

*Title: Your kingdom for our rights; Bahrain; Reborn Bahrain.(International)(Yes, a Gulf country can make a real stab at democracy)(Brief Article)*

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THE 400,000 citizens of Bahrain, a prosperous island emirate in the middle of the Gulf, cannot believe their luck. Their country, a mere few months ago one of the more efficiently oppressive of Arab states, has leapt to being the most liberal.

The tale goes like this. For a quarter of a century, the island stifled under the harsh rule of a weak emir and his wily brother, the chief vizier. When the emir's son came to power in 1999, it was assumed that he would be as weak as his father. But the new emir scrapped censorship, emptied the prisons, publicly embraced his father's foes, invited exiles to come home, and issued a national charter to turn the country into a European-style constitutional monarchy. Last week, a referendum on the charter won a 90% turnout of voters (including women, for the first time) and 98.4% approval.

It is as if "a genie came and granted our wish," says a bemused newspaper editor, who, like one Bahraini male in ten, has done time as a political prisoner. "The people are very, very happy, but are afraid they may wake up from this dream." Yet it appears to be no dream. In the few days since the referendum, the island's ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa, has repealed a 1974 law that allowed the police to throw suspects in jail without charge for three years or more. He has abolished state security courts, ordered that anyone ever fired from a state job for dissent be rehired, and told Bahrain's 10,000-odd Bidoons-residents who have remained stateless despite generations on the island-that they will be granted citizenship.

In moving so quickly, Sheikh Hamad has not only made himself truly popular. He has also pulled the rug from under a singularly embittered and entrenched opposition movement. In 1994, some 25,000 Bahrainis signed a petition demanding reforms. In the following year, 38 people died in violent clashes with the police, and up to 15,000 were arrested. Unrest had simmered ever since.

One reason for the opposition's strength is that Bahrain has a relatively long history of political activism. Its first experiment with democracy, which lasted between independence from Britain in 1971 and the suspension of parliament in 1975, was marked by feisty debate, which included demands to curb the ruling family's power.

Also, unlike other Arab states in the Gulf, a majority of Bahrain's people are Shia Muslims, whose prime loyalty is often to their religious leaders. The al-Khalifa family, rulers for 218 years, are Sunnis, in the mainstream of Islam, but accounting for only 30% or so of Bahrainis. The 1979 revolution in Iran caused a ferment among Bahrain's Shias. Not only the local Sunnis but also some of Bahrain's powerful allies-including both its puritanically Sunni neighbour, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, whose Gulf fleet is discreetly based here-feared the Islamist "infection" might spread into Bahrain. It is no coincidence that the reform comes when Iranian-Saudi relations are warming.

Yet even Bahraini sceptics believe that Sheikh Hamad's motives are home-grown. The less charitable claim that he simply wanted to secure his family's future. "He granted us our rights, but we have granted him kingship," says a teacher who was dismissed for signing the 1994 petition.

Others point to the economic stagnation of the past decade. Bahrain has little oil, and relies more on services such as offshore banking and tourism. It is rich enough to have attracted some 200,000 foreign workers, but unemployment among locals tops 15%. Without the political stability the reforms may bring, badly needed foreign investment might have stayed away.

The prevailing belief, however, is that Sheikh Hamad has a genuine desire for progress. The test of this will come in the next few months, as the country prepares first for municipal voting and then for a general election. Calls for "responsibility" and "maturity" in local editorials suggest an underlying anxiety that radicals-particularly religious ones-may abuse their new-found freedom. But few seem overly concerned that

Shia clerics may be a dominant force. "They won't go and ban alcohol. We make too much money from being the closest bar to the world's thirstiest country," chuckles a Bahraini, meaning Saudi Arabia.

There is also the question of those, both in the al-Khalifa clan and outside, with vested interests in the old, opaque way of managing the island. Many Bahrainis hint that their last doubts about the government's intentions will vanish only when Sheikh Hamad's uncle, who has been prime minister since independence, leaves the stage. So far, the emir has handled his uncle graciously. However, the appointment of the popular, Cambridge-educated crown prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad, to lead the committee that will implement the charter suggests that the exit light is switched on.

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