

## **Bahrain: A Democracy Balance Sheet**

*Mansoor Al-Jamri*

Bahrain is either moving toward democracy or going nowhere, depending on to whom one listens. Pro-government quarters depict the Bahraini situation as an advanced model for democracy in the region. According to some in the political opposition, on the other hand, Bahrain is nothing but an absolute dictatorship with democratic window-dressing aimed at fooling friendly Western governments and winning praise from the Bush administration. Opposition forces tend to be more vociferous than government supporters—as well as ready to employ exaggeration to make their case—and therefore carry the day in public discourse.

Between the two conflicting views, many Bahrainis are still reserving judgment on the new political phase that started in early 2001. They see a number of positive developments as compared to the situation before 2001, among them:

- There are no longer any political prisoners. Those who were detained for short periods in the past four years were released without being harmed.
- Restrictions on travel have generally been lifted. In the past, political suspects were prevented from traveling or returning to Bahrain.
- People are free to congregate in houses and public places and to debate political and social issues without fear of consequences.
- Press freedom has expanded significantly.
- Senior members of the ruling establishment, notably the Crown Prince, speak openly about issues of real concern and invite discussion with citizens.
- Non-government organizations have proliferated, with more than 400 groups working in the open on a wide variety of issues, including human rights and politics.

Opposition activists tend to stress the negative aspects of the current picture, believing that louder voices get things done when due process is absent. Among their grievances:

- Bahrain is still burdened with dozens of laws intended to codify the state of Sunni-Shiite tensions that prevailed prior to 2001. Should the government put into use any of these laws, it will turn the clock back to the days when the security and intelligence forces were in charge of the daily lives of Bahrainis.
- The five municipal councils elected in May 2002 are powerless. There are five appointed “governates” and a ministry for municipal affairs that actually oversee and control matters.
- The 80-strong bicameral legislature that was partially elected in October 2002 has been toothless. So far, it has not passed a single law proposed by a member of parliament. The laws that were enacted were proposed by the government, which blocked all those proposed by parliamentarians.
- Electoral districts are unfairly drawn; in some cases, the number of citizens per elected representative can vary by a factor of ten or even 20. This of course fuels

speculation about gerrymandering and biased distribution of votes in favor of one section of society versus the other.

There is also the question of the rule of law. In the past three decades not a single Bahraini with influence has been prosecuted for misconduct or inappropriate use of power, for example corruption and or human rights violations. In a truly democratic environment, all must be subject to the rule of law.

A final issue is the lack of trust that persists between Shiites and Sunnis. The opposition movement is predominantly Shiite in nature, with support from a secular liberal elite including both Shiites and Sunnis. Confessionalism still plays a significant role in decision making inside and outside government. There is much work yet to be done in order to establish a democracy agenda that can be shared by the majority of the population at the grassroots level. For now, Bahrainis will continue to debate whether or not their democratic experiment is succeeding.

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