



INTER PRESS SERVICE  
News Agency

Journalism and Communication for Global Change

Arabs Rise for Rights, Civilisations Find Alliances, Global Geopolitics, Headlines, Human Rights, Middle East & North Africa, North America, Peace, Religion, TerraViva United Nations

## OP-ED: Genuine Constitutional Monarchy Is the Only Way Out for Al Khalifa

By Emile Nakhleh

WASHINGTON, Mar 21 2013 (IPS) - As the Bahraini and international media continue to dissect the meaning of Crown Prince Salman's appointment as first deputy prime minister, powerful factions within the ruling Al-Khalifa family must be pondering the future of their rule.

It's interesting to note that no prominent royals congratulated the crown prince on the appointment other than his siblings and children.

A make-believe "constitutional monarchy" grounded in regime repression and apartheid policies against the Shia majority is a sure formula for regime demise. The Arab upheavals in the past two years forced powerful authoritarian regimes out of power. The Al-Khalifa rule is no exception. Their survival could be achieved through a genuine constitutional monarchy.

Despite King Hamad's claims in the 2002 constitution, Bahrain is neither a constitutional monarchy nor a democracy. Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, who has held that position since 1971, and other senior royals, including heads of the royal court and the military, have exercised power without accountability.

To save the monarchy, King Hamad must commit himself, in word and deed, to building a genuine democratic constitutional monarchy. This requires sharing power with the people and respecting civil rights and freedoms of speech, assembly, communication and worship regardless of religious affiliation.

Under this system, the appointment of the prime minister, cabinet members, and other senior officials and judges must be subject to confirmation by a popularly elected parliament with full legislative powers.

The era of an omnipotent prime minister wielding economic and political power for four decades must end if the ruling family hopes to maintain a modicum of legitimacy.

The Bahraini upheaval over the past two years has not faded away despite the policies of repression, torture, and sectarianism. Regime brutality has left the ruling family devoid of internal legitimacy, ostracised internationally, and torn apart by family feuds and jockeying for power.

Efforts by the king and his son have been shoved aside by the all-powerful prime minister and his supporters within the family council.

Bahrainis were led to believe during the "reform" years of 2001 and 2002 that they were the source of sovereignty. The 2001 National Action Charter was debated openly and endorsed publicly by the ruler. Three key statements in the charter underpinned the massive popular support it received in the national referendum.

First, "All citizens are equal before the law in terms of rights and duties, without distinction of race, origin, language, religion, or belief." Second, "Bahrain shall be a constitutional monarchy," and third, "Bahrain is a democracy where all powers vest with the people."

Bahrainis were also promised a legislature that would be popularly elected and vested with full legislative powers.

The 2002 constitution included similar promises about democracy and popular sovereignty. Article one of the new constitution, for example, underscores the democratic nature of the regime and recognises the people as "the source of all powers".

The promised "reforms" turned out to be a charade, and real power remained ensconced in the hands of the family's conservative old guard. The prime minister, the rising young generation of the so-called Khawalids, and their anti-reform and anti-Shia Saudi benefactors, including the former Saudi interior minister, emerged as the real centre of power in Bahrain.

This powerful faction made sure the king's promised reforms were not implemented. The only "reform" people saw was the change in the title of the ruler from "amir" to "king".

Demonstrations erupted frequently throughout the following decade demanding reform. Prime Minister Khalifa and his allies used the security services, consisting entirely of Sunnis, to silence the opposition. Egregious human rights violations were committed against the largely peaceful opposition, which has been emboldened by the Arab Spring.

Where does Bahrain go from here?

Bahrain's benefactor, Saudi Arabia, and its superpower supporter, the U.S., are becoming more impatient with the regime's refusal to respond to the people's reasonable demands for reform. It is not unthinkable for Al-Khalifa obduracy to force Riyadh and Washington to abandon the ruling family. If this happens, it would only be a matter of time before the minority Al-Khalifa regime is swept away.

Some powerful elements within the regime still subscribe to the illusion that Washington's probable anti-regime stance would be constrained by the presence of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. They also believe they could count on Saudi support because of perceived Saudi fears of a potentially emboldened Shia community in Saudi Arabia, which is concentrated in the kingdom's oil-rich eastern province.

U.S. strategic interests in the Gulf and the wider Middle East region, especially regarding Iran and Syria, however, are not necessarily wedded to a minority regime in Bahrain which the majority views as illegitimate.

The Obama administration's often-stated commitments to values of human rights and good governance are no longer believable in light of Washington's support of a brutal regime in Bahrain. U.S. credibility in the Arab Muslim world is being tested by its perceived benign neglect of what's happening in Bahrain.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia's strategic regional interests do not necessarily coincide with those of Bahrain. Although the late Saudi interior minister Nayef supported the Bahraini prime minister's hard-line policies toward the Shia, his son Muhammad, the new interior minister, tends to be more pragmatic and open-minded.

Muhammad bin Nayef's focus on counter-terrorism in recent years perhaps has convinced him that reaching out to the population through "hearts and minds" policies that focus on "bread and butter" issues is more productive than regime brutality.

He is certainly positioned to use the massive Saudi leverage to support King Hamad's appointment of his son as principal deputy prime minister to force the prime minister to retire and institute real reform. Continued instability in Bahrain does not serve the interests of Saudi Arabia or the region.

---

U.S. credibility in the Arab Muslim world is being tested by its perceived benign neglect of what's happening in Bahrain.

---

\*Emile Nakhleh, a former Senior Intelligence Service Officer, is a Research Professor at the University of New Mexico and author of "A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America's Relations with the Muslim World and Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing Society."

---