



## Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

### BAHRAIN'S STALLED REFORMS AND THE FUTURE U.S. ROLE

■ Simon Henderson

Of the Persian Gulf states, Bahrain has been most affected by the events known as the Arab Spring. Of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman—only the island nation of Bahrain and Oman, as well as, briefly, Kuwait, experienced street demonstrations. But tensions in Bahrain, which first erupted into violence in early 2011, have persisted. Until late 2015, the U.S. embassy website continued to show a map indicating areas in and around the capital, Manama, that are off-limits to U.S. personnel because of the danger of civil strife. Meanwhile, a political transition has taken place, but not in the direction of greater social equality. Although depicted by the Bahraini government as leading to a more pluralistic society, the changes have also reinforced the political role of the Khalifa ruling family.

The overall context of Bahrain's domestic politics is overshadowed by Iran, whose history is intertwined with Bahrain's. Occasionally, Iranian politicians revive a territorial claim to the island, which has a large population of Shiite Muslims, coreligionists of most Iranians. Omi-

nously, tensions with Iran have increased since the July 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and the P5+1. In October 2015, after discovering a reportedly Iran-linked bomb-making factory south of Manama, Bahrain accused the Islamic Republic of being a state sponsor of terrorism, expelling the Iranian ambassador and recalling its own envoy from Tehran. In late November 2015, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for democracy in Bahrain, describing the country's government as a tyrant minority, and so prompting a further Bahraini diplomatic protest. In January 2016, following the sacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran prompted by the execution of the Saudi Shiite firebrand Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, Bahrain followed Saudi Arabia and broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. At least until that point, Shiite moderates in Bahrain had seen Iran as a potential ally and had sought its support in their quest for political reform.

Despite the tensions, Bahrainis across much of the political spectrum are proud of their country's hosting of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and the headquarters of NAVCENT, the naval component of U.S. Central Command. This gives Washington an opportunity, perhaps even a responsibility, to help guide Bahrain's political evolution. Indeed, in addition to the challenges posed by Iran, some young Bahraini Sunnis are attracted to the ideology of the Islamic State. Yet the most predictable event that could break the Bahraini political logjam is the eventual transition from power of Prime Minister Sheikh

Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the head of government for the last forty-five years, who has come to represent the royal family's essential caution and conservatism. His departure will prompt a realignment in the power structure. In such circumstances, Washington cannot be indifferent to Bahraini politics but must balance carefully the roles of conciliator and facilitator.

## THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN THEORY...

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy under King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, a hereditary monarch. Nevertheless, his father styled himself Ruler of Bahrain and Hamad declared himself king in a 2001 constitutional amendment, which after a referendum took effect in 2002. The king appoints the prime minister, who for the last forty-five years has been, without interruption, his uncle Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the brother of the late ruler. The cabinet is also appointed by the king.<sup>1</sup> In May 2015, twelve of the twenty-five cabinet members were from the Khalifa ruling family. A September 2015 reshuffle led to a slightly smaller cabinet, although one still dominated by the Khalifa clan. The bicameral national assembly consists of two houses with forty members each. The upper house, known as the Consultative Assembly, is appointed by the king, and each member of the lower house, the Council of Representatives, is directly elected to a constituency. The last elections to the lower house were held in November 2014, and the next are due in November 2018. In Bahrain, no political parties are allowed as such, but there are political societies (discussed below) that back certain candidates. Among the GCC states, this level of political development is equaled only in Kuwait.

## ...AND IN PRACTICE

The true division of Bahrain's power and influence is very different from what the government's theoretical struc-

ture suggests. As billboards all over Manama and photographs in government offices make clear, the country is run by a triumvirate: the king, age sixty-five, is central but his eighty-year-old uncle, the prime minister, remains a key influence. The third member is the crown prince, the king's eldest son, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, who at forty-six is perceived by the Shiite opposition and local diplomatic community as a moderating force. Despite his advanced age, the prime minister retains a firm grip on everyday government and economic decisions. The power of the king, seen as a vacillating character, is further diminished by royal family hardliners who oppose any concession toward the country's Shiite community and are deeply suspicious of neighboring Iran. Of particular note are the three ministers assigned to the royal court, all Khalifa family members, as well as the commander-in-chief of the Bahrain Defense Force. Although the crown prince is considered a relative liberal because of his apparent willingness to make concessions to the Shiite opposition, his standing with his father, the king, may be diminishing with the rising status of two younger sons, half-brothers of the crown prince—Sheikh Nasser, twenty-eight, and Sheikh Khalid, twenty-six—who hold command positions in the elite Bahraini Royal Guard unit. Senior figures in the royal family are reported to be deeply involved in Bahrain's economy, sometimes controversially, as in sales of land reclaimed from the sea, which is made available for commercial and upmarket residential development.<sup>2</sup>

Like other Gulf countries, Bahrain has a substantial number of expatriates, often long-term. Government officials estimate the country's total population at around 2 million, though the CIA World Factbook cites 1.35 million, of whom only 45 percent, or just over 600,000, are estimated to be citizens.<sup>3</sup> Of the resident population—that is, including noncitizens—around 70 percent are Muslim, more than 14 percent are Christian, nearly

1. "Bahrain," CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/world-leaders-1/BA.html>.

2. "Bahrain Land Deals Highlight Alchemy of Making Money from Sand," Financial Times, December 10, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b6d081a2-74b8-11e4-8321-00144feabdc0.html>.

3. "Bahrain," CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>.

10 percent are Hindu, and 2.5 percent are Buddhist. The most vexatious ratio, though, is the narrowing divide between Sunni and Shiite citizens. Officially, the Bahraini government does not distinguish between Sunnis and Shiites, but the reality is far starker. By granting citizenship to Sunnis from Pakistan and Jordan, many of whom have been recruited into the Bahraini security forces, the government has been steadily shifting the ratio. Some non-Muslims, including Western expatriates, have also become citizens. What was clearly a Shiite citizen majority more than thirty years ago is now much more equal and may even be approaching a Sunni majority. Although individual Shiites prosper in Bahrain, collectively Bahraini Shiites live in poorer areas and allege government discrimination. (A Bahraini opposition leader once told the author that he would consider it progress if Bahraini Shiites had the same local standing as Saudi Shiites had achieved in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, less than an hour's drive across the causeway connecting the two countries.) Few, if any, Bahraini Shiites are entrusted to be members of the security forces. Several thousand Shiites are reportedly still in detention after being arrested during street disturbances in the last four years.

## BACKGROUND

In historical terms, Shiite Bahrainis perceive themselves as the country's indigenous people and regard the Khalifa clan, which came to the island in 1783 from the Arabian Peninsula mainland, as intruders and usurpers. The island's colonial legacy is also important. In 1830, the Khalifa ruling family signed a treaty with Britain making itself a protectorate. In 1967, Britain moved its main regional naval base from Aden to Bahrain, but a year later the British declared they would close their bases east of the Suez Canal by 1971. That year, Bahrain declared independence and signed a treaty of friendship with Britain. Agreement was also reached with the United States, permitting U.S. rental of naval and military facilities.

Economically, Bahrain was the first site of oil discovery in the southern Gulf, and although those small reserves are almost entirely depleted, the island developed an industrial base with a refinery, aluminum smelter, and dry

dock, as well as establishing itself as a financial center. Since the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. military presence on Bahrain, through the Fifth Fleet headquarters, has expanded considerably to around eight thousand personnel. In 2014, Bahrain announced that it would fund the construction of a smaller British naval base, which began in 2015. The unstated purpose of both bases is to counter any threat, particularly Iranian, to the oil exports of the GCC member states, which are crucial to the world economy.

## THE HISTORY OF ELECTION POLITICS

Important to understanding the evolution of Bahrain's electoral system and the current situation are the main inflections of the modern historical time line—principally, independence from Britain in 1971, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the 2002 declaration of a constitutional monarchy, and the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations.

Elections for a National Assembly were first held two years after independence, in 1973, when the membership was forty-four, made up of fourteen cabinet members and thirty members elected by male voters ages twenty and older. In 1975, the emir dissolved the National Assembly after the prime minister complained that it was impeding the government's work. In 1992, the emir appointed a thirty-member Consultative Council for a four-year term. Three years later, a Shiite cleric, Sheikh Ali Salman, was deported after calling for the restoration of the (elected) National Assembly. In 1996, the appointed membership of the Consultative Council was increased from thirty to forty. In 2000, the new emir, Sheikh Hamad, who had succeeded his father, Sheikh Isa, after his death in 1999, appointed four women to the Consultative Council, one of whom was a Christian, and a Jewish businessman.

In 2001, a referendum was held to determine whether Bahrain would become a constitutional monarchy, to include the National Assembly serving as the elected lower house as well as an independent judiciary. Approved overwhelmingly, the transition took place in early 2002. In October 2002, following local elections in May, Bahrain held its first parliamentary elections since

1973. Women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates, although none won any of the forty seats. Because women had been included, Sunni Islamists called for a boycott of the vote. Elections were also held in 2006, 2010, and 2014. In early 2011, the eighteen members of the main Shiite opposition political society, al-Wefaq (Accord), and one secular ally resigned in protest at the government security forces' crackdown on demonstrations prompted by the Arab Spring events in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. Later in 2011, special elections, boycotted by al-Wefaq, were held to fill the vacant seats. In 2014, al-Wefaq again boycotted the elections.

The Bahraini government gives the following overview of the elections held since 2002:

ELECTION	CANDIDATES	FEMALE CANDIDATES	FEMALES ELECTED	% VOTER TURNOUT
2002	177	8	0	53.48
2006	206	19	1	73.6
2010	127	9	1	67.7
2014	419	22	3	52.8

Adapted from "A Journey of Progress: Bahrain's Political Achievements" (accessed 2015).

The presentation here emphasizes an increasing number of candidates after the Arab Spring events of 2011, and a record number of women candidates and elected women, all evidence of a developing political system. But the presentation also highlights, bizarrely, a drastic slump in voter turnout, which in the eyes of many readers is likely to cancel any notion of progress.

Unstated is the almost certainly correct implication that the turnout volatility is attributable to Shiite participation levels. From the Shiite perspective, an early and persistent complaint has been districting. Although the Shiites constitute a probable and certainly self-perceived majority, the drawing of electoral boundaries meant that Shiites, most of whom are affiliated with al-Wefaq, could never win a majority of the forty constituencies. Some redistricting occurred before the 2014 polls, but this was insufficient to change Shiite perceptions of unfairness, thus contributing to al-Wefaq's boycott decision and the year's low turnout. The relatively high turnout for 2006

and 2010 reflects the comparative enthusiasm for participation by Bahraini Shiites and their sense that these earlier votes had some meaning.

## TEMPLATE FOR REFORM

The Bahraini political spectrum is very wide. Some Shiites regard involvement in any formal political process as useless and seek the overthrow of the Khalifa regime. Others regard the regime with contempt but say they are against violence. In the approximate middle is al-Wefaq, which is still legal despite its supporters' boycott of the 2014 elections. On the other end of the spectrum is the Khalifa royal family, representing varying degrees of readiness to accommodate the organized political participation of the island's Shiites. Crown Prince Salman is the most moderate, with the reported support of Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa. His uncle, the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa, is seen as the godfather of hardliners opposed to any organized Shiite political participation and transfer of real power. King Hamad juggles his position so as to maintain the respect of all sides of the royal family while avoiding any ultimate decision. Additionally, a range of non-Khalifa Sunni opinion prevails, which includes the Muslim Brotherhood, tolerated in Bahrain, and extremist Sunnis, from which at least seventy adherents are reported to have left the country to join the Islamic State, fighting in Syria and Iraq.

No apparent agreement exists on the definition of the word "reform" in the Bahraini political lexicon. From al-Wefaq's perspective, the lack of hope for any real reform prompted its mass resignation from the National Assembly in 2011 and its boycott of the 2014 elections. Less politically active Shiites as well as members of Bahrain's Sunni community probably fear any reform that will further empower the Shiites organized into al-Wefaq, possibly causing a political crisis and jeopardizing the position of more moderate Shiites. Within the ruling family, there is resistance to any development that may weaken its control.

Yet the ruling family has, in effect, already conceded what amounts to a reform agenda. In a bid to quiet the growing unrest in March 2011, Crown Prince Salman

set forth seven principles to guide a national dialogue, including a parliament with full authority, a government that meets the will of the people, and fair voting districts. The initiative came to nothing, however, because of a security clampdown, backed by reinforcements from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which ended demonstrators' occupation of the Pearl Roundabout, a renowned local landmark; the site was subsequently bulldozed into oblivion and renamed al-Farouq Junction, a reference to a historical figure revered by Sunnis. The ensuing attempts to stabilize the political situation involved a commission of inquiry and meetings of a so-called national dialogue, though the king, under pressure from hardliners and apparently Saudi Arabia, resisted moving toward establishing a parliament with "full authority." Lack of agreement resulted in government suspension of the dialogue in January 2014.

Nevertheless, in September 2014, Crown Prince Salman produced a five-point "framework" for a new national dialogue, centering on redefined electoral districts, a revised process for appointing the Consultative Council, powers for the elected Council of Representatives to approve or reject a new cabinet, judicial reforms, and new codes of conduct for the security services. The opposition rejected the proposals because they did not satisfy the core demand that the elected Council of Representatives, rather than the king, select the prime minister.

As for the government, it apparently prefers that the National Assembly comprise members who act as individuals rather than in groups. Apart from al-Wefaq, the only other unbanned political society is Waad (Promise), a left-leaning secular group whose membership includes both Sunnis and Shiites.<sup>4</sup> At the end of 2015, the government was pushing for amendments to the Political Societies Law that would outlaw active religious clerics from membership in political societies. An obvious target of this "ban on turbans," as it is known in the diplomatic community, is the currently incarcerated al-Wefaq leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, who has dominated Shiite politics since returning from exile in 2001 after being

found guilty of making a seditious speech allegedly advocating the government's violent overthrow, a charge he disputes. Another target is Sheikh Isa Qassim, often seen as al-Wefaq's spiritual leader.

In Bahrain, the principal reformist actors are:

- *Crown Prince Salman*: heir apparent to King Hamad, who has negotiated with al-Wefaq and at times seemed to accept a significant Shiite political role, albeit at the cost of his own personal credibility with the Sunni community.
- *Khalil al-Marzouq*: deputy leader of al-Wefaq and effective leader while the secretary-general, Sheikh Ali Salman, serves out his prison term. Marzouq has had his own legal problems, having been acquitted in 2014 of the charge of criticizing the government.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS AND THE U.S. ROLE

Despite its large naval base, the United States has been perceived neutrally by both the Sunni leadership and Shiite opposition. Demonstrating this perception, al-Wefaq has not called for the closure of the base. The government, though sometimes frustrated by U.S. administration and congressional expressions of dissatisfaction over Bahraini human rights violations, has not retaliated against U.S. forces, maintaining instead arguably the loosest restrictions on U.S. military activities of any GCC state. Although it must be utilized judiciously, this respect gives the United States potentially great influence over a future transition.

When, in 1999, Emir Sheikh Isa died of a sudden heart attack at sixty-five, shortly after meeting with U.S. defense secretary William Cohen, it was Cohen's fortuitous continued presence on the island that was seen as ensuring that Isa's son, Hamad, took over rather than Isa's brother, Khalifa, then, as now, the prime minister and the real power center.

Two predictable eventualities loom in at least the mid-

4. Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>.

dle distance: the death of King Hamad and the death or at least retirement from public life of the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa. (In November 2015, Sheikh Khalifa spent three nights in a hospital for unspecified tests.) Either event will prompt a royal or even a larger crisis, with the Khalifa hardliners likely unwilling to concede a transfer of power or authority to Crown Prince Salman.

Sandwiched between the Islamic Republic of Iran, which defines itself as anti-American, and Saudi Arabia, which has tensions within its own ruling royal family, Bahrain's continued stability and pro-U.S. stance are in Washington's interest. Widespread Bahraini respect for the United

States must be leveraged into ensuring a peaceful transition to dominant power for Crown Prince Salman, either as king or, as long as King Hamad lives, as heir apparent. King Hamad sees himself as a constitutional monarch, in the style of Britain's Queen Elizabeth, although the latter has only authority rather than power. Bahrain needs to move along that continuum so that its king, too, at least shares power. The alternative is either revolutionary chaos or harsh oppression by a ruling elite that despises much of its population. The U.S. interest is best satisfied by encouraging cautious reform and marginalizing hardliners at both ends of the political spectrum.

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