exchange for their active participation in mobilising popular support and legitimacy for his constitutional monarchy project. In the process Hamad bin Isa appears set to transform Bahrain, to use Nazih Ayubi's distinction, from being a '*hard state*' into becoming a '*strong state*'.

But things remain uncertain. Changes introduced by Sheikh Hamad since assuming power remain fragile, and hostage to a number of factors including the balance of power within the ruling family. While Al-Khalifa's squabbles are public knowledge, the family as a whole has remained outwardly united. Whether the king can continue to rely on this unity or whether he, and the country, can afford indefinitely to pay its financial, political and security costs, will determine the pace and direction of the reform process. Can this unity withstand the pressures that would undoubtedly surface as soon as the political reforms, in spite of their slow pace, start affecting the ruling family's privileges?

In spite of conciliatory statements made, and measures actually taken or proposed, the old guards remain in place. This is another cause for apprehension. When will the old guards, or the King himself, consider it necessary to call for a 'corrective move' as developments, from their perspective, begin to get out of hand. Corrective moves could be triggered by the unavoidable cutbacks in the ruling family's privileges when the elected parliament starts monitoring state revenues and its budgetary outlays. 'Corrective moves' launched by disgruntled members of the old guard are not the only threats to the current project of controlled liberalisation. A number of threats could come from unpredictable consequences of the 'snowballing of democratic demands'.<sup>17</sup>

As the pace of political *infatih* gained momentum, a state of national euphoria seemed to engulf the country, the rulers and the ruled. Among additional measures that convinced most sceptics and turned the whole country into a carnival site, were the two Amiri decrees of February 18, abrogating the State Security Law, and abolishing the State Security Court. Sheikh Hamad is reported to have told his interlocutors that the new legislature would be elected in 2004, while the existing *Shura* council would remain in existence as an advisory body.<sup>18</sup>

Two Committees were formed to implement the provision of the Charter. The Committee for Amending the Constitution was charged with reviewing the constitution and proposing amendments as stipulated by the Charter. The second, the Committee for Activating the Charter, was charged with proposing political, economic and juridical proposals to reform the state, its institutions and modernise the 'political environment'. Meetings of the former, the Amendment Committee were unpublicised while those of the second, the Activating

Committee, were subject to regular media exposure. The public was informed on the minute details of its deliberations, and experts were summoned to give evidence on a variety of public concerns including unemployment, transparency and the establishment of public audit office.

The irony remains, that success scored by opposition groups have led to their gradual weakening and fragmentation. By contrast, the political concessions forced upon the state have contributed, instead to emergence of the Amir as the ultimate victor. Opposition groups found themselves swept by the public euphoria created by the massive approval of the Amiri plan, in spite of their lingering doubts about ability to take the some of decisive steps needed to create a more equitable and democratic political system.

Probably more ominous is the inability of leaders of opposition to maintain a minimum level of unity as they scrambled towards expected political gains in the aftermath of the plebiscite. Within months, political and personal disagreements would lead to splits within the three organizations that have contributed, in different capacities, and through various fronts to convincing the Amir that reform is his most prudent option. Several months after the plebiscite, most opposition groups remained enthusiastic about the political reform process and about the role of the Amir in that process. Here, Bahraini opposition, too, is exhibiting the perennial problem noted by Robert Dahl in a more complex setting, of being either too much or too little.<sup>19</sup>

Elevated popular expectations fuelled by both the Amir and his euphoric opposition of dramatic changes are not likely to be satisfied by reforms that stop at an elected parliament and self-proclaimed constitutional monarchy. For their own different reasons, the Amir and his loyal opposition pushed popular expectation of change to unrealistic levels. In spite of the initial limitation imposed on the social and political spaces that are affected by controlled liberalisation, and in spite of the stringent control, liberalisation could gather its own momentum. As more people become aware of their collective civic power, they are likely to act to expand the perimeters of liberalisation by pressing for additional and possibly far-reaching demands.

While certainly limited, royal political reforms have created some unprecedented venues for political activity, gradually these reforms are facilitating redefining the political space in the country. An instrument in that direction is the activities of a multitude of associations, political and otherwise, that have been newly founded or given a new lease of life since February 2001. More than three hundred associations helped to bolster self-confidence among their growing membership and constituencies.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the regime

continues to affirm, once again, its ability to shape major parts of the visible political terrain of the country. Through manipulation of administrative red tape and legal requirements, the regime controls the growth of these associations, their activities and freedom of action. In spite of these powers, various regional and ethnic networks and political groups manage to operate clandestinely. Ethnic, regional and ideological allegiances are finding expression in forums, associations, and in mosques and religious meeting places. As it happened, the old network bases of contention that Sheikh Hamad hoped to render outdated or to replace simply found new life in the form 'associations' – the very structures he imposed upon them.

Table 1: Number of Associations officially accredited the Bahraini Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

Association Category	No. before January 2001	No. established between Jan. 2001 and Jan. 2002	No. established between January 2002 to July 2002	Total number July 2002
Women Associations	5	4	0	9
Social Associations	17	14	14	45 (including 16 'political' associations)
Charitable [national] societies	2	0	0	2
Charitable Funds [locality-based]	42	23	2	67
Islamic Associations	3	3	2	8
Professional Associations	21	13	14	48
Pan-GCC Associations	8	1	0	9
Foreign Associations (cultural and social)	34	6	0	40
Foreign Clubs (sports and social)	25	3	0	28
Churches and other non-Muslim religious associations	13	0	1	14
Cooperatives	17	0	1	18
Other voluntary associations	11	1	1	13
Total	198	68	35	301

Source: Based on Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 'Daleel al-Jamiat...', [Catalogue of Associations...], July 2002; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, <http://www.bah.molsa.com>, (Accessed on 15 August 2002); and, *Bahrain Brief*, April 2002 Vol. 3 Issue 4.



From the regime's perspective, leaders of the opposition have already been outmanoeuvred and marginalized. The Amir, ruling core and ruling family have affirmed their supreme position in the state, while components of civil society remained too weak and former dissidents are in disarray and unable of taking any joint action to redress the balance of power in society. It has become increasingly evident that through makramas, whether personal or collective, the regime is able of re-shaping the political scene to its liking. The King has skilfully restructured his potential opposition by convincing it to purge itself from extremist elements with untimely or unrealistic political agendas. Unfortunately, his success is likely to backfire as co-opted leaders of opposition fail to convince their followers that what they actually are getting is much less than what they have bargained for when they voted on February 14, 2001 for the Amiri reforms.

Mirroring the meagre achievements of his Moroccan and Jordanian counterparts, the Bahraini monarch did not introduce those reforms that he initially suggested would make his country join the 'well established democratic monarchies of the world'. In spite of all his good intentions and his genuine modesty and his visible concern for the future of the country, the Amir of Bahrain, like King Mohammed VI and King Abdullah II, remains a hostage of the *ancien régime*, its politics and institutions. Certainly, many Bahrainis are grateful to him for the adjustments he made in the political system and for improving their lot. But Shiekh Hamad's political reforms did not effect a systemic change nor did they go beyond regime's redlines – most important of which are the ruling family's tribal privileges and its ruling core control of rent distribution.

Whether Bahrain has taken its first steps towards political reforms remains a matter of debate. Neither Jordan nor Morocco provides glimmers of hope. In spite of eleven years of 'pre-emptive liberalisation', the old regime in Jordan is still in power. Indeed, political liberalization in Jordan enhanced the regime's ability to prevent real dissension and/or democratisation as well as to regulate the opposition through an array of bureaucratic and legal mechanisms<sup>21</sup>. While Morocco is more advanced, its progress on the path of political reform has come to halt leaving society impatient for the real change its expects.<sup>22</sup>

Political reforms initiated by King Mohammad VI in Morocco, also remain largely symbolic gestures. As Abdeslam Maghraoui notes the Moroccan monarch

“ has appointed no serious team of reformers and announced no discernible program of reforms. Three important signs confirm the new king's inability to reform the authoritarian system he has inherited. His initiatives seem impulsive and ad hoc rather than guided by a clear reformist strategy. He bypasses due process and formal decision-making institutions, diluting his professed aim to establish the rule of law. Third, King Mohammed's personal initiatives

reproduce, in a different form, the old image of the benevolent despot. The medieval mechanisms of exercising political authority in Morocco are still in place.<sup>23</sup>

Commenting on 'experiments of controlled liberalization' in the Arab world at the beginning of last decade, Gudrun Krämer laments the notable the absence of what are commonly regarded as basic prerequisites of liberal democracy, 'such as involvement of broad sections of 'civil society', government dependence on internal mobilization of resources rather than oil or political rent, and a stable regional environment'.<sup>24</sup> A decade later, the Bahraini *infitah* is not an exception.

Outwardly, the evolving political system appears, especially during months following the plebiscite to be clearly dominated by one man- the Amir himself. In reality, however, Shiekh Khalifa bin Salman, the prime minister and the regime's strongman for the past three decades has never relinquished any of his authority.<sup>25[10]</sup> His power base, the ruling family and its allies, is the same as the King's. His control of the government apparatus whose functionaries are his own appointees, gave him a considerable advantage over his nephew, the novice king. Yet, as time passed, cohabitation between the two became an accepted part of the political scene. According to Dr. Hassan Fakhro<sup>26</sup>, 'one could speak of a shadow Cabinet at Amiri court'. Through this 'shadow cabinet', orders are communicated to officials in various ministries, below minister level. With orders from the Amiri court, officials at various ministries were expected to bypass their own ministers as well as the normal procedures and red tape while expediting diverse ad hoc *makramas*, ranging from finding employment for a job-seeker, a government housing loan, releasing a detainee, to granting citizenship.

Hamad's effective use of *makramas* has elevated it from being simply an aid for cooptation of notables and their circulation, into becoming a strategic instrument of rule. In addition to ad hoc *makramas*, with a limited number of beneficiaries, the list of makramas dispersed by the Amir from December 2000 to February 2002, is long and by any measure impressive. Some such as item no. 19 in the list below, 'Housing bonanza for Bahrainis', actually benefited some 30,000 families, nearly 40% percent of Bahraini citizens' households.

Table 2: Official list of Amiri (royal) Makramas from December 2000- February 2002

No.	Date	Royal gesture
1	17/12/2000	Extra Salary for Government employees
2	17/12/2000	Cheaper electricity and housing instalments
3	01/01/2001	Mass wedding for 2,000 Bahraini
4	06/02/2001	General amnesty for criminals
5	01/05/2001	Training bonanza for job-seekers Bahraini
6	21/05/2001	University fees slashed
7	16/07/2001	Amir's gift to help orphans
8	28/08/2001	Amiri gift of care for a nine-year-old boy
9	16/09/2001	A Royal gesture from His Majesty the King to pay the Fedya (blood money) for Bahraini citizen
10	23/09/2001	Families are to be guaranteed their homes if the breadwinner dies, under new government regulations.
11	29/09/2001	Amiri gesture for wrongly accused citizen.
12	05/11/2001	Help for widows.
13	17/11/2001	10,000 families to get food help during Ramadan.
14	16/12/2001	Privatisation of Seef Mall and donating 30% of its ownership to needy families
15	16/12/2001	Development of a new commercial complex in Sitra for the benefit of limited income families
16	16/12/2001	Launching a plan to benefit more than 50,000 Bahraini families with new homes in four new towns
17	16/12/2001	Reducing customs duties on all goods to five per cent.
18	26/12/2001	Medical students aid
19	05/01/2002	Housing bonanza for Bahrainis
20	22/01/2002	New jobs for Bahrainis at BDF
21	18/02/2002	Free Education for Bahrain University students
22	19/02/2002	Bahraini citizenship for orphans
23	25/02/2002	Royal Lifeline for Divorcees

Source: <http://www.bahrain.gov.bh/arabic/makramat.asp> (accessed on 15 July 2002)

### The monarchy

On 14 February, the first anniversary of the plebiscite, Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al- Khalifa declared his country a constitutional monarchy and himself a king. He also informed his people that in order to "fulfil his promise" to bring democracy to Bahrain, he has promulgated an amended constitution, and called municipal elections in May and national elections in October.

While the decision to upgrade the country from an emirate to a kingdom was part of a consensus that was consolidated during the year following the plebiscite, other proclamations created controversy and charges of betrayal of trust.

Critics of the royal unilateral moves point to that one of the most effective arguments to convince sceptics to vote for the National Action Charter that the mandate of the appointed Shura Council will be consultative and not legislative. The general consensus, at the time of

plebiscite, has been precisely reported by local and foreign media and in official pronouncements. According to one report,

“The most far reaching of the National Charter's proposals is the formation of a bicameral parliament, modelled on the British system. Under the proposals the lower chamber will be democratically elected on the basis of universal suffrage with both men and women having the vote and it will have legislative powers. The upper house will be appointed, and as such will have an advisory rather than a legislative role. It will provide checks and balances on the political system. The upper house, much as the Consultative Council does today, will support, protect and nurture minority viewpoints.”<sup>27</sup>

The controversial amendments give the King whose person ‘is inviolate’, ‘the loyal protector of religion and homeland’, the ‘symbol of national unity’, wide ranging authority elaborately detailed in Section One of the Constitution of 2002. He is Head of State, Supreme Commander of Defence Forces, and Chair of the Higher Judicial Council. He appoints and dismisses ministers, judges, and members of the Consultative Council. According to article 35, the King ‘may amend the constitution, propose laws, and is the authority for their ratification’.

Most heated debate focused on amendments stipulated in the fifty articles of section Three of the new document, the 2002 Constitution. According to these amendments, the National Assembly, which shares legislative authority with the King and is to be made of two 40-members chambers, *majlis al-Shura* and *Majlis al-Nuwwab*. The King appoints members of the Shura Council while members of the Deputies Chamber are elected on the basis of universal suffrage. Critics maintain that considering other substantial powers of the King, the 40 elected members to Chamber of Deputies are incapable of influencing policies.

*The Explanatory Memorandum to the Constitution of Bahrain, 14 February 2002*,<sup>28</sup> is partially intended to refute most critical arguments voiced by political leaders and jurists in Bahrain against the new document. These counter arguments include a) the overwhelming favourable vote for the charter is also a vote of confidence in the Amir, b) the overwhelming vote of confidence in reality giving the Amir, a full mandate, a *tafweedh*, to amend the constitution as he sees fit<sup>29</sup>, and, c) the Charter itself, when carefully read, gives such a mandate to the Amir and that was the basis for forming the Constitutional Amendment Committee. Critics were also told that the new constitutional document is an improvement on that of 1973. It is a product of intensive work and consultation in which senior Arab and international jurists and constitutional experts have been involved<sup>30</sup>.

The first indications that work on the constitutional amendments was completed came on 2 February 2002 when the Amir hinted to that effect during an audience<sup>31</sup>. Gradually, groups of selected political and community leaders were summoned in small batches during the

following fortnight.<sup>32[17]</sup> It is important to note that these meetings were not consultations but rather audiences in which those summoned are not expected to initiate a conversation with the Amir or address him without prior acknowledgement that they could do so. As a result, the Amir was able to keep all his cards, literally, concealed until the moment of delivering his speech over Bahrain Radio and TV.

Two sets of factors may have influenced the shaping the Amiri choice of options. The first is formed by an understanding that leaders of the opposition, religionist or otherwise, are unable to re-build their already wrecked unity. Whether because of cooptation, disillusion or complacency they are unable to form a credible united front to mobilise their respective constituencies. The second is formed by the extent to which the regime and its loyal supporters manage to convince the public that royal redefinition of the National Action Charter and its promised reforms, is the most prudent, if lengthy, road to stability and prosperity.

While preparing the grounds for the imminent announcement of his unilateral constitutional amendments, Shiekh Hamad has shown his capability to effectively mobilise the regime's combined infrastructural and despotic powers. On February 5, only days before that historic occasion, two announcements were made. Both announcements, the costly and the bizarre, illustrate Sheikh Hamad's innovative blend of his regime's infrastructural and despotic powers.

First, the Amiri court announced a new *makramas* that benefited some thirty thousand low and middle-income Bahraini families. This most spectacular of a year-long series of *makramas*, euphemistically described in the official list above as 'Housing bonanza for Bahrainis' consisted of diverse housing grants at the cost of over 172 million dinars, app. 450 million US\$ dollars. The Minister of Housing also unveiled a government plan to build 'four new housing towns' to meet housing demands. The four towns are expected to provide homes for about 50,000 families. While regime opponents shouted foul, most observers considered the costly gesture as masterly. The second, was the summoning on February 5, by Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, Director of Security and Intelligence Services of several leading Shi'a activists. The group, some of who are former political prisoners and exiles, were informed that they were on a U.S. 'check list' following the September 11 attacks. They were also informed that 'there were around 100 Bahrainis whose names are on that list, Bahraini Authorities received from their American counterparts'. However the group members were told that they would safe while they are in Bahrain, but authorities cannot guarantee their

safety if they leave the country. Uncertainty about their situation continues in spite of prompt denial by spokespersons at the US embassy.

Probably for similar reasons, Sheikh Hamad held two separate meetings with senior members of the ruling family and with officer corps of the Bahrain Defence Force to present a preview of his impending moves. These meetings, with some unprecedented media fanfare, could be seen as step towards institutionalising the role that both corporatives play in the emerging political space of the monarchy.

Opposition spokesmen abroad became more vocal in voicing disappointment at the constitutional changes introduced by the Sheikh Hamad, accusing him reneging on his promises of democracy. The BFM called it "a constitutional putsch that is more alarming than the 1975 dissolution of parliament". Similar sentiments, albeit in less confrontational tones, were made by a number of former dissidents.<sup>33</sup> Shiekh Abdul Amir al-Jamri, the front figure of the constitutional movement since 1992, said during his Friday sermon that "This (planned new) parliament is not what our people, Sunnis and Shiites alike, struggled for. This national charter is not the one for which we all voted.... We have reservations, and we will pursue our peaceful political struggle without resorting to any form of violence". In spite of these critical voices, the general tone of criticism remained unfrontational. And, to confirm the King's strategic calculations, no one called for street protest or similar actions demanding the abrogation of the new the constitution. Most hope were put on the King's own discretion and his willingness to listen to the people.<sup>34</sup>

Immediately after the proclamation of the new constitution, five of Islamic and liberal groups agreed set up a committee to study the document. While most political leaders inside Bahrain were grappling with the new problems they were facing, the tone of BFM's spokespersons in London were becoming increasingly confrontational. On February 22, a statement by BFM stated that the new constitution is "creating an absolute monarchy with non-democratic provisions covering all aspects of public life in Bahrain". It also notes that the "political situation in Bahrain changed on 14 February, 2002. This is the day when the emir imposed a constitution in a way that had never (sic) been practised in the history of mankind,"

On May 9 Bahrainis went to the polling stations for the first time since 1973, to elect five 10-seat municipal councils. To many, those elections were a source of disappointment. The turnout was remarkably low, although municipal elections were seen as a dress rehearsal for next October's more controversial polls to choose members for a new, restored and restructured Parliament. Slightly less than half of the 240,000 eligible voters, all Bahrainis over the age of 21, plus an undetermined number of Gulf Cooperation Council nationals (from

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE) permanently resident in Bahrain cast their ballots<sup>35[19]</sup>. Another source of disappointment was the failure of any of the women candidates' 31 out of 306 to gain election. All candidates considered 'liberal or leftist' lost, while those fielded or supported by *Alwefaq*, the National Accord Islamic Association, a coalition of Shiite clerics, networks and individuals, did best. In most constituencies *Alwefaq* defeated its rivals by a convincing majority. Sunni religious organizations gleaned most of the seats in their areas.<sup>36</sup>

The failure of liberals or leftists to win a single municipal seat may be partly explained by their failure to present themselves as a viable alternative to candidates supported by the regime or by clerical establishments. The poor showing by women, including those fielded by *Alwefaq* and other religious groups and networks, while disappointing, is not really surprising in a male-dominated political culture like Bahrain's. In some cases, women candidates had to run against male candidates from the same political organization.

To leading clerics, their electoral triumph comes as a vindication. They have been under immense pressure from their rank-and-file and supporters to extricate themselves from the royal reform project. Feelings of frustration with it have been growing, and were expressed in many ways. Disillusionment has been growing among the very groups who dutifully followed the clerics' call to trust Sheikh Hamad. Bahrainis from all walks of life have expressed discontent, in marches and sit-ins by the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups. While these may be dismissed as "untimely" manifestations of restlessness, they have nevertheless set off alarm bells.

The results of the municipal elections should be viewed in light of ongoing, behind-the-scenes, bargaining between King Hamad and leading clerics. At the tail end of April, a meeting was held between government representatives and four of the most senior Shiite clerics<sup>37</sup>. Dr. Hassan Fakhro, the most trusted royal advisor on political affairs together with Information Minister Nabil al-Hammar and Cabinet Affairs Minister Mohammed al-Mutawa met with the leading four Shia clerics, Sheikhs Isa Qassim, Abdul Amir al-Jamri and Abdullah al-Ghuraifi and Ayatullah Najati. According to an unpublished account, the royal envoys voiced their appreciation of the clerics' role in maintaining calm on the streets of Bahrain despite the use by security forces of live ammunition against demonstrators marching near the US Embassy in the capital Manama to protest against American support for Israel's incursions in the West Bank. They were particularly commended for their conciliatory statement following the death of a young protester shot by riot police.

The Shia clerics reaffirmed that they wanted to give the reform process another chance and wanted the regime to look into some of their misgivings. These include allegations that the government is playing the sectarian card and trying to derail the democratic process through gerrymandering. Bahraini political activists of all shades have criticized the authorities for redrawing the map of electoral constituencies in such a way as to moderate, if not totally eliminate, the effects of the Shiite numerical majority in most regions. The royal representatives were told the clerics and their political surrogates were finding it difficult to induce people to participate in the municipal elections. They emphasized that they had done their utmost to persuade their followers to vote, but that there was strong resistance to going along with what was being perceived as a farce.

True to his reputation as an astute tactician, King Hamad sought to appease his Shiite clerical critics by springing two surprises on the eve of the May 9 municipal elections. First, he let it be known that the government would compensate hundreds of Bahrainis for salaries lost while they were detained in connection with the political unrest of the 1990s. The common understanding is that most beneficiaries of this makramas are religionist voters. King Hamad's second surprise was an announcement while eligible Bahrainis can vote, it is up to Commanders-in-Chiefs of Bahrain Defence Force, the National Guard, the Police and Security Services, to decide, each time, whether their personnel are permitted to participate in the poll. A day just before polling day, the commanders issued an order forbidding their staff from polling. The sudden removal of this solid bloc of some 15-20000 Sunni voters must be seen as a grand conciliatory gesture to the Shiite clerics and as an attempt to offset their fears about the "doctoring" of the electoral constituency map. But this gesture a temporary administrative measure is likely to be challenged as evidently an unconstitutional<sup>38</sup>.

### **Concluding notes**

Sheikh Hamad's project of political reforms is an outcome of a realistic appraisal of the limited options available to him to sustain the al-Khalifa dynastic rule. Upon assuming power in March 1999, he was facing a determined popular opposition that remained defiant in spite being manifestly exhausted by the harsh measures against them by the old regime. Outwardly, all opponents of the regime remained united. Paradoxically, attempts to discredit leading opponents of the regime were backfiring. The five years grass root uprising seemed on the verge of being taken-over by street gangs, thus threatening to plunge the country into a state of total chaos. His decision to introduce a number of reforms while preserving the main contour of his dynastic regime is an outcome of a realisation that there were nowhere else to



turn.<sup>39</sup> Reforming the system, was simply, the only available and most feasible solution to his dilemma. This decision pushed him and the country on what seemed to be a path of democratic practice. Abrogation of state security laws and regulations, release of political prisoners and return of political exiles were part of deeper changes that seemed to take place in different aspects of the day-to-day life in Bahrain.

Sheikh Hamad has proven himself to be skilful manipulator of his regime's despotic and infrastructural powers. He benefited also from the support of a highly accommodating and generally moderate opposition. Yet, Bahrain has limited economic resources to sustain Sheikh Hamad's combined cunning and generosity for long. And, there were several structural constraints for how far he can make use of these powers. On their parts, leaders of the opposition cannot resist the pressure from their own constituencies to work for more tangible reforms.

Sheikh Hamad has been remarkably successful during the first two years of his rule in his attempts to augment his power base through, among other measures, co-opting some of regime's former opponents and upgrading some of them into notables, *wujha'a*, with right to intercede on behalf their own constituencies. But such a strategy, to paraphrase Michael C. Hudson's comments on 'the king's dilemma', would not continue to be viable.<sup>40</sup>

The current situation is unlikely to improve without introducing wider changes in the political culture and institutional balance of power between state and society including the relation of power between the royal family and other political actors in the country. There were at least two obvious sources of immediate backlash. The first is the ruling family's own uncertainties and internal squabbles that can be fuelled further by the expected challenges political reforms can pose to its tribal privileges and its dominating role within the state. The second is the snowballing effects of reforms particularly in encouraging more and more groups to put their claims forward.

The question remains: how far needs a non-democratic ruler move on the path of political reforms before realising that the reform process is becoming futile or even counterproductive? This is one of those questions that cannot be answered with any level certainty when one considers the short time that lapsed since the launch of reforms in Bahrain. However, a couple factors may need to be considered while speculating on the future direction of these reforms. First, the regime and its opponents seem to have concluded that neither side is likely to annihilate the other. Both realise that they need stability, a prerequisite for legitimate good governance and prosperity. This common objective has been demonstrated by the behaviour of all political actors since the plebiscite of February 2001. However, initial euphoria over a

smooth and speedy process of reforms has first turned into to a state of cautious optimism before reaching its threshold of a crisis. Mutual mistrust is a serious threat to any future collaborative attempts to rebuild bridges between the regime and his opponents. Second, the corrosive effects of past decades of misrule, mismanagement of resources and violations of human rights, makes current reforms appear temporary and unsustainable.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> C. Monga, Eight Problems with African Politics, *Journal of Democracy*, vol.8, issue.3, pp. 156-170
- <sup>2</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970, p. 177.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 177-191
- <sup>4</sup> I am using the term notables, wujaha', to designate those individuals who have acquired wealth and/or social status through their privileged access to the regime. Political leaders, include some of the notables but also those who have acquired social status and/or political influence through their political engagement within the informal political space, including the underground.
- <sup>5</sup> On the eve of the 1973 parliamentary elections, the Amir issued a formal decree re-structuring the '*al-Khalifa Family Council*'. According to that decree, the Council has become a formal organ of the state with an executive secretariat and full time administrative offices headed by an al-Khalifa, 'with a rank of a minister'. Formally, the Amir appoints members of the board of the '*al-Khalifa Family Council*'. However, members of the Council are recognised representatives of various kinship lines and factional alliances within the family. Within its formal meetings the council attends to internal family disputes, particularly those related to appropriation of land, sale of real estate and other properties. Regardless of their rank, members of the ruling family are not allowed to refer these or other disputes to ordinary law courts. Further, they are not allowed to enter any major transaction, particularly in real estate, without prior approval of the Council. Cf. A. Khalaf, *Unfinished Business: Contentious Politics and State-Building in Bahrain*, Lund University, 2000
- <sup>6</sup> For a more general discussion, cf. N.H. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1995 183-et seq.
- <sup>7</sup> Huntington, op.cit, pp. 177-191.
- <sup>8</sup> M. Mann, The Autonomous Power of the State, in John A. Hall, (ed.) *States in History*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, 1986:113.
- <sup>9</sup> Mann, loc.cit.
- <sup>10</sup> See translation of the full text in: <http://www.bahraintribune.com/others/charter.htm#one>
- <sup>11</sup> See translation of the full text in: <http://www.bahraintribune.com/others/charter.htm#one>
- <sup>12</sup> A. Amawi, Democracy Dilemmas in Jordan', *Middle East Report*, January-February, 1992, p. 27
- <sup>13</sup> Glenn E. Robinson, Defensive Democratization in Jordan, *International Journal of Middle East*, vol. 30, issue 3, 1998, p.387
- <sup>14</sup> See translation of the full text in: <http://www.bahraintribune.com/others/charter.htm#one>
- <sup>15</sup> Mohsin Marhoon, personal communication, 12 April, 2001.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Katherine Rath, The Process of Democratization in Jordan', *Middle East Studies*, Vol.30, No. 3, 1994, p.549
- <sup>17</sup> Robinson op.cit. p.390.
- <sup>18</sup> To clarify some ambiguities and general formulations in the text of Charter, an audience was held on February 8 with a delegation of prominent figures in the opposition headed by Shiekh Abdul Amir Al Jamri. According to Mr. Abdulwahab Hussain, who also attended, discussion was candid. The delegation wanted a clarification on two issues: whether the 1973 Constitution will be the governing criteria and whether the upper chamber will ever have legislative powers. A report on the meeting published by BFM also states that the Amir replied, "I give you my word as a gentleman that the 1973 Constitution will be the basis and that the upper house will only be for consultation". The opposition figures requested that these affirmations be published in the media. And the Amir responded. He ordered the Justice Minister to publish a statement that appeared in the two daily newspapers (Akhbar Al Khaleej and Al Ayyam) the next morning (9 February 2001) confirming that the 1973 Constitution will be the basis and that the upper chamber will be for consultation only.
- <sup>19</sup> R. Dahl, et. al (ed.) *Political Opposition in Western Europe*, New Haven Yale University Press, 1966, p. 397
- <sup>20</sup> In July 2002, there were at least sixteen 'political groupings', officially accredited as 'social associations' by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. They cover the full spectrum of what is known as the Bahraini Rainbow- ranging from reformed Communists to Muslim Brothers. Upon concluding registration formalities, officers of each association are granted an audience where they reiterated their 'support of the king's political reforms project', and received his royal blessings. While some of these associations have yet to define their constituency and political agenda, four or five have deep roots going far back in underground politics since 1950's.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf Q. Wiktorowicz, *Management of Islamic Activism, the Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan*, State University of New York Press, N.Y., 2001
- <sup>22</sup> I. Dalle, Mobile King and Static Society: Morocco: waiting for serious change, *LeMonde Diplomatique* June, 2001 <http://www.en.monde-diplomatique.fr/2001/06/>
- <sup>23</sup> Maghraoui, Abdeslam. Political Authority in Crisis: Mohammed VI's Morocco, *Middle East Report*, Spring, 2001,

<sup>24</sup> Krämer Gudrun 'Liberalization and Democracy in the Arab World', *Middle East Report*, January-February, 1992, p. 22

<sup>25</sup> Since 1975, Sheikh Khalifa has often appeared to follow a prebendalist logic – looking the other way, if not directly encouraging, senior officials to indulge in personal enrichment of oneself and one's family. The practice led to noticeable corruption in the government and public institutions. For the PM corruption appeared as just another conduit for consolidating control over the pyramid of patron-clients in the country. While individual office holders benefited from the prime minister's generosity, prebendalist practices made them both vulnerable, and in constant need to remain in the prime minister's good books.

<sup>26</sup> In private conversation with author on 28 June 2001. Dr Fakhro is one of the King's close advisors and generally assumed to be the architect of the reform process in Bahrain.

<sup>27</sup> See also, Gulf Centre for Strategic Studies, "National Charter of Action Referendum", *Bahrain Brief*, February 2001, Vol.2, Issue 2, <http://www.bahrainbrief.com.bh/english/february2001-issue.htm>

<sup>28</sup> The Kingdom of Bahrain, *The Explanatory Memorandum to the Constitution of Bahrain*, 14 February 2002

<sup>29</sup> An early public sign that indicated Sheikh Hamad's preferences and possible direction of his solution to the royal dilemma may be the use of *Tafweedh* and *Tajdeed Albaya'a* by Sheikh Abdulla bin Khalid al-Khalifa while handing him the draft National Charter to the Amir on the eve of the plebiscite. For most, the choice of those words seemed nothing more sinister than a florid use of Arabic. The same term emerged a year later in several statements by the King himself and by his spokespersons.

<sup>30</sup> The committee is said to have been assisted by a number of Arab and foreign experts in constitutional law including Jean Paulson (from France), Mohammed Ramzi Al Shaaer and Mohammed Mirghani (from Egypt), Abdul Latif Al Manoni (from Morocco) and Dhafer Hikmat (from Jordan). According to Dr. Abbas Hilal, President of the Bahrain Bar Association, 'No Bahrain expert was approached for consultation at anytime and at any level'. Personal communication, February 29, 2002)

<sup>31</sup> According to Mohsin Marhoon, a lawyer and a member of 1973 parliament who attended the audience of February 2, he requested to review the amended articles, his request was denied. He was allowed to accompany the Minister of Information to an adjoining room where he was read a few of the substantially amended articles of 1973 constitutions. Mohsin Marhoon, personal communication (February 4, 2002)

<sup>32</sup> A probably unrelated development occurred on 5 February 2002, when the head of the intelligence service, Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, summoned a number of prominent opposition figures to inform them that Bahraini authorities have been given a list of 99 Bahrainis on a US blacklist. The group were told that they have nothing to fear as long as they are in the country. The US embassy, according to reports, duly denied that such a list ever existed.

<sup>33</sup> For a compilation of some of these comments see, *Molahdhat Naqdiya ala al-Ta'adeelat al-Dustoriya fi al-Bahrain*, [Critical Notes on Constitutional Amendments in Bahrain], Dar al-Kunooz al-Adabiya, Beirut, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Several opposition groups agreed to coordinate their activities and, to that effect, hold regular meetings to review political developments. Following a meeting in 22 July, four political associations, Alwasat Arab Islamic Democratic Society, National Democratic Grouping Society, Alwefak National Islamic Society, National Democratic Action Society, issued a statement outlining their 'joint' position on controversial issues. While they support "without hesitation, taking more steps towards the achievement of His Majesty the King's reform project, which is supported by all citizens", they declare the following: a) the unilaterally declared 2002 constitution does not represent a contract between the government and people; b) that the constitutional amendments exceed what has been mandated the Charter. These amendments are a back down from what has been guaranteed by the 1973 constitution; c) recent royal decrees, especially those banning associations from fielding candidates and formulating electoral platforms eliminate the political role of these associations and create conditions for unlawful underground activities, and d) there must be a parity in number of voters in the different electoral districts. This statement reflects the general confusion prevailing in the country and the indecisive mood of political leaders. Authors of the statement are evidently dismayed by the King's unilateral amendments to the constitution, stopping just short of rejecting them outright, yet they continue to argue for re-considering such details as voters' parity among electoral districts.

<sup>35</sup> According to a report issued by the Bahrain Transparency Association, only 46.3% voted in the first round of the municipal elections on 9 May and 50,21% in the second round on 16 May. The Bahrain Transparency Association, 'Report on Municipal Elections held on 9 and 16 May, 2002', unpublished, June 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Results of these elections were a major topic for public debates. Only a fraction of the heated debate was reported in local media. While liberal and leftist groups and independent candidates put the blame for their poor showing by references to religious candidates 'unfair' use of religious symbols, the open support they received from senior clerics who banned 'non-religious candidates' The Bahraini daily *al-Ayam*, published on May 19, 2002 an interview with Dr. Mohammad Jaber Al-Ansari, another of the King's close advisors, calling upon 'liberal forces to learn from this lesson' and to begin to recognize that they cannot survive the current political climate where extremism is on the rise without the protection that the state can provide. Liberals, he warned

should not take lightly the menace of these rising extremisms, because the liberals themselves will be the first to be 'devoured' at any future political contention. Other writers have discussed the same issue from other perspectives. In a series of well-written columns discussing the process and results of municipal elections, Mr. Aqeel Swar counselled liberal and left groups to self critically review their own performance since the plebiscite instead of looking for scapegoats. ( *al-Ayam*, between May 11-19, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Personal communication (May 7, 2002) from an aid to one of the attending senior clerics.

<sup>38</sup> In its report on the municipal elections the Bahraini Transparency Association notes that this ban has caused 'confusion to both candidates and election officers. Because " lists of eligible voters included names of military and security services personnel' some were able to cast their vote using other forms of identification than their official identification cards.

<sup>39</sup> J. Waterbury, Fortuitous Byproducts, in Lisa Anderson (ed.) Transition to Democracy, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 279

<sup>40</sup> M.C. Hudson, Arab Politics - The Search for Legitimacy, Yale University Pres, p. 166