

Balancing Rights in Bahrain

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Oct 22, 2010

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Brief Analysis

On October 23, the people of the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain will vote in parliamentary and municipal elections. Five days later, the trial will begin of more than twenty Shiite political activists detained since August and charged with terrorism and conspiring against the government. Both events will be watched carefully from Washington and Middle East capitals for evidence of influence or involvement by Iran, which once claimed the island territory for itself.

Sectarian Prism

Bahrain is often described as a Shiite-majority country ruled by the Sunni royal al-Khalifa family. But this characterization may no longer apply. For several years, according to opposition sources, the government has been providing fast-track citizenship to Sunnis from Pakistan, East Africa, and other Arab states. According to a Sunni Bahraini source, the government may have created an additional 200,000 citizens this way. If such a figure is accurate, Bahrain may soon -- or already -- have a Sunni majority among its estimated 500,000 citizens.

The Sunni-Shiite balance is a sensitive matter. A census being conducted this year asks only whether families are Muslim or another religion, not whether they are Shiite or Sunni. Moreover, the government's unstated policy of boosting the Sunni community is widely recognized as an effort to reduce the risk that Iran will revive its claim to the island.

The arrested activists regard both Bahrain's elected lower house and appointed upper house as a sham. In the wake of their detention, protests and incidents of minor sabotage have been widespread, resulting in two deaths, including that of a policeman. A third fatality has been attributed to a malfunctioning homemade bomb. All told, approximately 300 people have been detained in the government crackdown. Although some detainees have been released -- and complained subsequently of harsh questioning and rough treatment -- others are still being held.

In Shiite areas, anger is simmering, in response not only to the arrests but also to longstanding institutional prejudice against Shiites and poor economic opportunities; resentment also festers against privileges accorded to new Sunni citizens, many of whom serve in the security forces. This month alone, the U.S. embassy in Manama has posted four notices warning Americans living in Bahrain to avoid demonstrations that could "turn confrontational and possibly escalate into violence."

Life Goes On

Despite the recent tumult, the island is taking pains to live up to its motto "Business Friendly Bahrain." The country's financial-services sector is well established, and the island hosts the expanding headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. In addition, Bahrain's hotel sector thrives on a welcoming attitude toward visitors and, by the region's standards, tolerant social mores. Saudis, in particular, who can drive to the island across a sixteen-mile causeway, seem to regard Bahrain as many Americans do Las Vegas.

Bahrain's leadership, always paranoid about Iran, seems particularly skittish in its current approach to its neighbor to the north. Officially, Bahraini officials are not blaming Iran, but are very critical off the record, likely reflecting fears that Iran's suspected ambition to acquire nuclear weapons will give the Islamic Republic a sense of regional hegemonic empowerment. Meanwhile, when Bahrain's ambassador in Washington (incidentally, a member of the country's miniscule Jewish community) attested recently to the danger of a nuclear Iran -- using language similar to that employed this past summer by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ambassador to the United States -- the Bahrain Foreign Ministry felt obliged to make a placatory statement, much as the UAE government had done before. Negative reactions to the Bahraini ambassador's comments, which the ministry later described as "inaccurately reported, or...misinterpreted or misunderstood," were exacerbated by her mention of a February 2009 incident in which an Iranian politician referred to Bahrain as Iran's fourteenth province.

As the political temperature has risen in the last few months, Iran has remained silent, save for its ambassador in Manama, who joined the chorus blaming foreign powers for the unrest. (Mischievously, he even suggested that Western countries, rather than Iran, are the troublemakers.)

Predictable Electoral Outcome

In the 2006 elections, the Shiite Wafaq Party emerged as the single largest grouping in Bahrain's lower house, holding seventeen of the forty available seats. Yet smaller Sunni groups still outvote it. Sunnis are also favored by the electoral boundaries of Bahraini constituencies. Shiite areas have as many as 20,000 voters, compared with just a few thousand in Sunni districts. The only uncertainty is whether votes cast by the newly naturalized Sunni residents will create greater proportionality in the results.

The portrayal of the election outcome could be crucial to future political harmony in Bahrain. This is in part because the reality of civil society in Bahrain is more complex than the picture suggested by a mere Shiite-Sunni divide. Rural and urban Shiites have differing attitudes that often reflect a disparity in employment opportunities. The degree of affinity for Iran also varies -- indeed, even Shiite political activists critical of al-Khalifa rule often emphasize their desire for political freedom and rejection of any Iranian claim of sovereignty.

Within the al-Khalifa house, disagreements are said to exist between the relatively reformist King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa -- supported by son, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa -- and the king's uncle, the long-serving, more conservative prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa. But the three are reported to be united on the current challenges associated with recent and potential unrest.

U.S. Role

Given its longstanding close ties with Bahrain, Washington has both an interest in defusing tension and a possible role to play. Some Shiite spokesmen have been critical of U.S. officials, in particular blaming Ambassador Adam Ereli for allegedly giving the green light for the detention of activists who spoke out during trips to Washington and London, a criticism that persists despite embassy denials. U.S. officials appear to have adopted a stance of neutrality. On October 13, the visiting deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Janet Sanderson, told reporters that she had discussed the human rights situation with Bahraini leaders but that Washington was not

pressuring Bahrain on the issue: "We are not here, frankly, to impose our views on others but to encourage the countries of the region to fulfill their priorities in this area. The dialogue that we had on human rights could be difficult, but it is open, ongoing, and part of our relationship."

In the context of beatings, arrests, and terrorism charges for political activists, the recent expulsion of civil society groups such as the Washington-based National Democratic Institute, and the absence of clear Iranian interference, cautious words such as Sanderson's are too timid. While U.S. officials must indeed safeguard the Fifth Fleet and associated Central Command base facilities, which are located principally in a historically Shiite area, they must also avoid being seen as endorsing heavy-handed tactics by Bahrain's security forces. The Bahraini government has rejected any role for international observers at the elections. Still, Washington should pressure Manama to ensure that the forthcoming trial is open and that full access is given to foreign media and nongovernmental organizations.

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