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**GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND ELITE-DRIVEN
REFORMS IN THE KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN**

by

Steven Wright

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GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND ELITE-DRIVEN REFORMS IN THE KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN

Steven Wright

1.0 INTRODUCTION

With the onset of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa's reign in March 1999, Bahrain embarked on an unexpected and radical departure from the political order of the past. Since Bahrain achieved full independence in 1971, the secure monarchical system had possessed a monopoly on political and legislative power. Historically, this status quo was only interrupted by a short-lived experiment with political enfranchisement following the adoption of a constitution in 1973. As this provided for an elected unicameral advisory legislature, Bahrain was viewed as one of the more progressive monarchies within the Arabian Gulf. Although elections did take place, the National Assembly and the constitution proved to be a brief experiment. The dissolution of the National Assembly mainly stemmed from its representatives objecting to the ability of the government to detain political suspects for up to three years without trial under the provisions of the 1965 Public Security Law. Compounding this, the privileges that the ruling Al Khalifa tribe enjoyed in terms of land and financial allowances were coming under increasing scrutiny.² As a result of such heated debates, Emir Isa bin Salman saw the National Assembly as intent on challenging the moral and religious legitimacy of the Al Khalifa, and thus opted to suspend the parliament in August 1975 while it was on its summer break. Legislative authority passed to the cabinet as parliament was not reconvened; this characterised the status quo in Bahrain until a new era of reform began under the newly styled monarch, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

The reforms under King Hamad mark a comprehensive break from the past, as they are not only geared to parliamentary and legislative restructuring but also encompass discernible changes within civil society. Such changes are having a noticeable impact on all levels of Bahraini society and underlines that a departure from the inequality in opportunity that characterised the old order, is taking place. In terms of the character of the reforms, this article will argue that Bahrain is experiencing an elite-driven and controlled reform process that is being enacted in a gradualist manner. It is moving towards liberalisation with aspects of democratic practice, but not at the expense of the privileged position of the ruling elite. However, these reforms are surprisingly not a product of any domestic, regional or international pressure, but rather come from a generational change that is being driven by King Hamad's own idiosyncrasies and desire to safeguard Bahrain's post-traditional tribal rule for the future. The strategy behind the reforms will be shown to be promoting liberalisation with limited democratisation, in order to solidify the power of the ruling tribe without the need for recourse to coercive means to maintain its position. In essence, it is a reform from above and the current role of civil society in furthering change will be shown to be promoting democratic consolidation but not acting as a fundamental driver of it. Given

² Emile A. Nakhleh, Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing Society (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1976).

these factors, in addition to other contextual issues that will be analysed, a key finding is that the manner in which Bahrain's reforms under King Hamad can be taken further at this stage will be shown to depart from traditional notions on democratic modernisation. There is a need for the opposition, NGOs and foreign state actors to adjust their reform promotion efforts in order to operate more effectively in this unique setting. The article will ultimately aim to show how adaptation to this unique situation can best be achieved in order for reform to be taken to the next level.

2.0 THE CONTEXT OF REFORM IN BAHRAIN

Although there have been a number of developmental achievements since Bahrain's assumption of independence in 1971, the political leadership of Emir Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa also inadvertently fostered the social and economic challenges which King Hamad faced upon his succession in 1999. Under Emir Isa bin Salman's rule, there was an emphasis on maintaining security in order to safeguard the political order. Not only was this a means of ensuring that Bahrain was a stable and secure haven for foreign direct investment, but to a certain extent it was also influenced by the West's desire to maintain the status quo to ensure a secure flow of oil resources from the region. Indeed, this epitomized US foreign policy towards the Arabian Gulf during the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, which served as encouragement to Bahrain's leaders to opt for a firm long-term maintenance of the existing political order. Whilst Bahrain did achieve these objectives, the manner in which it did so had unforeseen consequences on civil society and the economy.

The most important consequence for civil society was that it fostered socio-political and economic alienation within large sections of Bahrain's Sunni and Shi'a sects. This is particularly pertinent as the Shi'a sect is commonly accepted as forming the majority of Bahrain's population.³ That said it is increasingly difficult to give an accurate picture as the government has granted citizenship to a large number of Sunnis from countries within the region to bolster its sectarian support base.⁴ The key point here is that the government's strong emphasis on internal security and autocratic rule did not lend itself towards an equal distribution of wealth or economic opportunity for the majority of Bahrain's society. Indeed, it resulted in the government increasingly aligning itself with loyal tribal elites, who were typically of the Sunni sect, to secure its own position. This developed into a mutually reinforcing political status quo in where these tribal elites benefited from the privileged position they held in society and conversely contributed towards its maintenance under what amounted to a rentier state system.⁵

An important point to recognize is that it is a common mistake for writers on Bahraini politics and society to assert that the Shi'a are widely impoverished whilst the less numerous Sunni sects enjoy a much higher degree of wealth; this paints a stark sectarian divide. This perception does not accurately represent Bahrain's society as poverty is equally found in Sunni villages and amongst urban Sunni families. A more valid understanding is that a minority of Sunni tribal elites, and a small number of loyal commercial Shi'a families who are allies to the ruling Al Khalifa, enjoy exceptional economic wealth and political privileges. Given the privileges such elites enjoy, they have a vested interest in the maintenance of the political order. But when we consider the root causes of this structure, which clearly excludes the vast majority of the Shi'a, recognition should be given to the historical context. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, a close relationship developed between Iran's new revolutionary

³ Estimates are varied and suggest that the Shi'a constitute 50-80% of Bahrain's population. Given that no survey has ever been conducted on this issue, it is simply not possible to determine a valid sectarian picture of Bahrain; however, secondary-source material consistently indicates that the Shi'a are the dominant indigenous religious sect in Bahrain.

⁴ Habib Trabelsi, "Bahrain's Shiite Muslims Cry Foul over Dual Nationality Plan," *Khaleej Times* 16 June 2002.

⁵ Louay Bahry, "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11.3 (2000): 129-43.

government and many Shi'a in Bahrain. Indeed, it is understandable why a great deal of mutual mistrust has been fostered over time. Firstly, a number of Bahraini Shi'a were implicated in an Iranian-backed coup attempt in 1981, and secondly there were a series of uprisings and calls for the overthrow of the Al Khalifa in the period preceding the revolution.

When all this is viewed within the context of Bahrain's unique sectarian and economic character within the Gulf monarchies, the conditions for the development of genuine middle class stood in marked contrast to the emerging picture in Saudi Arabia for example.⁶ Without the growth of a strong private commercial sector, the growth potential for a middle class that would have an interest and capacity to fight for a greater political voice is limited. A secure middle class would also moderate the opposition and give the government the self-confidence to move forward with reform. With Bahrain's socio-economic structure showing little evidence of a stable middle class, the ability for civil society to currently act as a fundamental driver of reform is limited. This lessens the prospect that a gradualist transition may be achieved through long-term economic success as happened in South Korea and Taiwan.⁷

The socio-political structure described has resulted in steadily growing unemployment, poverty and resentment within large sections of Bahrain's alienated society: importantly this applies to both Shi'a and Sunni sects.⁸ The economically deprived and politically alienated position of large sections of Bahrain's diverse society ultimately resulted in a series of violent riots and sabotage in the mid-1990s, which only ceased after a sustained and effective internal security crackdown. Emir Isa bin Salman's political objective of maintaining stability, in addition to the historical context of the alignment of Bahraini Shi'a with revolutionary Iran against the Al Khalifa, contributed towards long-term domestic challenges to Bahrain's own national security.

With the beginning of King Hamad's reign, these social and economic realities held the potential to threaten Bahrain's security once more. Although the uprising of the mid 1990s had been brought under control, periodic street protests and underground opposition continued.⁹ With official unemployment in 2002 standing at 15%, and the size of the workforce projected to double by 2013 because of a youthful population, the need for sustained economic development and reform which afforded equal opportunity appeared a necessity to quell the risk of future disturbances.¹⁰ Indeed, even when the most optimistic assessment on Bahrain's growth rates is factored in, official unemployment will by 2013 be in the region of 30-35%.¹¹ All the same, this did not mean that King Hamad had to undertake

⁶ Giacomo Luciani, "From Private Sector to National Bourgeoisie: Saudi Business," Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs, eds. Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (New York: New York University Press, 2005) 144-81.

⁷ Stephan Haggard, The International Political Economy and the Developing Countries (Brookfield: E. Elgar, 1995).

⁸ For a detailed discussion on Bahrain's sectarian identity, see: Fuad Khuri, Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁹ Munira Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment," The Persian Gulf at the Millennium : Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion, eds. Gary Sick and Lawrence G. Potter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 167-88.

¹⁰ Bahrain Economic Development Board, Reforming Bahrain's Labour Market (BEDB, 2004), 2-19.

¹¹ Ibid.

such reforms: his position, along with that of the ruling tribe, was viewed as secure for the foreseeable future.¹² The main reason is that the ruling tribe felt they could rely on two factors to secure their position: first, the government could rely on the effectiveness and loyalty of the armed forces and internal security apparatus in quashing any domestic challenge. Indeed, with the Bahraini armed forces and internal security services having a large number of foreign nationals and having excluded Shi'a from their ranks, there appears to be a genuine sense within the ruling Al Khalifa tribe that their control over and loyalty from the coercive arm of the state are sufficient to safeguard their position. Second, there is a widely held view among the ruling elite that it could rely on support from close allies in several of the GCC ruling tribes, such as the Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, if the internal situation became too difficult to manage.¹³ Although such support networks are seen to be substantive in terms of direct intervention if necessary, the real importance is mainly psychological as it reinforces the sense of security and power of the elites over civil society.

Therefore, the key question is why would reform potentially pose a challenge to the elites given the effectiveness of the security forces and regional support networks in controlling civil society? Here the answer lies in the inability for an effective social mobilization within civil society to develop into a credible political force, stemming from the comprehensive powers exercised by the state. The challenge liberalization and democratization pose to the ruling elites is that it could ultimately result in social mobilization against them which may not be fully controllable by the coercive arm of the state.

Although domestically King Hamad did not feel the need to depart from the status quo through any current or future concerns to the ruling elite's position, a similar picture emerges when we consider influencing factors on the regional and global levels. Gause has rightly argued that external factors can largely explain the staying power of Gulf monarchies¹⁴ and such a view has currency when viewed within the context of US grand strategy. The reforms in Bahrain, however, are not satisfactorily explained by this rubric. Indeed, the reform initiatives do not appear to be a product of regional pressure. Although some Gulf monarchies such as Qatar and Kuwait were undertaking further liberalization at the time of King Hamad's succession to the throne, other countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Saudi Arabia were not following the same course. King Hamad may have been motivated by a desire to be seen as the most progressive reformer within the GCC, but this is unlikely to have been a determining factor.¹⁵

On a global level, Bahrain's reforms began in the immediate period following the death of Emir Isa bin Salman in 1999 and before the change in the United States' position towards

¹² For a good analysis of internal and external power relationships which are relevant to Bahrain, see: Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origin, Mechanisms and Results," States in History, ed. John A. Hall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

¹³ Fred Lawson, Bahrain: The Modernization of Autocracy (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989).; Jill Crystal, Oil and Politics in the Gulf : Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar, Updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).; F. Gregory. Gause III, "The Persistence of Monarchies in the Arabia Peninsula: A Comparative Analysis," Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

¹⁴ Gause III, "The Persistence of Monarchies in the Arabia Peninsula: A Comparative Analysis."

¹⁵ Interviews in Bahrain, June 2006.

regional reform following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.¹⁶ So the degree to which diplomatic pressure from key international countries played a role is of contextual worth but not a substantive explanatory factor. Indeed, the majority of Bahrain's initiatives occurred prior to the codification of the United States' Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative of June 2004, which saw the promotion of democracy as a strategic objective come into full force.

In terms of understanding the driving force of Sheikh Hamad's new reform agenda, it is appropriate to view it as a clear example of a *controlled elite driven revolutionary reform*. Here, a distinction needs to be made between the substantive determining factors and contextual issues which only have a modest impact. The King was not in a position whereby he had to implement such reforms. As history shows with the short-lived unicameral parliament of 1973-75, reform of this character could easily be reversed if it is viewed by the elites as posing a threat to the historical social and political status quo.¹⁷ Control and the impetus of reform clearly resided with the new ruler of Bahrain and is thus a product of generational change. King Hamad's efforts in this regard appear to stem not only out of a genuine benevolent attitude towards his citizens, but also out of a realization that if he could successfully liberalize Bahrain, he would also be able to give the ruling tribe legitimacy to secure its post-traditional¹⁸ position of power. Therefore, the strategic objective is to maintain the ruling elite's privileged position without a clear reliance on coercion: liberalization and limited aspects of democratization are thus seen as the key towards increasing the ruling monarchy's legitimacy and staying power. With this being the central strategy of the ruling elite to ensure a continuance of tribal monarchical rule, it is interesting to note that Emir Isa bin Salman proved unsuccessful in achieving this, but nevertheless attempted it with the short-lived parliament and constitution of 1973-75.¹⁹ Following Bahrain's generational change in 1999, the new ruler has once more taken up the challenge in order to ensure the longevity of monarchical rule.

¹⁶ Thomas Carothers, Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004) 237-50.

¹⁷ From 1975 to 2002, the parliament was suspended and legislative powers were assumed by the cabinet.

¹⁸ It is insufficient to view Bahrain as either a traditional or neo-traditional state as longstanding practice has evolved and changed. Therefore, Nonneman's formula of seeing Gulf States as post-traditional but using neo-traditionalist practice would be a more accurate depiction. See: Gerd Nonneman, "Political Reform in the Gulf Monarchies: From Liberalisation to Democratisation? A Comparative Perspective," Durham Middle East Papers 80.6 (2006): 3-4.

¹⁹ Gianluca P. Parolin, "Generations of Gulf Constitutions: Paths and Perspectives," Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf, eds. Abdulhadi Khalaf and Giacomo Luciani (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006).

3.0 A NEW ELITE DRIVEN REFORM INITIATIVE

The new reforms did, however, take a great number of seasoned observers by surprise as King Hamad was thought to have a more traditional outlook on account of his tribal affinities and also his long-standing military background.²⁰ Moreover, the structure of Bahrain's political system was seen as a clear obstacle to reform given both the more traditional elements within the government and the experience shortly after independence.²¹ The King's uncle, Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman, was accepted the *de facto* ruler of Bahrain during the reign of Emir Isa bin Salman, and was commonly seen as unwilling to support a break from the past given his more conservative outlook on political life. Moreover, the extent to which elites within the government would be willing to support reform, potentially challenging their privileged position, was a key issue which played heavily in the internal government debate about reform. But the overarching contextual factor remained the memory of the abolition of the parliament in 1975 on account of opposition leaders using their position to challenge the post-traditional rule of the Al Khalifa. Given the distribution of power within the ruling government, the extent to which the more conservative elements, mainly the Prime Minister and his inner circle, would be supportive of the pragmatic zeal held by the new King and the Crown Prince was questioned. Indeed, Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad is known to have a progressive development vision of his own for Bahrain and it is generally accepted that he played a very influential role in encouraging his father to embark on this radically new political course.

Soon after his succession, Sheikh Hamad began a process of national dialogue and consultation with the wider society on their concerns and aspirations for the future. He made the gesture of meeting with a series of Shi'a religious figures in their own houses and met on a near daily basis in his palace with former exiles, journalists, religious leaders and civil society representatives to hear their concerns. There was clear evidence that a pragmatic break from the past was emerging under the new ruler of Bahrain. His popularity rose to new heights during this consultation period and he was famously lifted on the shoulders of villagers and cheered for his new pragmatism.²² During this active consultation period, Bahrain's most well known opposition figure, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al Jamri, was convicted on charges of espionage and inciting social disorder in July 1999. The new Emir pardoned Sheikh Abdul the following day. This was the start of a series of royal gestures (*makramas*) geared towards the opposition in order to show the King's genuine desire for reform and also to bolster his support base in society.²³ This included the pardoning of all political opponents, which translated to the release of all detainees who were being held for their role in the unrest

²⁰ King Hamad served as Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defence Force whilst Crown Prince.

²¹ It should be recognized the ruling Al Khalifa tribe can be viewed as synonymous with the government of Bahrain. An example of this is that the inscription in the Bahraini passport which states that the Al Khalifa tribe is the owner rather than mere leader of Bahrain.

²² Given Bahrain's political structure, generational change and the idiosyncrasies of the ruler has been a decisive factor in shaping its politics. See: Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Salman Bin Hamad Al-Khalifa: Ruler of Bahrain, 1942-1961* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995).

²³ Abduldadi Khalaf, "The King's Dilemma: Obstacle to Political Reform in Bahrain," (European University Institute: Forth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, 2003), 17-20.

of the 1990s and also the restoration of citizenship²⁴ for exiles in order to allow them to return to Bahrain.²⁵ Key among these initial gestures towards the opposition was the abolition of the State Security Court and State Security Law which granted the government exceptional rights to ensure internal security.²⁶ The changes included the forced retirement of Ian Henderson in July 2000, a British national and Head of Bahrain's State Security Investigations Directorate, who was regarded by the opposition and international organisations as a major perpetrator of human rights abuses.²⁷ With King Hamad taking such measures, he had gone a considerable way to addressing one of the key demands of the opposition and had firmly established himself as a pragmatic reformer who aimed to give Bahrain a "fresh start".²⁸

Although this was a major and progressive move, a common complaint amongst the opposition is that there has been a failure to bring to account the perpetrators of past major human rights abuses on account of legal immunity being granted.²⁹ While the opposition is right to press for such a demand, it should also seek for a fair trial of those now pardoned prisoners who were charged with severe crimes such as murder or bombings. It is important for the opposition to do this, not only to distance itself from such events, but also in order to show recognition that severe crimes were committed not only by the government, but also by some unrepresentative and highly radical members in wider society. This would allow for the construction of a fair and just national reconciliation process, and would thus likely be seen as a legitimate demand by the government.³⁰

Although the State Security reforms were a sign of a "fresh start" for Bahrain and have had a noticeable impact on Bahraini society, there were also a series of royal gestures enacted in quick succession shortly after the King assumed power. These included the provision of free electricity for around 10,000 impoverished families; cutting education fees at the University Bahrain by 80%; reducing import tariffs by upwards of 10% on vehicles; and offering financial assistance for single parent families and orphans. Whilst this list is neither exhaustive nor challenges the structure of Bahrain's political system, these gestures are important as they constituted part of the domestic political context during the onset of the series of radical reforms implemented. Overall, such initiatives can be viewed as having compounded the political measures undertaken and thus solidified the King's popularity as a benevolent ruler.

²⁴ Citizenship was also granted to the *Bidoons* of Bahrain: these are a group within society who were not granted citizenship even if they were born in Bahrain and were thus stateless people.

²⁵ Key among these was Dr Mansoor bin Abdul Amir Al Jamri, who was the leader of the Bahrain Freedom Movement in exile and later Editor-in-Chief of Bahrain's first independent newspaper *Al Wasat*, had his citizenship restored and was allowed to freely return to Bahrain.

²⁶ The State Security Laws in question allowed the police to hold prisoners without issuing charges.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, Routine Abuse, Routine Denial: Civil Rights and the Political Crisis in Bahrain (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1997).

²⁸ This also included the removal of Henderson's deputy, Adel Flaifel, who was originally from Jordan and has been accused of involvement in several human rights violations towards the political opposition within Bahrain.

²⁹ All State Security officials were granted legal immunity against prosecution on human rights issues by the Impunity Code No. 56 in 2002. However, there has been a failure to investigate human rights violations by security officials since this code was enacted.

³⁰ The elected *Majlis Al Nuwab* rejected the establishment of an independent National Human Rights Commission in March 2005.

The new ruler of Bahrain thus acted in both a pragmatic and strategic fashion in the initial stages of the reform process. Through providing this wide-ranging series of royal gestures within a relatively short period, he has been able to foster a strong support amongst the general public of Bahrain. Indeed, it is noticeable within Bahrain that the King and Crown Prince enjoy a high level of support throughout society as they are seen to be actively working towards the advancement of Bahrain's people as a whole. By doing so, the King has also contributed towards his own legitimacy. Such legitimacy in turn has made him more able to achieve reform through peaceful national consensus: ensuring popular legitimacy for the regime is thus critical for the King to be able to successfully overcome the more conservative and powerful elements within the government, which evidence indicates he needs to achieve in order to carry out his reformist objective. Without the conviction of more traditional and powerful elites, such as Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman, on whether reform will undermine the very social and political fabric of Bahrain and also pose a challenge to their own position, further reform is unlikely. Therefore a key opportunity and challenge for the opposition is to work with the King by acknowledging and supporting his initiatives, rather than in some cases challenging the concept of tribal rule by the Al Khalifa or protesting for increased reforms through unruly demonstrations. An initial observation which can be made here is that there is an opportunity for both sides to engage in a patient but focused dialogue to achieve this. Such dialogue is likely to have a much more successful impact on allowing pragmatism to overcome the cautious traditionalism within the ruling elites. In many respects, the ability of the King to garner support within key sections of the government will be indicative of whether he will be able to implement further substantive reforms in Bahrain.

3.1 Constitutional and Legislative Reform

Although King Hamad implemented a number of substantive reforms and gave political gestures to bolster support behind the new political agenda, the most important reform measures have centred on the constitutional reform which began in late November 2000. The King established a Supreme National Committee which was tasked with formulating a National Charter for Bahrain that would specify a framework for a constitutionally grounded political system. A key objective was to affirm Bahrain as a constitutional monarchy and to make alterations to the original 1973 constitution. The Committee comprised forty-six leading Bahrainis from government, academia and the private sector. It included six women and several noted critics of the government.

Within the National Charter, the wording used on the new National Assembly was relatively vague: "the first council shall be formed through direct and free elections and shall have legislative attributes. The second council shall be appointed and shall comprise people of experience and competence who will offer their advice and knowledge when needed."³¹ With this ambiguity, Sheikh Hamad found there was a growing level of resistance from key Shi'a leaders within Bahrain. Specifically, their objection was that the appointed *Majlis Al Shura*³²

³¹ Text of the National Charter, as published in the *Bahrain Tribune*, 21 December 2001.

³² The *Majlis Al Shura* was established in December 1992 as an advisory body with a legislative capacity restricted to proposing and writing legislation for approval by the cabinet office.

may have a legislative capacity: their view was firmly that the elected *Majlis Al Nuwab* should be the only legislative body in the National Assembly. The King publicly agreed to their demands and signed a document which gave an undertaking for the newly constituted National Assembly to have this revised character. It is clear from this episode that the demands of the opposition were far reaching and firmly fixed on the objective of seeing Bahrain transform itself into a truly representative democracy rather than mere liberalisation. With these obstacles overcome, the National Charter was duly put to a referendum on the 14-15 February 2001. Despite fears from the government that a number of people would boycott the referendum, it received public backing from the opposition which was a key factor in achieving the astonishing turnout of 90% of the eligible electorate³³ with 98.4% of them voting in favour of the National Charter.

The adoption of the National Charter was a clear victory for King Hamad: the level of optimism within Bahrain's society and outflow of national pride which followed the referendum was unprecedented. The composition of the new National Assembly, *Majlis Al Watani*, was announced with the release of the new constitution, approximately one year after the referendum.³⁴ Despite the national dialogue and the undertaking that the elected *Majlis Al Nuwab* would act as the sole legislature, the new framework provided for a bicameral system where the appointed *Majlis Al Shura* would also have a legislative capacity.³⁵ Moreover, with the President of the *Majlis Al Shura* having a casting vote in the event of deadlock, the opposition saw this as evidence of a legislature lacking true substance. Opponents were dismayed at this announcement as they saw it as a clear breach of trust by the King to carry out his public undertaking for a sole democratically elected legislature and saw it as a step away from democracy.³⁶ Moreover, the opposition uniformly criticised the constitution as a unilateral act which lacked transparency and saw no substantive role played by opposition figures in the drafting process.³⁷ Importantly, the 2002 constitution stipulated in Article 120 that no constitutional amendment was permissible by the parliament on the provision for a bicameral system under hereditary rule. Therefore, the 2002 constitution safeguarded the post-traditional rule of the Al Khalifa and prevented any *de jure* future change by the parliament towards fulfilling the opposition's demand for the *Majlis Al Shura* not to have a legislative capacity if it were comprised of appointed officials. In other words, future changes on the structure or composition of Bahrain's legislature is not possible through constitutional amendments by the parliament, but is, however, achievable through a decree of the King under Article 35.³⁸ This underlines the interpretation that Bahrain is experiencing a gradualist elite driven and *controlled* reform process: future reform thus depends on the support the King enjoys from the conservatives within the government and his own willingness to go forward.

³³ Voting is based on universal suffrage for Bahraini citizens aged over 20 years.

³⁴ The King has the right under the constitution to dissolve parliament and although retains the power of veto on legislation, the National Assembly may overturn this by a two thirds majority vote. Given that this would require a number of the appointed *Majlis Al Shura* to vote against the King, such an eventuality is

³⁵ Both houses of parliament comprise forty members, whom serve for four year renewable terms of office.

³⁶ Michael Herb, "Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal* 56.3 (2004): 376.

³⁷ Khalaf, "The King's Dilemma: Obstacle to Political Reform in Bahrain," 3-19.

³⁸ The Constitutional Court, provided for in Article 106 of the 2002 Constitution, only gives it the right to rule on the constitutionality of legislation and it does not give it the authority to change the constitution.

Following the adoption of the constitution, municipal elections were held in May 2002 – the first since 1957.³⁹ 306 candidates, including 34 women, competed for 50 seats in five governorates. Voter turnout amounted to 51% of the registered electorate, but what made it of unique significance was that it was the first election in Bahrain's history to be conducted on the basis of universal suffrage: women were allowed to both vote and stand as candidates.⁴⁰ The results of the election constituted a major victory for the Islamists, primarily from the Shi'a Al Wefaq National Islamic Society.⁴¹

Although the main opposition party, Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, participated in the municipal elections, it opted to boycott the 2002 parliamentary elections as a protest about the provisions in the constitution on the role of the appointed *Majlis Al Shura*. Moreover, their boycott was on the grounds of gerrymandering electoral districts through having an appointed legislature. In this regard, Bahrain was demarcated into 12 municipalities within 5 governorates;⁴² in some districts there were as few as 500 registered voters while in others there were over 10,000. This underscores that although reform had taken place, the government still wanted to maintain control in order to ensure the reforms did not take on a momentum of their own and potentially challenge the social or political structure of the country. This is especially important given it was a time of rising unemployment and social deprivation as historically such reactive politics resulted in the 1975 dissolution of parliament and the government ignoring constitutional articles.

The parliamentary elections subsequently took place in October 2002, two years ahead of schedule. The turnout for the first round of voting was 53%, and 43% for the second. The 10% fall in electoral participation can mainly be ascribed to the boycott call on behalf of the Al Wefaq National Islamic Society as well as other prominent societies.⁴³ Regardless of such, the results from the election saw the lion's share of seats go to Islamist candidates, but no females were elected. In total, 174 candidates, including eight women, competed for 40 seats.⁴⁴ The next election for the *Majlis Al Nuwab* is scheduled for late 2006 and a higher number of female candidates are expected, but the participation of all of the societies is unclear as their prerequisite of further constitutional reform has not been met.

Although allowing the appointed *Majlis Al Shura* a legislative capacity was a reversal of policy which prompted the boycott, what is not commonly appreciated is why this occurred. Behind this policy decision was the opposition King Hamad received from within more conservative elements of the government, mainly stemming from the experience of the previous constitution and parliament in the 1970s. The conservatives, such as the powerful Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman and his inner circle, were not necessarily against

³⁹ The municipalities have no political role and are merely geared towards the provision of social services.

⁴⁰ Women accounted for 52% of all voters, but no female candidates were elected.

⁴¹ With the absence of political parties, the most effective politically mobilizing force within Bahrain is Islam and thus goes some way to account for the ineffectiveness of more secular alternatives.

⁴² Each governorate has an elected 10 member council and oversight and control is exercised from the Ministry for Municipal Affairs.

⁴³ The other key political societies which called for a boycott are: the Arab Nationalist Democratic Society; the Secular National Democratic Action Society; and the Islamic Action Society.

⁴⁴ Sunni Islamists won 20 seats and on account of the majority of leading Shi'a societies boycotting the election, the Shi'a societies that contested won 4 seats.

reform per se, but saw reform which moved too quickly as potentially counterproductive, and to some a potential challenge to the privileges that they enjoyed. Indeed, through ushering in a radical series of changes, especially within the legislature, the conservatives view was that over hasty reform could result in knee-jerk reactive politics which could ultimately pose a challenge to national stability. Memory of the unicameral parliament of 1973-75 was still fresh and the argument for having a second elected chamber as a safeguard was persuasive for the conservatives. That is to say, the King and the Crown Prince were forced to compromise on their plans for legislature reform in order to ensure they had a viable degree of support within the ruling elite. Whilst the King's objective of achieving a wholly elected bicameral legislature may still exist, it very much seems as though it will now only be achieved as part of a long-term strategy. The final analysis that can be made is that this will hinge on whether the conservative elites within the government feel that such moves towards democracy would not be politically counterproductive to national stability and also on their own position in the absence of sufficient popular legitimacy.⁴⁵

3.2 Progressive Developments in Civil Society

When examining the question of reform in Bahrain, it should not be overlooked that a great deal of reforms other than structural has been accomplished. One of the most noteworthy achievements has been the expansion and promotion of women's and family issues. In August 2001, the King created the Supreme Council for Women whose purpose is to advise the government and act as a coordinating body for the government on women's issues. The Council is headed by the King's wife, Sheikha Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, and consists of 14 experts. It works closely with all Ministries, but mainly with Education, Health, Labour, and Social Development. Moreover, it engages with a number of NGOs within Bahrain and internationally to further women's initiatives whilst also bringing Bahrain's own practice in line with established international codes. In terms of the participation of women in political life, Sheikha Sabeeka has been instrumental in calling for women to participate more actively in municipal and parliamentary elections.

One of the most noteworthy campaigns which the Supreme Council for Women is spearheading is an attempt to change the personal status law for women. Bahraini women currently enjoy the same rights as men apart from personal status issues, such as divorce or inheritance, which is governed exclusively by Islamic Sharia law. Within this, there are substantial differences in the manner in which a Shi'a and Sunni woman would be treated. For example, although women from either sect have the right to petition a religious court for a divorce, it may equally refuse such a request. With regard to inheritance, women of either sect may inherit property in the absence of a male heir, but whilst a Shi'a woman would inherit all property, a Sunni woman would only receive a limited proportion.

The Supreme Council for Women aims to have legal codification on the matter in order to ensure legal equality for women and to remove the arbitrariness of Sharia court rulings, which

⁴⁵ Daniel Brumberg, "Authoritarian Legacies and Reform Strategies in the Arab World," Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, eds. Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995) 229-60.

often go against women especially in cases of divorce and child custody. The importance of the activities of the Supreme Council should not be underestimated as by achieving change within the family unit through promoting a more equitable role for women, it has the potential to challenge the patriarchal culture which cross-cuts Bahrain. Here, the challenge for the wider opposition is to recognize that such initiatives at the civil society level are linked to those at the political level. Pragmatism on the part of the opposition to seek a compromise concerning such initiatives has the potential to have a progressive impact on the political reform process in the long-term. Overall, such initiatives underscore that substantive and progressive reforms are being carried out even at the heart of society: this shows that King Hamad has the potential for a fundamental change in all levels of Bahrain.

A further area of reform which should be recognized concerns the manner in which civil society organizations can be constituted. Prior to the new era of reform, organizations in civil society were strictly regulated by the Law of Associations of 1989.⁴⁶ This law required all groups to be licensed and prohibited political activities by any organization. Whilst such organizations still have to seek a license to operate from the Ministry of Social Development, there has been a discernable increase in NGOs since the onset of King Hamad's reign. This is most likely down to the relaxation of freedom of speech and press since the new reforms began⁴⁷ and also from the government actually encouraging NGO activities in key areas such as women's rights or education. Currently there are just under 400 NGOs registered in Bahrain and this number is steadily rising. This is despite King Hamad ratifying a law in 2005 which placed regulations on the operation of politically orientated societies: the law required all such societies to register with the Ministry of Justice and prohibited any foreign funding.⁴⁸ Indeed, the issue of foreign funding was the key reason why the Washington based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs had its license revoked in 2006 as it went beyond the confines of this provision. Whilst foreign NGOs may engage in training or provide advice to Bahraini political societies, their support must not be financial. Nevertheless, the government is in favour of a gradual opening up of civil society, but it does not yet feel comfortable with removing restrictions on associations acting in a truly political capacity. The final analysis indicates that without such restrictions being lifted, the ability of civil society to have a substantive impact on furthering reform will remain limited.

One key development, however, was the government's establishment of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) in 2002, with the purpose of providing training and research on such issues. This was a significant undertaking by King Hamad as it was the first such human rights centre in the GCC. Whilst the BCHR has had success as an institution in drawing international attention to Bahrain's past and current human rights record, its activities also brought it into conflict with the government. Indeed, the Executive Director of the BCHR, Abd Al Hadi Al Khawaja, was imprisoned in September 2004 for inciting hatred and calling for the overthrow of the Prime Minister. His stated purpose in this regard was to provoke a

⁴⁶ Established by Emiri Decree No.21 in 1989 and reinforced by Decree No. 1 of 1990 which regulated the internal operations of associations.

⁴⁷ Naomi Sakr, "Media Policy as a Litmus Test of Political Change in the GCC," Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf, eds. Abdulhadi Khalaf and Giacomo Luciani (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006) 132-56.

⁴⁸ Gianluca P. Parolin, "Generations of Gulf Constitutions: Paths and Perspectives," *Ibid.* 74-75.

crisis as he maintains the view that only through confrontation will social and political grievances be heard and acted upon by the government.⁴⁹ Given Al Khawaja's remarks, the BCHR was thus closed down for violating the 1989 Law of Associations. Moreover, in 2005 the BCHR, which was then operating unofficially, called on other associations to defy the 2005 law that demanded politically orientated associations register with the Ministry of Justice and restricted foreign funding. Even though there is some merit in the BCHR's principled position, it was also clearly breaching the law: this explains why it lost its March 2006 appeal to the government's decision to dissolve the Centre. However, since reform at this juncture is an elite driven and controlled progression, the most effective strategy for furthering it will come from recognizing that it is a gradual process and that it requires opposition movements, and reformers in civil society, to work with the government and within the confines of the law to achieve greater liberalisation which will allow them to have a substantive impact. Trying to work against the system in a confrontational manner will only strengthen the support base of the conservatives within the government and undermine the position of the pragmatists such as the King. Patience with the reform process is not, however, an easy thing especially in the context of rising unemployment and uncertainty on the future. The government has an opportunity in this regard: by showing a clear social, political and economic strategy for the long-term will at least give civil society a light at the end of the tunnel and would foster national unity behind the process.

⁴⁹ International Crisis Group, Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge (Brussels: ICG, 2005), 3-4.

4.0 THE IMPACT OF DEMONSTRATIONS ON REFORM

With the recognition that unemployment will inevitably rise to around 35-40% by 2012, the issue at hand is what impact will this have on society? Will there be a reversion to the widespread riots of the 1990s⁵⁰ which will give credibility to the view that reform may be counterproductive to national stability?⁵¹ In many respects, this will depend on the pragmatism of the opposition and the ability of the government to persuade the people that there is a clear development strategy which will lead to real improvements. In terms of civil society, it is noticeable that whilst the leaders of the opposition in Bahrain commonly use the analogy of Mahatma Gandhi in their speeches as an effort to ensure peaceful protest, this is often not fulfilled in practice. It is surprising that on many occasions a number of people who attend such protests have taken part due to thrill seeking and simple boredom. Nevertheless, it is common for the Arab-Israeli conflict to be used by protestors as a metaphor for Bahrain's society, justifying the use of violence. Compounding this is the propensity of disaffected Shi'a youths to idolize the Islamic revolutionary leaders in Iran: this is not necessarily out of a desire to see Iranians exercise rule over Bahrain or for Iran to undermine Bahrain's domestic politics,⁵² but more out of a zeal for their success in overthrowing the Shah of Iran, of whom some equate with the Al Khalifa.⁵³

Despite the general level of optimism around the onset of the reform period, street protests have once again returned to Bahrain. Although they are often prompted by a specific issue, one grievance that has common currency within the opposition and cross-cuts the protest marchers in general is for a more active consultation which shows meaningful and substantive reaction to their demands and aspirations. The need for a sustained and meaningful dialogue to ensure national consensus is thus of pressing importance. Whilst peaceful rallies do take place and promote reform, unruly demonstrations and sabotage also occurs and commonly results in both being painted with the same brush. This detracts from the positive influence of peaceful and controlled protest. The non-peaceful demonstrations typically comprise unemployed youths who commonly resort to burning tires, throwing rocks and spray painting graffiti which demand democracy or in some limited cases a revolution. Such revolutionary fervour is, however, unrepresentative and on the fringes of society and the opposition itself.⁵⁴ Whilst such issues indicate a clear underlying social challenge, they also underscore that a number of protests will turn violent as a minority of youths simply choose to provoke a reaction from the security forces: this is either down to thrill seeking or through a desire to

⁵⁰ The riots of 1990s were an example of mass social unrest in Bahrain. In 1994 for example around 40 people were killed in clashes with the security forces and some estimates place the number of people who received prison terms in the thousands. This is particularly indicative as the number of Bahraini nationals amounted to around 435,000.

⁵¹ Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment."

⁵² Iran was behind a well documented coup attempted in Bahrain in 1981 and is generally accepted as having maintained intelligence links with some religious figures in Bahrain's Shi'a community.

⁵³ Murals of Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamen'i can commonly be seen in rural Shi'a villages in Bahrain.

⁵⁴ Mainstream opposition leaders uniformly call for peaceful protest and do not call for an overthrow of the government. Individuals who call for more radical political action are typically of a younger generation and have a limited constituency: this is not only because of the existence of a well established mainstream political societies, but also down to internal security being effective in dealing with individuals that commit illegal acts through insighting such radicalism. Moreover, such radicalism is uniformly condemned by the mainstream opposition.

create publicity in the international press that Bahrain is repressive in dealing with political protest and free speech. Indeed, this is compounded by the often heavy handed tactics of Bahrain's security forces who have at times intervened preemptively. In either case, it seems that although demonstrations are ultimately controllable by the security forces, opposition leaders find it difficult to ensure restraint at their rallies and such unruly behaviour is wholly counterproductive to their objectives.

Although the opposition has gone to great pains to call for non-violent protest, the failure to achieve collective restraint on the part of the protestors has only underscored the government's perception that a further relaxation of internal security laws, political parties and freedom of protest, will pose a threat to national stability. But even more importantly, the selection of venues for protests by certain opposition figures, coupled with the risk that it may turn unruly, shows a limited realization on the part of the opposition in general that such activity would be counterproductive for their objectives. Indeed, with many selected venues for protests being sensitive, such as in commercial, diplomatic or government areas, it is hardly surprising that the government has clamped-down on such demonstrations. This stems not only from their potential illegality if outside a royal palace, but also that such demonstrations would pose a public safety risk and ultimately deter foreign investors especially if in commercial districts: prime examples being the December 2005 protest inside Bahrain's airport and the March 2006 one adjacent to the Dana Shopping Mall. This is particularly pertinent given economic reform and growth through foreign direct investment is the key to overcoming Bahrain's social problems. Given these factors, the government passed legislation in May 2006 which placed restrictions on where demonstrations could be mounted and required the organizers to inform authorities of them in advance on the grounds of public security.⁵⁵ But whilst the issue of legitimate protest is a right and can bolster public support behind a just political or social issue, in the case of Bahrain such unruly and unrestrained protests actually hamper the reform process. Indeed, the protestors do not seem to generally recognize that this prevents King Hamad from overcoming the conservative elements within the government, who have doubts on the implementation of further substantive reforms. So whilst examples in other countries where mass popular protest has pressured the government to change policies, in Bahrain the character of political system is such that public protest, even if peaceful, may actually undermine the potential for future reforms. The need for the government to provide an alternative vehicle for civil society to express its concerns and aspiration is thus a pressing need.

⁵⁵ The elected *Majlis Al Nuwab* passed legislation on 18th May 2006 which amended the Public Gatherings Law of 1973. It ban's demonstrations near airports, shopping malls, hospitals and locations deemed sensitive by the Minister of Interior. Protest organizers must give three days notice and assume full civil and criminal responsibility for any damage caused to public or private property. It also places restrictions on rallies so they cannot be held before 07:00 or after 23:00. It also adds the caveat that funeral processions must not act as a political rally.

5.0 SELECTED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Offering criticism on the reform process in Bahrain is relatively straightforward, but the challenge is to offer realistic solutions. It is all too common in the case of Bahrain's domestic politics for criticism to be offered without realistic policy solutions which seek to satisfy key needs and interests of not only the opposition, but also the government. Whilst the above analysis has offered cursory observations on opportunities which the government and opposition could seize in order to further the reform process, key challenges to Bahrain's future reform and possible means to overcome them are still outstanding. At this stage, the most important recognition should be that Bahrain's reforms are being driven and controlled by the elites in the government and thus the most effective strategy is for the opposition to work constructively with the government rather than challenge it. As indicated earlier, the ability of the King to take Bahrain to the next level in the reform process depends on his ability to counter the powerful conservative block within the government: an opposition which fails to bolster the support base of the reformers such as the King is highly unlikely to be successful.

What can be concluded from Bahrain's unique reform process is that an opposition conducting itself in the traditional normative use of the word, through continual criticism, mass demonstrations or steadfast opposition through unwillingness to compromise with the government, will ultimately prove to be counterproductive – this is a highly significant observation which challenges the generally accepted conception on how domestic associations in a reform process should operate. With the government in a secure position, it simply does not feel the need to initiate reforms in order to appease society: reforms are only being implemented on account of the personal idiosyncrasies of progressive elites. As the reforms could be rolled back, the role of the opposition in patriarchal monarchies such as Bahrain should be geared towards supporting the hand of the progressive reformers through showing loyalty and a willingness to compromise. This would strengthen the position of elite reformers against the conservatives and also counter their own concerns about whether such initiatives will wholly undermine their historical position along with the social fabric of the country.

Given this, what should be undertaken to best aid this unique elite driven and controlled reform process? In the first instance, a recognition of the key concerns of the opposition should be identified. In this regard, a common problem is that although the King and Crown Prince did engage in dialogue with large cross-sections of Bahrain's society since 1999, a widely held grievance is that the constitution and other reforms are simply royal gestures rather than evidence of a substantive response to the desires of the people. Indeed, the failure of the new constitution to provide for a sole elected legislature and the allowance of political parties is widely viewed as clear evidence of this. There is thus a widely held view within Bahrain that the people have not played a substantial role in the reform process: the reforms undertaken so far are very much elite driven by the King and Crown Prince. In some respects this is an inevitable consequence of the unique character of Bahrain's political system.

Directly related to this grievance, is that although King Hamad has ushered in a series of reforms which have had a notable impact on Bahrain, the reform process is perceived as

having slowed considerably with little or no new changes being carried out. This is compounded by the uncertainty of what steps will come next and to where the process is ultimately leading. As a result of this, the belief that people are not playing a substantive role in the reform process is reinforced and this serves as a mobilizing agent for demonstrations and overt opposition: this entrenches positions which reduce the desire to compromise.

Consultation and public information on the process is thus an issue of great significance in Bahrain and is a mechanism which will allow these challenges to be potentially overcome. Moreover, by combating them, it will also serve the key purpose of bolstering the reformists within the government against more conservative positions within the elites. It can be asked what should be done to achieve this?

With the traditional *Majlis* method of open consultation with ruling elites proving ineffective for civil society, a new initiative is needed. In order to realise the objective of increased consultation and information on the reform process, a series of public consultation working groups should be established. Their objective would be to act as a subject specific body that would aim to develop balanced policy recommendations for a Minister. Through frank engagement by the government with the opposition and civil society, it would also serve as an information conduit so that the public and opposition will better understand why the government cannot implement certain policies and also as a means for civil society to express its aspirations. With the objective being to develop a series of policy recommendations though compromise, it will allow both the opposition to play a role in policy formation and for a degree of national unity behind the reform process to be fostered. In essence, it would try to create a stakeholder society where civil society could feel it is playing a part in policy formation and have a stake in the government's success.

The manner in which such an initiative could be implemented would depend on the view of the Bahraini government, but a committee of experts or specialist group could be drawn from a cross-range of NGOs, political societies, business and academia in cases where such specialist bodies do not exist within a Ministry. As a core group, it could act as the coordinating body on the given issue. Here, working groups can be established on particular social or political issues such as, but not exclusively limited to: vocational training; institutional reform; welfare and poverty; education; women's issues; and even tourism promotion. Such working groups, could meet on a regular basis and be chaired at the undersecretary level. Furthermore, regular public forums held in each particular village, modelled on the United States' Town Hall meetings, would probably be the most effective conduit. All in all, the effect of such bodies would be twofold: firstly, people in civil society would be able to directly engage with government officials and make them better understand their needs and aspirations in addition to having a role in policy formation. Secondly, the public, in addition to opposition groups, would become aware of the restraints the government is under and thus would impact on the criticism being levied and the type of demands being called for. In essence, it would provide the opposition and public with a more valid understanding of the whole picture and make them more realistic and constructive in their demands. The most important function would, however, be one of public outreach and engagement.

Related to this policy initiative on public consultation is the issue of the direction in which Bahrain's reform process is heading. Given the increasingly held perception that the reform process has stalled, where does it go from here? Also, how should the government manage the social problems which are inevitably going to become more pronounced before any marked improvement is realized? For many in civil society, the answer is unclear. The key to addressing these issues is for it to be recognized that a successful economic development is an overarching objective which will cater for future reform. In essence the two issues are linked. For the government, the economic development board's strategy should be tied in with a clear political and social development package so the people see that there is a clear long-term strategy. Currently, the nature of future reforms is only discernable from the speeches of the King and key officials such as the Crown Prince. Whilst there is clarity on where the reform process is heading in economic terms, uncertainty exists on social and political issues.

In this regard, the government should seriously consider unveiling, after a period of consultation through the above process suggested, a joint social and political development strategy which captures what it is seeking to achieve, possibly in medium and long-term settings. Such a strategy should be flexible, and whilst it would be inadvisable for it to not state explicit deadlines, it could talk in general terms about medium to long-term goals once certain preconditions were met. In certain areas, the government could also codify from the speeches of the King, a clear picture of what Bahrain's political structure is being reformed into. For example, it could even consider identifying targets on literacy, employment, poverty and vocational training. The benefit of this approach is that civil society and the opposition will be assured Bahrain is truly reforming and that there is a clear strategy for it to be achieved. Yet for the government, the advantages of such an approach would likely be much greater. Specifically, it could, in tandem with such a strategy, acknowledge that unemployment and social hardship is going to become more pronounced in the short term but that there is a clear policy strategy for this to be overcome in the medium to long-term settings. The benefit of this approach is that the government would be able to prepare society for this difficult period, induced by a youthful demographic character; it would be able to better prevent social upheaval as happened during the 1990s. Preparing society for the hardship caused by demographics is thus a unique opportunity for the government. Though the government is linking this with its long-term developmental and liberalization strategy, it could borrow from the experience of Singapore in fostering stability within civil society. Indeed, Singapore's economic success can primarily be traced to the ruling People's Action Party having secured the social base of society and garnering popular support through economic restructuring through the announcement of periodic social and economic development strategies. Indeed, from 1959 to 2000, Singapore implemented five such development strategies in successive phases, roughly every ten years. Securing the base would enable Bahrain to create a secure economic climate conducive for foreign investors, which it needs to do in order to fulfil its foreign investment-led growth strategy. Fostering a national consensus behind this development and liberalization programme is thus the key to further social and political reforms in Bahrain.

6.0 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The most striking feature of Bahrain's reform process is that it is a radical departure from the past, at both the political level and within civil society, which only began with the onset of King Hamad's reign. So where is the reform coming from? Upon succession, his position domestically was completely secure through the effectiveness and loyalty of the internal security and armed forces in enforcing maintenance of the status quo with force if necessary. At this level, the new ruler of Bahrain was under no tangible pressure, despite rising unemployment and poverty, to implement reforms as the status quo was maintainable for the foreseeable future. On a regional level, although signs of reform were taking place in neighbouring Gulf countries such as Kuwait and Qatar, this by no means pressured King Hamad to break from the past in the manner he has done: regional and domestic pressure has therefore not been an instrumental factor in the case of Bahrain. Despite all of these being important contextual factors, the most valid explanation is that Bahrain's new era of reform is a product of generational change. Indeed, such political upheaval follows a historical pattern as Bahrain's political course has typically shifted in marked degrees upon the succession of a ruler.⁵⁶ Therefore, given King Hamad's genuine desire for an inclusive society in which all will benefit, in addition to securing the position of the ruling tribe for the long-term, Bahrain has embarked on a controlled reform process. In fact, the underlying objective of maintenance of the position of the ruling tribe has currency: it has been a consistent objective in Bahrain's colourful history and mirrors the picture of the other GCC countries.⁵⁷

The reform is, however, being implemented in a gradualist manner: mainly through the recognition that successful reform is a long-term process. This also stems from the need of the pro-reformers in government to overcome the conservative outlook of the ruling tribe who see overly hasty reform as counterproductive to their own position and also to Bahraini society. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the memory of the short-lived parliament and constitution following independence in 1971 underscores two key points: first, that there is a genuine concern of what such reforms could bring, and second, that reform can be halted or even undone by the ruling elites despite international pressure if deemed necessary. All in all, the strategic objective appears to be using liberalization and limited aspects of democratization towards increasing the ruling monarchy's legitimacy so it can maintain its privileged position without a reliance on coercion.

With Bahrain's reform being a gradualist elite driven and *controlled* process, a fundamentally different dynamic is facing the opposition, NGOs and foreign governments at this stage than would be experienced if power truly resided in civil society. Further liberalization will inevitably cede more power to civil society so it can become the driver of reform, but that stage has not yet been reached. Moreover, this is compounded by the absence of a genuine middle class. Bahrain's liberalization reforms will increasingly provide more power to civil society and this will slowly result in them emerging as a fundamental driver of reform. Overall, civil society is unlikely to have the ability to become a fundamental driver of reform

⁵⁶ Mohammed G. Al-Rumaihi, Bahrain: A Study on Social and Political Changes since the First World War (London: Bowker Publishing, 1976).

⁵⁷ Rosemarie Said Zahlan, The Making of the Modern Gulf State : Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, The Making of the Middle East (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

until the government undertakes further liberalisation to allow political parties and unions to operate as a viable political force. Without liberalisation in this regard, the pendulum of reform will remain in the government's hands. Therefore, a move towards civil society becoming a driver of reform will firstly depend on the willingness of the ruling elites to enact further liberalization, which in turn hinges on their own self-confidence to go forward. The government's relationship vis-à-vis NGOs, opposition groups and civil society will be the decisive factor in this crucial decision on whether to take Bahrain to the next level.

The opposition needs to recognize that political pressure in the traditional sense of demonstrations and an unwillingness to recognize reform as a gradualist process, coupled with a need for compromise, will in some respects undermine the very objective they are seeking to achieve. The reason for this is that there seems a general failure to recognize what the current character of Bahrain's reform process is, what is driving it and what impact the activities of the opposition are having. Whilst in countries such as Iran under the Shah, the power was shown to ultimately rest with the people, in Bahrain it is not the case as the internal security issue is completely different: not only is the security forces and military loyal due to their composition, but also Bahrain is very small in size and social unrest is manageable by the state. The ruling elites feel this security and certain types of pressure for reform are proving to be counterproductive force in Bahrain.

Given these factors, a change in tactics by those seeking to advance reform would be a more effective way of it achieving its objectives in Bahrain. However, as a first step, the onus is on the government to engage with the people and the opposition. Without this, the objective of providing the ruling elites with the self-confidence to enact further liberalization will be limited. A reform towards greater public information and consultation in addition to key reform related policy decisions would thus be a major progressive step that foreign states, NGOs, civil society activists and the opposition should focus their attention on. Achieving a new partnership for future reform would also benefit the government as it would play a significant role in countering alienation and developing a stakeholder society which would aid Bahrain's economic development strategy. In fact, with civil society increasingly seeing the role they can play in the reform process, support for the government and its reforms are likely to be greatly increased. Importantly, this will only be achievable if, as a first bold step, the government acts in a progressive manner towards more informative and substantive engagement with all of Bahraini society.

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