

Arab Reform BULLETIN

Bahrain

Bahrain's Electoral Campaign Starts to Ignite

Fred Lawson September 15, 2010



Campaigning for elections in Bahrain is typically combative, but this year the circumstances leading up to the combined parliamentary and municipal elections scheduled for October 23 are nothing short of explosive. Amidst a major crackdown on opposition figures and organizations, most of which champion the interests of the disadvantaged Shi'i community, various political societies (Bahrain has no political parties) are scrambling to define their platforms.

Just one week after King Hamad bin 'Isa Al Khalifa announced the date of the balloting on August 8, the campaign against liberals and leftists commenced with the arrest of Dr. 'Abd al-Jalil Singace, a key figure in Haqq (the Movement for Liberties and Democracy). Three other prominent human rights activists were rounded up the next day. The four were charged with setting up "an organized network aiming to undermine the security and stability of the country," as well as with inciting violence and terrorist acts against private and public property.

In response to the arrests, protesters clashed with riot police in poorer predominantly Shi'i districts around Manama. Setting tires and trash cans on fire to block main roads in suburbs became more widespread and frequent. Security forces responded by stepping up forces against critics of the regime—by contrast, in April 2009, expressions of popular anger compelled the ruler to release Singace. Four more leading proponents of reform were taken into custody on August 19, along with a dozen young people who had allegedly engaged in tire burning and tossing Molotov cocktails.

Because they have been charged under the terms of the draconian 2006 anti-terrorism statute, the detainees enjoy no rights of judicial review or access to counsel. The Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) joined Human Rights Watch and the regionally-based Gulf Group in inreporting that the detainees have been subjected to torture. The government responded by adding the head of BCHR to the roster of reputed terrorists. When the Bahrain Human Rights Society (which is usually more deferential than BCHR to the regime) called for the detainees' civil rights to be respected, the Ministry of Development and Social Affairs seized control of the organization.

Bahraini authorities justified such extraordinary measures on the grounds that Haqq and other groups that reject the electoral process have allegedly received funding from religious networks based in Iran and Iraq, and that they maintain links to suspected cells of the Iranian militant group Ansar-i Hizbullah. There is widespread suspicion, however, that the arrests are more an attempt to divide and weaken the opposition than a response to a looming threat of terrorism or sedition.

The primary targeted organization, Haqq, has consistently criticized Bahrain's pre-eminent Shi'i political association, al-Wefaq (the Islamic National Accord Society), for its decision to contest the 2006 elections and start playing by the rules of the political game. The crackdown on Haqq in the run-up to next month's balloting confronts the leadership of al-Wefaq with a dilemma: it can close ranks with fellow Shi'a and pull out of the electoral process, opening itself to government accusations of complicity with hostile outside forces, or it can participate in the elections and abandon a large part of its potential constituency in the hope of effecting change from inside.

Al-Wefaq reacted to the August arrests by condemning the use of violence by the authorities and supporters of Haqq alike. The head of the society charged that the regime's resort to force had "destroyed ten years of progress," and a spokesperson blamed escalating protests on long-standing economic grievances rather than external provocation. Despite its public appeal for calm and expanded dialogue, al-Wefaq quickly found itself dragged into the confrontation. The society's website was blocked by the authorities in early September together with several others affiliated with the opposition. Al-Wefaq then released a statement that decried the fact that the accused had been stripped of their legal rights and pointed to evidence of torture. At the same time, however, al-Wefaq registered a slate of candidates to run in the October elections. The list did not include three prominent sitting deputies, including the society's leader Sheikh 'Ali Salman, who chose to disengage from battles in parliament.

The crackdown has sharpened rivalry between al-Wefaq and other political societies. Widespread frustration with the inability of the lower house of parliament to enact any real change has resuscitated the liberal al-Wa'd (National Democratic Action Society) and al-Minbar al-Taqqdumi (the leftist Progressive Platform), neither of which won seats in the 2006 elections. Both organizations have castigated al-Wefaq's lackluster performance in parliament, and an off-shoot of al-Minbar al-Taqqdumi called al-Shabiba (the Youth Society) is taking steps to mobilize younger voters to break the grip that Islamists of all stripes have on parliament.

Among Sunni Bahrainis as well, new groups have emerged, such as 'Adala (the Integrity National Movement), which opposes the government's policy of extending nationality, and thereby voting rights, to thousands of non-Bahraini Sunnis. In addition, independents (mostly businesspeople) have emerged in unprecedented numbers, seeking to replace interminable partisan bickering with orderly governance. And while al-Wefaq's electoral list consists entirely of men, a few influential women have stepped forward as candidates for al-Wa'd and as independents.

The broader context for the current repression is a society simmering with discontent over the lack of employment opportunities, particularly for educated citizens. University graduates have demonstrated regularly in front of the ministries of education and labor to demand secure jobs in the civil service, and a thousand members of the General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions marched on the parliament building on May 1 to protest job losses in construction and finance, and to demand that public sector employees be permitted to unionize. Other persistent irritants continue to fester as well, notably the systematic confiscation of agricultural land and shoreline property by well-connected individuals. Such actions have not only enriched members of the ruling family and their closest allies but have also sent land prices soaring.

As of this writing, it is unclear whether the authorities will end up releasing the detained activists in the face of popular outrage, as they have done in the past. If not, the October elections are likely to take place in the most volatile atmosphere in Bahrain since King Hamad came to power in 1999. Such a development would effectively deprive the king's reform program—about which most Bahrainis have become disillusioned since the issuance of the "amended constitution" in 2002—of any remaining credibility.

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