

Bahrain Monitor

A Monthly Newsletter on the Human Rights Situation in Bahrain



Bahrain Human Rights Monitor

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Building Trust Guarantees Stability, Reform and Human Rights Protection

It has been mentioned in previous issues that political reformists on both sides (the Government and the Opposition) are losing out in the recent violence and riots in Bahrain to the advantage of advocates of extremism and political stagnation. However, it can be said that forces of reform in the government's legislative and executive institutions and on the street are stronger than their opponents and thus any agreement, reconciliation or attempts to promote trust between moderate forces and reformists will precisely mean the following:

- Enforcing the choice of reform with all its various political, cultural, legal, social and economic scopes.
- Enforcing state's apparatuses and emphasizing their authority as well as protecting citizens' choices which they expressed in the elections.
- Enforcing the stability and security of the country, containing violence and its advocates and emphasizing the rule of law which is able to protect citizens' interests.
- Promoting human rights and working to maintain, protect and develop human rights principles.

Violence and riots would not have escalated on the street if not for the feelings of distrust which have been growing amongst reformists in both parties. It is notable that the growing distance between the two sides manifests itself negatively in the form of violent tendencies and riots, as advocates of violence want to practice what they believe are their rights outside the boundaries of the law; and every time their practices increase, trust between the two sides is shaken or even completely destroyed.

The General Secretary of Wafaq Society Sheikh Ali Salman was not wrong when he stressed (in newspaper interviews after the pardon and release of some detainees by the King on 12 April 2009) that working towards regaining trust will be his first priority, for trust between the Government and the strongest political player in the arena (who also possesses the largest number of MPs) is crucial in order to return the situation in the country to what it had formerly been. Thus as soon as the two sides reached an agreement, citizens were optimistic and took to the streets carrying the King's pictures welcoming his decision. On the King's part, he - as usual - did not wish to intervene as soon as a problem arises, instead allowing government bodies to deal with the problem and practice their role. However, when the crisis reached a dead end, he intervened and solved the problem in the correct manner.

The appropriate solution for regaining confidence is based on the emphasis on the rule of law and institutions. It is not possible to forgive anyone - neither the state nor the ordinary citizen- who transgresses the law regardless if their demands are just or not. It is also not possible for one side to monopolize the law, as the law is enforced in order to protect citizens and ensure the legitimacy and right of the state and anyone attempting to transgress it is only weakening the state and abusing the rights of its citizens.

Sheikh Ali Salman said that Wafaq will not be lenient with any individual who advocates violence and pointed out that his Society is willing to take to the streets if necessary. This marks a significant shift in the rules of the game and is making the government and the opposition more vigilant regarding the stability of the country and the security of its society. The correct way for regaining the confidence between the government and the opposition lies in the continuation of the reform process, fulfilling the hopes of citizens and solving their problems. This can only be achieved after a considerable amount of the required trust is regained, far from political tension, as distrust hinders the reform process, weakens state institutions and leaves all parties trapped within themselves, instead of moving towards future change.

We support any trust-building that makes the citizens confident in the ability of the reform actors to protect human rights and preserve human dignity.

Hasan Moosa Shafaei

President - Bahrain Human Rights Monitor

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Press Freedom in Bahrain is Growing

On 12th April 2009 around ten trade unions and journalist societies discussed reports regarding freedom of press and media in their respective countries which are members of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). The 2008 Annual Report on Bahrain affirmed that Bahrain enjoys a growing and diverse level of media freedom, despite the existence of some challenges due to the censorship of certain internet sites, which has provoked debate amongst interested parties.

The report stated that Bahrain witnessed numerous political debates and religious confrontations throughout 2008, where many politicians criticized the media for being politicized in dealing with the subject as well as inciting sectarianism in the country. This criticism led the Bahrain Journalist Association (BJA) to organize a campaign against sectarianism in the media. The report added that the BJA represents a large group in various parts of the media. The main objective of BJA is the protection of freedom of press and the defence of journalists from legal actions by providing legal aid, organizing public protests and lobbying activities. The BJA played a major role in the preparation of the bill of the new Media Law and in demanding the recognition of electronic media.

On the other hand, Mohammed Al Sawad, a member of the Board of Directors of BJA, said that the number of legal cases filed against journalists had decreased in 2008 compared to 2007 from 28 cases to only eight. Al Sawad pointed out that the cases against the journalists were filed by officials and not societies, institutions or individuals. Al Sawad called for the amendment of an article in the Penal Code which provides for the imprisonment of journalists.

Qasim Calls for Speeding up Reforms and says Escalation is 'Unwise'

On 24th April, Sheikh Esa Qasim called upon the Government to speed up the reform process in order to stop the

individuals who wants to take the country to the opposite direction, and in order to put an end to the roots of the problem. He also urged the citizens to invest in the positive outcomes of the royal pardon and to interact with it positively. In addition, he called for more cooperation with the



Sheikh Esa Qasim

Government for the good of the country and for the sake of its interests, and said that the Government should be given a reasonable chance to push forward the reform process. He also added that resuming tensions is unwise and harms national interest, stressing the need for social tolerance which exists between the two main components of Bahraini society, the Shia and Sunnis, saying that both sects share a common origin, have contributed to the development of the country and have lived side by side for a long time, sharing the present and future aspirations.

Development Minister: Training Civil Organizations to Design Projects

Between the 25th and 27th April 2009, the National Centre for Supporting Civil Organizations organized a workshop entitled 'Designing Development Projects'. The Centre aims to help civil organizations design projects which achieve the objectives and priorities of development in Bahrain. It also provides them with training in order that they obtain a financial grant from the Civil Action Fund, financed by the Ministry of Social Development and a number of private



Fatima Al Balushi

sector institutions. The Minister of Social Development, Ms. Fatima Al Balushi, has called upon civil organizations to participate in the financial grants programme for NGOs for the year 2009-2010, in order to put in place developmental social programs that

have a positive impact on society.

Hiwar: First Civil Society for Information is licensed

Last February, a civil Society under the name of Al Hiwar was licensed. It aims to provide information by collecting and distributing data, as well as conducting research studies and preparing surveys and statistics, particularly those related to the youth. In addition, the society aims to promote a culture of dialogue between various parties which differ in their opinions and positions on social issues.

The President of the society, Sayid Adnan Jalal, said in an interview with AlWasat Arabic daily newspaper on 9 April 2009 that the future plan of Hiwar will focus on training, promoting national belonging, spreading environmental awareness and nurturing hidden talents. He also added that Hiwar is not exactly a youth society, but a society in which youth represent the majority of its members and its main concern is youth issues, including engaging and integrating young people in social issues.

Al Morzooq Demands Legislations against Discrimination

Khaleel Al Morzooq, the Vice-President of AlWefaq Parliamentary bloc, has stressed the importance of the global struggle against all forms of discrimination, especially racism, which has become

particularly abhorrent globally. Al Morzooq expressed the need for legislations which criminalize discrimination and promote transparency and equal opportunities



Khaleel Al Morzooq

as endorsed by Islam, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain and international conventions. He added that if this happens, it will push Bahrain forward in the human rights field, and will make its experience

an example for others in the international forums.

The Launch of a Website for Human Rights in Bahrain

On 26th April, and under the patronage of the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Nazar al Baharna, a special website for the Comprehensive Periodic Review of human rights was launched. The website contains information on human rights in the Kingdom of Bahrain in all fields, such as the rights of women, children and foreign workers, among others. The website also contains special human rights questionnaires as well as a discussion forum. The Supervising Committee looks forward to receiving the views, comments and suggestions of citizens and residents which would promote and protect human rights. The website was prepared with the cooperation of all interested parties, including the Government and civil society representatives. The launch also comes within the framework of the Committee's work to implement its commitments as well as the recommendations of the Comprehensive Periodic Review.

The Institute of Political Development launches Programme for Political Training

The Institute of Political Development has recently launched a political training program which aims to increase the level of the participants in the fields of political, democratic and freedom work. The participants included 45 persons interested in local political issues from all sectors of civil and political societies, as well as from Government institutions. The Executive Director of the Institute, Ibrahim Majid Al Romahi, said that the programme seeks to familiarize the participants with the tools of political action and training to enable them to engage in public work. The programme also aims to train national youths capable of carrying forward the work of the democratic process.

Human Rights Film Festival is Opened

On 30th April 2009, the second session of the Bahrain International Human Rights Film Festival was opened under the patronage of King Hamad bin Esa Al Khalifa. The occasion was attended by the President of the International Films Network for Human Rights. The Network will officially announce that Bahrain has joined its network. Twenty film directors

and international actors participated in the festival to propagate human rights culture by deriving human rights values from the visual arts. The festival Manager said that some civil society organizations still adopt traditional tools to spread human rights culture, but in recent years some have resorted to the cinema and visual mediums as a means of propagating human rights. This was in order to affirm the leading role of NGOs in establishing civilized channels of communication.

Minister of the Interior: the Time of Torture is over and we are not a Colonial Police

Minister of the Interior, Sheikh Rashid Abdulla Al Khalifa, said that the duty of his Ministry is to protect society and not to oppress it, saying: 'we are the Bahraini national police and not a colonial one', adding that 'the time of torture is now over and it has no place with us'. The Minister also stressed his refusal of torturing any person 'because part of our responsibility is to protect everyone'. He also rejected the use of excessive force and collective punishment.

This comment came on the margins of the Minister's meeting with Abdulla Al Drazi, the Secretary General of the Bahrain Human Rights Society, on 8 February 2009. The Minister continued that 'we all represent the generation of the King's reform project which was conceived while we were at the centre of responsibility, and one of the main priorities of this project is to embrace the human being, care for his rights and protect his freedom and dignity. We are currently stronger than ever before due to this clear vision'. He also added that 'we have done our best to develop our responsibility towards human rights and one of our concerns is to put into place a policy which is based directly on the enforcement of human rights values and culture among security personnel. This can be achieved through a solid commitment to all that which guarantees the protection of human rights and freedom stated in the Constitution and related laws'.

The Minister expressed his appreciation of the efforts of the Bahrain

Society for Human Rights and promised more cooperation with other human rights societies stressing that 'there is a wide margin for cooperation between us, and it is necessary for us to understand your vision and to involve you in the matter' as he put it. He added that his Ministry received 156 cases in the period between 1 July 2007 and 15 March 2009 and decided on 137 cases, while 19 of them are still under investigation, and 12 cases were referred to the military courts, in addition to five which were referred to the officials responsible in order to make the necessary action. The Minister also mentioned the establishment of a specialized committee for human rights issues, headed by the Under-Secretary of the Minister of Interior, which looked into 56 cases, in which 52 were completed and 24 were referred to the military courts. The total number of the accused in these cases was 71 individuals, 35 of whom were convicted.

On the other hand, the Secretary-General of the Society, Abdulla Al Drazi, stressed the fact that his Society is a product of the King's reform project and its main objective is the interest of the country, praising the Minister for his meeting in which some human rights issues were clarified. He also expressed his appreciation of the efforts of the Ministry of Interior in safeguarding the security and stability of the country, stressing that the Bahrain Human Rights Society will not accept that anyone be subjected to harm, including the security forces.

A Push for Reforms Guarantees Security and Promotes Trust

The dilemma of trust between the Government and the opposition is an inherited legacy from the pre-reform period and promoting trust between the two requires time, motivation and favorable circumstances on the ground. During the reform period, various political figures that were once in conflict with each other met and found themselves in a new, open and free atmosphere since 2001, but some fears and anxieties have remained.

It seems that the atmosphere of reform was not properly invested, in order to fill the anticipated gap between the two parties. This problem confronts all new democracies, and reform is supposed to dissipate all illegitimate fears and anxieties among the two parties, and not to completely eradicate them, but to gradually reduce them until real 'naturalization' is accomplished and the country's smooth movement to the next stage is achieved. Both parties' anxieties are justified and both have made mistakes in the past that contributed to the creation of barriers and hard feelings which reached their peak during the recent months, with the escalation of riots and violence actions.

Currently, and after the royal pardon and the active participation of Al Wafaq (supported by supreme religious leaders and social and political figures) in the easing of tensions, it is possible to say that the gap has been adequately bridged, or at least that the bridging process has begun according to correct bases.

The royal pardon, as Shaikh Ali Salman, the President of Al Wafaq Society, said 'did not stem from Government weakness', and we can also add that it did not originate from the weakness of evidence against some of those detained in security incidents, for violence, riots and murders did occur, and material evidence is available which shows a clear connection between some of the detainees and what happened. The pardon is a great national achievement for the country and its citizens, and is a crucial step towards easing tensions at minimum

costs in order to regain national cohesion between all spectrums of society.' This is not the issue, and the only reason for the pardon was to give all parties and especially ordinary citizens the chance to regain confidence and hope by continuing the reform process and cooperation of various parties in order to develop the country and legislations and in order to promote the rights of its citizens. Although the problem of the lack of trust has begun to diminish and take its natural size, there remain some questions regarding the future and guarantees of a lasting calm and promoting that trust, as well as the tools for solving any problems which may arise. The King on his part, and in advisory letter, referred to the strengthening of the legislative authority as the primary determinant of future change, and as a channel of communication between the Government and the people and a route towards obtaining their rights. As for Sheikh Salman, he pointed to two important issues which the Government itself has always demanded: first, continuously calling for the practice of freedom of expression including peaceful protests 'in accordance with the law', and second, the Society's willingness to take to the streets if necessary in order to expose and stop advocates of violence and vandalism, and to deprive them of any political cover they may have.

In order for trust to be built and promoted, there is a great need for another push forward for the reform process in addition to other issues including:

- Compliance with the law which regulates the life of the people and their political practices, as the lack of an ultimate legal reference point or its disrespect destroys trust. The independence of the judiciary must also be emphasized, as well as refraining from violating citizen's rights.
- Expansion of the margin of the freedom of expression and the atmosphere of freedom, despite the fact that much of it is already available, through repealing of obstructive laws.

Also the ratification of a law that guarantees the maximum amount of freedoms possible and by allowing even more civil society organizations to emerge and become active.

- Making the work of the Parliament more efficient, as it cannot be regarded as a real reference point even if it is elected, if it cannot achieve accomplishments for citizens. If truth be told, the performance of MPs in the past period has not been at all convincing, as some were involved in squabbles which weakened their position and increased divisions, and this has also reflected badly on the security situation. In order for Parliament to perform its true role, it is necessary that obstructive and disappointing laws which prevent it from developing itself are amended. At the same time, it is difficult to perform these amendments and increase the responsibilities placed on Parliament without an agreement with the executive authority and a plausible amount of trust.
- Establishing an honor charter for the media by journalists themselves which prevents the media from becoming a tool for causing social, sectarian and political tensions and which deals with cases and breaches- from any source- in an advisory manner and not with defamation.
- In order to bring about this desired trust there will be always a great need for good will between all governmental and civil parties and it is crucial that all those involved refrain from exaggeration and searching for the mistakes of others, for one cannot attribute every mistake to 'a government plan' or a 'terrorist plot'. It is also important to ignore some of the breaches or the unintentional small mistakes by the Government, political societies or others, as all parties have not yet reached a perfect level of maturity, and the country is still in a transitional period of trial and error.

Bahrain: the Question of National Identity and Political Reform

Hasan Moosa Shafaei

Bahrain does not suffer from an acute identity crisis, for the majority of its people share the same religion, language and political environment, all contained within a historical identity (by this I mean Bahrain from a geographic point of view). Yet Bahrain -as with other countries- faces challenges in regards to the question of identity on three different levels:

The first challenge lies in the amount of foreign workers, particularly from non-Arab countries, for statistics show that the number of foreigners in the country almost equals the number of citizens (the total number of the entire population is one million). There are those who have expressed concerns regarding the influence of incoming foreign identities on the Arab identity of the country, and especially from the Indian subcontinent which represents the majority of foreign workers. However, this problem remains less serious in Bahrain than in other Gulf States (excluding Saudi Arabia, in which foreign workers represent a third of the total population: 8 million foreigners as opposed to 15 million citizens). This challenge can be described as a moderate one and until now it does not appear to have had any serious effect on the Arab identity of Bahrain, despite the fact that some Arab researchers have exaggerated the problem and its potential consequences out of proportion, claiming that there is a serious danger.

The second level is the question of sectarian and ethnic diversity in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Although Islam is a unifying factor which supposedly transcends sectarian and ethnic extremism, in reality Bahrain is very much affected by sectarian tension- most of it from the outside- and is influenced by the various foreign political circumstances, particularly as result of the political changes which stormed Iraq and Lebanon. Events have proved that Bahrain is not immune from the impact of sectarian tendencies which constantly fluctuate according to local and external factors, and cast their shadows on individuals and communities in the

Kingdom of Bahrain.

The third level is related to the building of a local national identity. It has to be said that Bahrain possesses all the necessary requirements for the establishment of a strong national identity that can face all the challenges mentioned above. Bahrain is a historically well-established entity which possesses clear and undisputed geographic borders, and a fair amount of social interweave and tolerance among its inhabitants. This in addition to other political considerations such as the consensus over the country's independence and its political leadership which have been granted legitimacy in the 1970 referendum and in the second one, held almost thirty years later and included in the National Action Charter in 2001. Moreover, Bahrain has no linguistic problems or acute social, religious, sectarian or ethnic fractures which could all hinder the building of a national identity, and thus all the raw materials are available to produce a solid national culture and a strong national identity.

Currently, however, national identity in Bahrain is not sufficiently strong, though the idea has been reinforced as result of the political reforms which started almost eight years ago. This is because it is difficult to imagine building a national identity in the midst of oppression, as this could only yield a weak state with a deformed national identity, bound to fail when confronted with any real test, as we have seen in Iraq during the American invasion. Undoubtedly, promoting the national identity of any country is strongly connected to the political issue, and, therefore, the political reform initiated in Bahrain has paved the way for religious, political and cultural freedoms. The political reform constitutes the ideal path for the establishment of a strong identity through elected legislative institutions. It also provides an opportunity for the growth of a solid national identity despite the prevalence of a sectarian culture in neighboring countries. This latter, despite its negative effects, was unable to hinder the rise of a national culture in



Hasan Moosa Shafaei

Bahrain which is the sound basis for any political change.

Political reform can only be achieved through equality, justice and stability. In other words, it provides the necessary environment for building and promoting the national identity required, and this is what is happening in Bahrain at the moment but at a slow pace. Another important and sensitive issue is discrimination. Discrimination in all its forms cannot continue in any state which claims to bear the flag of reform, and cannot be supported by an evolving national culture or by a state intended to be guardian of the law. Discrimination is the fundamental problem facing national identity in Bahrain and is the antithesis of any national project. A culture which encourages policies of discrimination cannot continue and that any attempts to weaken discriminatory religious, sectarian and tribal cultures will only mean an additional promotion and enforcement of national identity, so that Bahrain can be protected from all foreign penetrations which are manifested in sectarianism and tribalism among others.

Political reform must continue at a faster pace so all obstacles facing the Bahraini national identity can be removed. The government should also have some additional programs and projects which aim to detect these problems and to work towards containing their negative effects on the social fabric or preferably to totally eradicate them.

Foreign Media Coverage of the Violence in Bahrain

The recent violence and riots in Bahrain, particularly during the last few months, have attracted the attention of foreign media both inside and outside the country, especially with the presence of foreign correspondents and several press offices working in the capital city Al Manama. Hot news inevitably draws media attention, therefore, news agencies, newspapers and TV channels were all quick to cover the story, and according to some journalists, the attention given to the issue by far exceeded what it actually deserved.

This is not the subject of debate here, rather the nature of the media coverage itself and by prominent and well established media institutions such as Reuters, the Financial Times, the BBC and the Economist among others. In general, this foreign media coverage resulted in many errors and exaggerations, and negatively impacted the already heated local situation. As the situation has calmed down significantly, it is now possible to discuss and analyze the media coverage and its outcome in the following points:

In analyzing the event:

- Media coverage focused on the events as part of 'a sectarian conflict' between the Shia majority and the Sunni minority, and sometimes between the royal family and the Shia population or between a Shia group and a fundamentalist Sunni one. It is obvious that this kind of analysis is inaccurate, for those who incited the riots were just a minority, however loud their voices were and despite the fact that they practiced their activities under the banner of 'Shia demands'. Even if these demands were legitimate, the way in which they were expressed was not directed towards Sunnis. In fact, the recent unrest was aimed at the Government and all its institutions, as advocates of violence in the streets did not show any consideration either to the law or to the Government and its institutions. This means that the unrest that occurred was a form of politicized violence and did not constitute a 'sectarian conflict', rather it was an

attempt to achieve political objectives using illegal means.

- Foreign media coverage also gave the impression that the minority who were at the centre of the events represented the majority of Bahraini citizens. This claim is still being said by the leaders of some groups to show that their demands were that of the majority of the people in the country. Here, the media also made another error, as although there is almost a unanimous agreement on certain demands, there are also different opinions on the best way to achieve these demands. The majority stresses the use of legitimate and peaceful means, while the minority only believes in the use of violence and rioting. Moreover, there are some demands that are limited to radical groups only such as the call to overthrow the royal family, dismissing the bases on which the state has been established and demanding to review such bases.
- Foreign media coverage has also connected the violence and riots that occurred in Bahrain to foreign interferences from countries such as Iran, Syria and Britain. The fact that it is in the interest of some foreign countries to inflame the situation in the country should not be overstated to the extent that local aspects, which played a major part in the unjustified and unacceptable violence phenomena, are ignored, whatever their reasons.
- During foreign media coverage of the events, there are some who portrayed what happened as a battle between human rights defenders and an authoritarian regime which violates human rights, as if there is no tolerance or margin of public freedoms in Bahrain, and that instead Bahrain only deals oppressively with the opposition. This image of Bahrain which appeared from time to time in some reports is not only incorrect and unfair, but is also of no benefit whatsoever to human rights defenders and Bahraini political

activists. This stereotypical depiction can be considered more accurate when applied to other regimes in a number of countries in the Middle East in general, but in Bahrain it is far from being true - any fair observer would agree to this analysis. Currently in Bahrain, there is no one political prisoner or a prisoner of conscience. Despite its small size, Bahrain is experiencing a free press atmosphere, free legislative elections and is home to hundreds of civil society organizations. Accepting the pessimistic picture which appeared



in some foreign media coverage would entail accepting the radical and hopeless call for change. Indeed, Bahrain has not become an oasis of freedom yet, but it has certainly taken reasonable steps towards respecting the rights of its citizens and residents since the start of the reforms in 1999. However, political and human rights activists are still demanding more reforms.

- Foreign media coverage of the events was not balanced, as it adopted the radical views and the views of those who stand behind them. On the other hand, the coverage did not reflect the opinions of the Government and more importantly that of influential civil society organizations, particularly political society (parties). These

opinions were either completely ignored or given only a small space and this eventually presented the reader with a distorted picture of the events. Presenting the events in this way portrays Bahrain as having only one major political player in total isolation of well known other major actors. In essence the views of radical groups are imbalanced, and their statements do not deal with all aspects of the political scene. The radical groups were concerned with presenting their version of events as the one and only truth, ignoring issues of violence, rioting and vandalism. They did not question who behind the violence, riots and vandalism or the motive behind them. Furthermore, the radical groups sought to convince the public opinion, locally and internationally, that the violence which took place was a mere 'expression of opinion' and that the Government alone bears the responsibility for it. This attempt by the radical groups is without a doubt a distorted picture of the situation.

The reasons:

Why was foreign media coverage of the events in Bahrain so unsuccessful, biased, subjective, contributed to the escalation of tensions at the local political arena and encouraged radical groups to persist?

There are several reasons for this. However, the media, as well as the Bahraini Government, political societies and local human rights organizations all share responsibility for the problem. The reasons can be summarized as follows:

- Performance of official media can be described as weak or even nonexistent. This does not mean that the opinion of the Government is always 'right' but it means that the official media could have added some balance to the coverage of the mentioned events. Also, Government officials did not communicate with foreign correspondents residing in Bahrain or sufficiently express their opinions about the events. They also failed to communicate with the larger media institutions around the world. On other hand, the radical groups

were much better in communicating with the media and in making their presence obvious than Government officials who lacked a renewed language, clear vision and rapid responses.

- In addition to the above, the moderate political wing of the opposition (which represents the majority of the population as was affirmed by the elections) decided not to engage in a media battle and perhaps also chose not to constantly provide the media with their opinion. This political wing was occupied with internal political activities and its members were absent from the scene for months, until they regained the initiative. Members of the wing helped the country to return to peace and stability, and by cooperating with the Government, were able to accomplish the recent royal pardon and secure the release of the detainees. However, the radical groups are expected to resume actions of riots again.
- The presence of some activists, who carried the banner of human rights and at the same time supported violent political actions, was a misleading factor for international human rights organizations and foreign media. This fact resulted in inaccurate statements or the portrayal of the situation as a conflict between human rights defenders and an authoritarian and oppressive regime. In fact, these human rights activists are merely members of political parties and observing their actions, coalitions and discourse will reveal their connection with specific parties.
- Foreign media possesses a stereotypical image of the nature of political systems in the Middle East and generally they only see two clear pictures: dictatorships and this includes all Arab countries, and one democratic state which is Israel. This stereotyping forced the foreign media to simplify analysis of Middle Eastern countries. According to this stereotyping, there always exist dictatorships which merit condemnation, without paying the attention to the fact that there are big

differences between Middle Eastern countries themselves regarding the nature of their ruling systems, bearing in mind that there is currently more than one country in the region moving towards democracy.

- The violent political events in Bahrain were strongly connected to a wider regional and international analytical framework, and as a result of this the events were stripped of their local proportions and given a regional and even international character, far greater than they deserved. There are some countries which invested in the events and covered them in their media from a sectarian point of view and presented them as a Wahhabi/Shia conflict which falls within the



scope of influence between the more powerful states in the Middle East. Some Western media took this a step further and connected what happened in Bahrain with Iran and exaggerated it, thus considering the events part of a conflict between Iran and the United States of America in the Gulf region. On the other hand, the Iranian media covered the events from their own point of view and took them out of their local context, placing them within a larger regional and international conflict. Finally, it is clear that the violent events were unique in attracting considerable media attention and coverage from various opponents and competitors in the region, but unfortunately this came at the expense of the truth.

Shushan Khachyan:

Our Organization is the Main Link with the Committee on the Rights of the Child

The NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) works with independent NGOs and national child rights coalitions in any country that has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and/or its Optional Protocols (OPs). It supports national NGOs and coalitions from over 160 countries in reporting on CRC and its OPs. The organisation has developed leading expertise in the work of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the monitoring of the Convention.

BHRM met Ms. Shushan Khachyan, the child rights officer at the NGO Group for the CRC, at her office in Geneva. Here is the outcome of the meeting.

Q. What are the procedures you follow with regards to promoting the rights of the child?

All States parties to the Convention have to submit regular reports to the Committee on how the rights of children are being observed in their countries. States must report initially two years after acceding to the Convention and then every five years. The Committee is composed of 18 independent experts (4 Committee members are from the Middle East and North Africa) who meet in Geneva to examine the progress made by States and address their concerns and recommendations in the form of “concluding observations”.

In order to obtain a more complete picture of children’s rights in the country, the Committee seeks written information

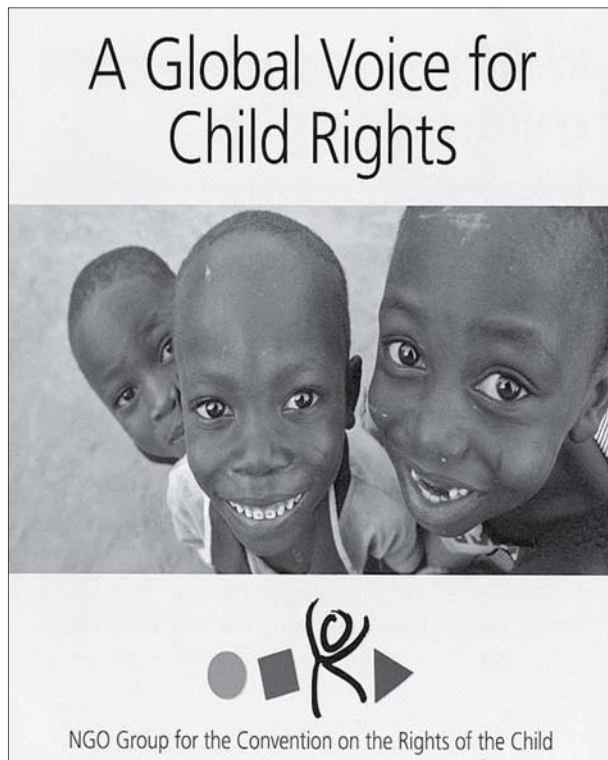
from other sources, such as NGOs, inter-governmental organisations and National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). Any complementary information received by the Committee is reviewed during the pre-sessional working group meeting. The Committee invites certain NGOs, UN agencies and NHRIs who have submitted information to present their views during this meeting. The Committee then prepares a list of issues to be submitted to the government for their responses and invites them to answer the questions and comments during the plenary session. At the end of the dialogue, the Committee prepares concluding observations which reflect the main concerns and issues. The States parties then have to take appropriate legislative, administrative and policy measures to implement the recommendations. The



role of NGOs is crucial in advocating and lobbying with their governments to follow up Committee’s recommendations requiring specific follow-up action at the national level.

Q. What is the relationship of your NGO with the UN CRC?

In 1983, 20 NGOs formed an Ad Hoc Group for the drafting of the Convention to ensure a comprehensive treaty on child rights. This led to the first international human rights treaty for children, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Over the years we have become the main link between national and international NGOs and the Committee, mainly by supporting NGOs in the reporting and follow up process as well as making NGO voice influential in child rights developments both at national and international levels. In addition to assisting NGOs in effectively presenting their views to the Committee, we ensure NGO participation in the Days of General Discussion, General Comments, elections of the Committee members and



sub-regional workshops.

Q. What is the role of your NGO in this process?

We assist NGOs throughout the reporting process by informing them about the reporting obligations of their State party, advising them on how to get involved with the UN human rights system, providing them with training, technical assistance and advice.

We have built strong partnership with NGOs in different regions across Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania. In the Middle East we have worked with NGOs in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran by supporting NGO initiatives in preparing reports as well as building national NGO coalitions.

Q. What kind of technical assistance NGOs can expect?

We offer NGOs our expertise on how to prepare NGO reports, build national NGO

coalitions and follow-up Committee's concluding observations either in the form of trainings or by various communication means. We provide financial assistance to NGOs to participate in the pre-session working group in Geneva to explain their perspective on child rights. We also provide NGOs with practical tools, guides and fact-sheets on children's rights.

The countries scheduled to be examined by the Committee in the

near future are Qatar, Egypt, Bahrain and Syrian Arab Republic and we would like to invite NGOs and national coalitions in the Middle East to contribute to the reporting process by submitting information on the main areas of concern with respect to children in their countries, and constructively engage in dialogue with the Committee. This will complement the efforts of their governments towards promoting and protecting the best interests of children in the country. For more information they can contact us by email khachyan@childrightsnet.org by phone +41 22 740 4730 or by visiting our website: www.childrightsnet.org.

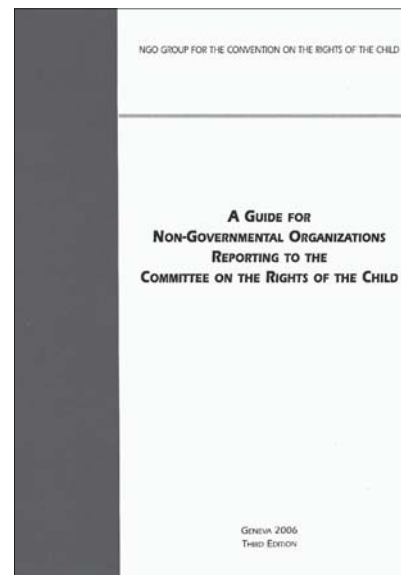
Q. How can NGOs benefit from this process?

By submitting information about the main issues of concern in their countries and by taking part in the reporting process, NGOs will get involved in high-profile advocacy work at international

level and can influence the country's agenda on the promotion of children's rights at national level.

It is of particular importance to the Committee to receive supplementary information to the State party report on the situation of children from national human rights institutions and NGOs. By highlighting the main issues of concern as well as making recommendations towards improving the situation, NGOs will make a valuable input in drafting the recommendations addressed to their government.

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that the information will be treated confidentially and will be available only to the Committee's experts. The NGOs will have an opportunity to meet the Committee experts during the pre-session working group meeting and discuss the main issues with them directly thus influencing the questions to be addressed to their government.



We would like to use this opportunity to call upon NGOs in the Middle East to get involved in the global discussions on child rights in the UN human rights system. We look forward to receiving requests for information and collaboration with the NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa.

Journalism Must Mature and Remove its Legal and Administrative Constraints

On the 11th of April 2009, an office for the International Federation of Journalism (IFJ) was opened in Bahrain, under the patronage of the Minister of Information and Culture Sheikhha Mai Al Khalifa, and with the participation of Mr. Eden White, the President of the Federation. Many important figures were among the participants including ministers, civil society organizations, presidents and representatives of Arab and international journalists' unions in addition to the local media.

Minister Mai Al Khalifa regarded the opening of the office as a step towards promoting confidence in 'The Kingdom's position, as an oasis for democracy in the current atmosphere of reform, transparency, professionalism, and a free and responsible ethical sense' and as an asset to the reform project led by the King. She added that 'Bahrain is witnessing a period of political activism, institutionalization, openness and development' hoping that the current heated debate on rights, customs and media ethics would be a source of enrichment and not a cause for obstruction.

The Minister stressed the importance of democratic expression and the position of the media, and said that the Ministry is striving to make both these transparent, professional and ethical, pointing to the existence of a serious attitude to solve all the problems that undermine work ethics. She also expressed her keen interest in promoting political pluralism, intellectual and information diversity and saw that freedom of the press and expression are at the heart of the reform project of His Majesty the King. She affirmed that she will personally work tirelessly for the legalization of freedom of the press as part of public freedoms which should expand, mature and remove all legal and administrative constraints. This is in order that these practices are performed within a clear framework and that all given guarantees are based on solid foundations. The Minister also called for a collective commitment of the international conventions regarding political and civil rights, transforming them into local legislations and revising existing laws and regulations accordingly. She stressed the need to form strong partnerships in order to benefit the future of press on various levels, such as ethical and professional knowledge

and re-habilitation.

Mr Nabeel Al Hamar, the King's media advisor, pointed out, during the same occasion, that the reform project 'has opened the doors of freedom for the Bahraini media, opinions, newspapers, and various movements and helped diversify them, which has promoted freedom and democracy'. He continued by saying: 'thanks to the King's democratic project, Bahrain has become an important centre for journalism and a workshop for democracy based on freedom of expression'. He stressed that 'the opening

Bahrain Transparency Society: Developing Legislations to Combat Corruption

On 15th of April 2009, the Transparency Society welcomed Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa's announcement on 9 April 2009, in which he stressed the need to develop legislations in order to combat all forms of corruption and bribery. He also called for the criminalization of mishandling of shareholders' money and providing the necessary legislations to guarantee their rights. An agreement has been reached on presenting an amendment to the Penal Code to the Council of Ministers regarding the addition of a new chapter entitled 'Bribery and Embezzlement in the Private Sector' and the consolidation of the values of transparency and equal opportunities. The Society also suggested passing a new law to combat and criminalize administrative and financial corruption, and said that it contributed to the bills of the National Committee for Combating Corruption such as the ones for combating corruption, the freedom to access information and liabilities law, stressing the need of passing and promoting these laws. The Society also called for strengthening the authority of the Financial Monitoring Agency, the independence of the judiciary and the Public Prosecutor so that they can perform their required roles in conducting any investigation, pursuing those accused of corruption and putting them on trial.

of an office for the International Federation for Journalism comes as another step to promote the atmosphere of freedom and democracy in the country, and as a fruitful outcome of the national democratic project'.

On his part, Mr. Eden White, the Federation's Secretary General, stressed the importance and the role of the law in expanding the margin that journalists are able to work within, pointing out that the establishment of an office in Bahrain is a new step towards achieving uniqueness in journalists' work and improving their professionalism. He added that he will personally organize seminars, workshops, activities and conferences from Brussels in order to develop journalism in the region, saying that this necessitates a strong commitment and partnership between journalistic organizations, Government institutions and civil society organizations. In an open letter, Mr. White demanded the Bahraini Parliament to adopt a new media law, which annuls treating journalistic breaches as criminal cases, saying that 'journalism should escape political domination and return to its original roots'.

He continued by saying that 'the press can only achieve this through emphasizing the central role of the media and its natural position in the heart of an open society, where people are free to express their opinions, and where telling the truth is perceived as an issue which serves public interest'. Mr. White made the statement to mark the launch of the IFJ's Program of Action to support the ethical and independent journalism in the Middle East, and with the opening of a regional office in Bahrain. The regional office will ensure the implementation of practical programs designed to remove the legal constraints against the freedom of the press as well as working towards spreading awareness regarding the crucial role played by independent and good quality press in the democratic reform process in the region. In his letter, Mr. White said that 'the IFJ is very pleased that Bahrain is the centre for its regional campaign for ethical journalism, and we are aware that the journalistic society in Bahrain is ready to play a leading role in the creation of new examples of moral journalism in the Arab World'.

Release of 178 Detainees by Royal Pardon Means Containing Violence at Official and Public levels

On 11 April, the citizens of Bahrain were surprised with the issue of a royal pardon, on the 11th of April, regarding the 178 individuals charged with security offences. The pardon included Sheikh Mohammed Al Moqdad and Hassan Mushaima as well as the so called 'Hujjaira detainees' and others accused of setting fires in the streets. As for those accused of causing the death of a foreign worker and a policeman by attacking their cars, they will remain imprisoned until the problem is resolved with the victims' families. On the 12th of April, the day after the royal pardon, all remaining detainees were released amidst great public joy expressed by civil and political societies in the country. In their statements the societies welcomed the move and thanked the King, and public reactions to the pardon were immediately reflected on the streets, where people expressed their joy by carrying pictures of the King and shouting slogans expressing loyalty to him.

The Minister of Interior, Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, explained the reasons for the royal pardon by saying that 'the decision comes within the framework of the amnesty and forgiveness approach that characterized the reform project; aims to instill hope and promote confidence; and allows everyone to participate in creating an atmosphere of peace and security as well as deepening the feeling of good will.' He added that 'if justice is the basis of ruling a country, then amnesty and forgiveness are its title for his royal highness'. The Minister also addressed those who were pardoned saying 'you should make use of your experience, learn a valuable lesson and become constructive members in your society, caring for its security instead of damaging it'. He also called for the support of the leadership in order to protect national unity and the social fabric and in order to unify efforts and create strong convictions among influential groups in order to work within the framework of national objectives. He added that political and religious rhetoric as well as the media should be directed towards unifying all parties, renouncing discord and extremism, and spreading love and forgiveness amongst fellow countrymen.

As a result of the royal pardon, the court has indefinitely postponed looking into all

security cases. The competent judge decided to suspend the case of six youths from the Samaheej area accused of attempting to burn the Samaheej police station. On the other hand, the Public Prosecutor, Ali Fadil Al Boaynain, announced that prisons in Bahrain are currently empty of all individuals charged with security offences, with the exception of two cases relating to private rights.

On 14 April 2009, the King called for strengthening the role of MPs and the legislative authority in the country. He stressed that they should be regarded as the basic reference points for dialogue and the correct channel for discussing peoples' demands, pointing to the fact that the streets are not the appropriate place for settling differences nor is the use of violence a legitimate means of attaining rights. He said that 'the responsibility to promote dialogue at this stage lies in the hands of the voters and their parliamentary representatives; they should refer to them on whatever they desire in regards to dialogue issues, for these representatives are elected by the people, and in accordance with the Constitution both they and other members of the Consultative (Shura) Council are the legislative authority in the country, and the rightful body which has the authority to listen to citizens' demands and to discuss the issues with them directly. This is in order to transform these demands into legislations and bills that can be implemented in accordance with the Constitution.'

The King also pointed to the importance of 'having a clear understanding of this constitutional right and practicing it in practical terms through communication with MPs.' He stressed that national dialogue is the basis for any reform action and has yielded the National Action Charter which resulted in a major shift towards change in the state such as regular elections, democratic practices, as well as widening the margin of freedom and working to promote women's rights and human rights in general.

In contrast to this, the radical Bahrain Freedom Movement felt a great loss in their position and in what the consequences of the royal pardon would mean at the local arena. They presented an inaccurate reading of the political situation and issued a harsh statement

entitled 'Thank you Molotov', in which they claim that the credit of the pardon is due to the use of violent means, including setting fires and destroying public properties with gas cylinders among others!

As initial reaction, the Al-Wafaq Society issued a statement in which they thanked the King and stressed that the royal pardon is a big step and marked a new beginning towards a better future in the country. They added that Bahrain has recently been through a dark tunnel and unprecedented political and security crisis which have affected social movement and political action. The Society stressed the need to open up new horizons for political action which push towards maturity and stability, serving the country and its reputation, and re-affirmed its commitment to peaceful means and abiding by the law.

On 13 and 16 April 2009, the Secretary-General of Al-Wafaq Society, Sheikh Ali Salman, refuted in interviews with Al Wasat newspaper the existence of a deal between the Government and his Society which resulted in the release of the detainees. He stressed that his political society is 'the powerful in Parliament' and will not be lenient with any attempt to incite riots and violence or assault public properties. He also expressed the willingness of the Society to take to the street if necessary, in order to confront advocates of violence adding that 'if it was not for the King's patience and his determination to meet with scholars in order to bypass these dark months, this pardon would not have been achieved'.

Sheikh Salman also condemned dealing with differences through the use of violence which distorted citizens' demands and rights in the eyes of human rights, political and diplomatic bodies. He said that freedom of expression is guaranteed in the country and should not be confiscated, stressing that demanding rights can be achieved by peaceful means. He called upon the opposition to engage in politics away from violence, adding that despite certain limitations in the law 'there is still sufficient room to work through it and political forces need not resort to violence. The authority should be more open to demonstrations and opposing opinions and the opposition should be more patient and not resort to violence either directly or indirectly'.

Various Human Rights Activities at the Fringe of Durban Review Conference

The President of the Bahrain Human Rights Monitor Mr. Hasan Moosa Shafaei participated in the United Nations' Durban ii Review Conference on Racism held in Geneva. Mr. Shafaei organized several meetings with a number of officials in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) as well as representatives of international, regional and Arab human rights organizations, in which he discussed human rights issues specifically related to the human rights situation in Bahrain and the Middle East.

Mr. Shafaei also met with Julian Waagensen, a human rights officer in the Middle East and North Africa Unit in the OHCHR, where the latest developments in the human rights situation in Bahrain were discussed, including the royal pardon of detainees which was the main subject of the discussion. Mr. Waagensen had his questions answered and showed great interest in the details of the recent events.

Mr. Shafaei also met with Shushan Khachyan, a child rights officer in the NGOs Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a coalition of international non-governmental organizations working to facilitate the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The CRC Group assists national NGOs in the preparation of the alternative reports. It also provides training and communication for NGOs with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The meeting discussed Bahrain's official report on the rights of the child recently presented by the Government, which is expected to be discussed again with UN experts in 2011. with the meeting also discussed the possibility of involving Bahrainis NGOs in the preparation of the alternative report.

On the other hand, BHRM's President also met with Isabelle Scherer, the Director of the International Service for

Human Rights, an organization which is concerned with providing assistance to human rights defenders through training and information on the various UN mechanisms in human rights field, and the most effective means for using them to promote and protect human rights in their countries.

Mr. Shafaei also met with a number of Bahraini human rights defenders, including Abdulanbi Alekri, the President of Bahrain Transparency Society, and Abdulla Alderazi, the Secretary-General of the Bahrain Human Rights Society. The meeting focused on the future cooperation as well as the developments of human rights in Bahrain. Also, he met with Mr. Eric Sottas, the Secretary General of the OMCT (World Organization against Torture) and Said Benarbia, a legal officer for the Middle East and North Africa in the International Commission of Jurists.

On 23 April 2009, Mr. Shafaei participated in a meeting for the Arab human rights NGOs on combating racism, organized by the Arab Committee for Human Rights, in which the situations of human rights in Palestine were discussed. Among the participants of this meeting were the Committee's President Dr. Violet Dagher, several Arab human rights defenders and a number of Rabbis who support the Palestinian cause and are involved in combating Zionism and racism.

Hasan Shafaei also had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Dagher, Ameer Makhoul, the Director-General of the Union of Arab Civil Societies; Mohammed Zeidan, the General Director of the Arab Association for Human Rights in Palestine; Rabi Ahron Cohen; Usama Halabi, a Palestinian activist from the occupied territories; and Dr. George Jabbour, an independent expert in the UN Human Rights Council.



Shafaei with Dr. Violete Dagher from the Arab Community for Human rights



Shafaei with anti-Zionist and anti-Racist Rabbis



With Shushan Khachyan of the NGO group for CRC



With Isabelle Scherer, the Director of the International Service for Human Rights.



Meeting Palestinians human rights activists.