

## Bahrain's Kleptocracy in the Crosshairs

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### The Bahrain crisis reveals that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia are no longer on the same page: Riyadh perceives the White House as demanding universal freedoms from its friends, but not from its adversaries like Iran.

It is easy to see where Bahrain went wrong. It is much more difficult to figure out how to make it go right.

An indigenous Shiite Muslim population outnumbers Sunni citizens by two-to-one, but Shiites are socially and economically discriminated against by the Sunni ruling family. Despite little oil wealth, the al-Khalifa family has evolved over the past 10 years from a benign dictatorship into what often seems like an institutionalized kleptocracy.

The small island in the Persian Gulf, sandwiched between the mainland of Saudi Arabia and the peninsula of Qatar, is the latest Arab state to be swept by this winter's political winds of change. But it is no Egypt or Tunisia, where sweeping away the elderly dictator and his immediate family allows for a fresh start.

Demographically, Bahrain can be likened to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Saddam's Iraq also had a majority Shiite Muslim population; his notionally secular Baath Party was a fig leaf for Sunni Muslim control.

King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa is no Saddam, and his son, Crown Prince Salman, is no Uday, but there is the same distrust of Shiites among the ruling family as there was in the Iraqi dictator's Revolutionary Command Council. An American visitor, once hosted at a diplomatic dinner, was shocked to hear a member of the al-Khalifa family declare: "Shiites are like carpets. They are better when they are beaten."

Historians might judge the beginning of Saddam's decline from the time when his extended family stopped being the foundation of his regime and became a liability. Rivalries among cousins meant that whole branches had to be ruthlessly cut off. Marriages meant in-laws challenged the pecking order.

The al-Khalifa haven't had schisms of Babylonian proportions. Instead, the family has grown laterally while the reins of political power have remained firmly in the hands of the king, a variety of cousins, and the king's uncle, Sheikh Khalifa, who has been prime minister for more than 40 years. They, and other members of the tribe, have profited from the huge commercial expansion of Bahrain. Ordinary citizens -- probably around 600,000 in total -- have benefited from the trickle down, though the Shiite community less so.

No longer an oil producer of any consequence, Bahrain has still benefited from the high oil prices of recent years. Its banks have a reputation for efficiency. Its hotels, bars and restaurants have attracted many visitors, including Saudis who can drive across a 16-mile causeway completed in the 1980s.

A particular scheme for the al-Khalifa family has been gaining a slice of the action in resorts and luxury housing projects built on artificial islands constructed in the shallow coastal waters. When some of this activity stopped Shiite villagers from harvesting their traditional fishing grounds, there were protests. This week, protesters were further enraged by alleged documentary evidence that the prime minister had bought reclaimed land in the prestigious harbor area for the equivalent of \$3 and then resold it for huge profit.

One assumes that when Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East Jeffrey Feltman caught the first plane to Manama this week after Saudi forces rolled across the causeway, democracy was his main talking point. From the Bahraini side, it was almost certainly Iran. The al-Khalifa, who remember the pre-1970s when Tehran claimed the island, tend to see a bearded mullah under every bed.

This week's violence -- especially yesterday's crackdown on protesters camped out in the iconic Pearl Roundabout, in which at least six were killed -- does not auger well for a return to civil political dialogue. Although the U.S.-educated crown prince had offered concessions, like fair voting districts and combating corruption, on March 13, just before Saudi troops arrived, his harder-line kin almost certainly advocate taking them off the table. Indeed, they probably demand the removal of the table itself.

The U.S. has cards to play but is keen to do so discreetly. It needs to press the ruling family for reform while telling the divided opposition not to reject all compromise. Washington is anxious not to be perceived, by either side, as being part of the problem. The headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, situated adjacent to a suburb of Manama, is a crucial part of the efforts to block Iran's nuclear ambitions and counter any interference with the flow of oil.

Almost worse than the mess in Manama, this crisis reveals that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia are no longer on the same page. Riyadh perceives the White House as demanding universal freedoms from its friends, but not from its adversaries like Iran. The Shiites of Bahrain see themselves as "Baharna," indigenous Bahrainis, rather than putative Iranians. But events are pushing them ever closer to Tehran, where they will surely be greeted with open arms.

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