



All quiet on the Bahraini front?

by Florence Gaub and Boukje Kistemaker

The 23rd EU-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ministerial meeting held on 30 June in Bahrain provided a good opportunity to remind ourselves of the - seemingly forgotten - on-going internal crisis of the host country. The smallest Gulf state with only 1.3 million inhabitants, Bahrain remains paralysed by weekly demonstrations and repeated failures to reach a compromise with the opposition. Although often classified as one of the 'Arab Spring' states, Bahrain differs from the other cases. Bahrain has not undergone a regime change like Yemen, Egypt or Tunisia, nor has it witnessed the violence of Syria or Libya, yet, unlike its neighbouring Gulf states, it has been unable to secure societal peace through financial means. In contrast to Qatar, which has just witnessed the abdication of the emir in favour of his son, there is little willingness to reform and its government has been headed by Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa since 1971. Bahrain is therefore caught between reforms it is not willing to undertake and an uprising it is unable to suppress. As both conflict parties continue to play for time, the crisis is taking its toll on the country's economy and is contributing to the exacerbation of Shia/Sunni tensions in the region.

A fundamental crisis

The main reason why Bahrain's crisis has not been resolved is because its root causes go far deeper than those of the other 'Arab Spring' states. In contrast to Syria or Libya, the opposition's demands are not only

about economic and social justice and human rights, but touch on the state's very identity. At the centre of the crisis is the fact that Bahrain's Shia Muslims, who make up 70 per cent of the population, feel discriminated against by the monarchy and, by extension the state apparatus at large, which is predominantly staffed by Sunni Muslims.

But the origins of this economic and social discrimination are rooted in regional politics. More precisely, the antagonism between Bahrain's Shia citizens and the government is part of the broader rivalry between Iran and its Arab Gulf neighbours. This regional dimension makes it difficult for the monarchy to make concessions to the opposition. The regime has long portrayed Bahrain's Shia population as a fifth column of Iran, a narrative employed ever since Iran claimed Bahrain, the only Arab Gulf state with a sizeable Shia population, as its 14th province in 1957. The royal mindset therefore remains one where its Shia citizens constitute a potential threat to the nation and put the regime at risk.

Bahrain's Sunni were able to consolidate power at the time of independence when both communities were roughly equal in size. The extent to which the Sunni Arabs brought in by the British from elsewhere altered the original demographic makeup is unclear, but what is certain is that the act worsened Shia perceptions of discrimination and undermined trust in the monarchy. The Islamic Revolution in Iran exacerbated these tensions further, with Ayatollah Khomeini openly calling for the Gulf monarchies



to be overthrown and offering financial support to militant Shia groups in Bahrain, finally leading to an attempted Shia coup in 1981.

Since then, Shiites have been sidelined when it comes to government jobs, and experienced overt discrimination regarding the practice of their religion. Although Bahrain does not suffer from extreme poverty, problems of unemployment are indeed concentrated in the Shiite population. However, the fact that Bahraini Shia are comparatively prosperous makes it more difficult for the government to 'buy off' social peace like its neighbours - although the government did issue a payment of 2,033 euros to every family after the events of 2011.

Who wants what?

Since the uprising began in February 2011, the opposition has become more radicalised and more fragmented. Al-Wefaq, the largest bloc in parliament and leading Shia party, advocates equality for Shia citizens, respect for human rights, free elections, the redrawing of electoral districts, a constitution submitted to a referendum, and the election of the prime minister by parliament. As a reaction to the regime's brutal repression of the demonstrations - leading to numerous casualties, the arrest of several thousand people, military trials and the harassment of opposition leaders - other, more radical groups such as the February 14 Youth Movement have emerged which demand the abdication of the king or the outright abolition of the monarchy.

The government originally chose to view the crisis solely through the regional prism, recalling its ambassador to Teheran and blaming the riots on Iran's interference. But it also took measures in an attempt to end the crisis. King Hamad commissioned the Bahrain Independent Commission Inquiry (BICI), an independent international committee formed to investigate the events of the uprising which confirmed the systematic abuse of protesters by internal security forces. It also documented 46 deaths, 559 allegations of torture, and more than 4,000 cases where employees - in both the public and private sectors - have been fired for participating in the protests. In May 2012, constitutional amendments were adopted giving the parliamentary assembly greater authority, allowing it to serve as a partial check on government power. Facing international concern over its human rights record and commitment to reform, in March 2013, the Bahraini government extended an invitation to Juan E. Méndez, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. This visit was, however, later unilaterally cancelled by the Bahraini government.

A 'national dialogue' has been repeatedly initiated but has broken down several times, while national demonstrations and clashes between security forces and protestors continue to occur every weekend.

But Bahrain cannot afford a protracted crisis; it has already lost over 1.5 billion euros as a result of the unrest, its GDP has shrunk by some 300 million euros, and it will be the first Gulf state to run out of oil in 10 to 15 years. The establishment of solid social foundations is therefore crucial if the regime wants to survive.

The outside dimension

Compared to other 'Arab Spring' cases, the Bahraini crisis has elicited different international reactions due to its specific regional dimension. The other GCC countries, as well as the League of Arab States, have supported the Bahraini government and backed its narrative of Iran-sponsored riots. The United States, whose Fifth Fleet has been based in Bahrain since 1971, has also claimed Iran's interference to be one of the main reasons for the uprising while simultaneously calling for reconciliation and show of restraint.

The European Union has repeatedly made calls for the Bahraini authorities to show respect for human rights and the rule of law and urged greater commitment to dialogue and reform. This position was again voiced at the latest EU-GCC summit, as was the support for the establishment of a free trade agreement between the blocs in an effort to boost bilateral trade which is currently worth some 145 billion euro annually. Furthermore, the summit underlined the importance of effectively addressing regional and sectarian challenges in order to improve security and stability in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East.

But implementing the recommendations on how to solve the crisis is difficult, in particular as there is no consensus within the ruling family on how to proceed. The king is not omnipotent, and faces opposition from influential hardliners who believe that earlier concessions were a sign of weakness. Even though the reformists in the family were strengthened by the conciliatory move of appointing Crown Prince Salman as deputy prime minister, the persisting protests have weakened their position. A solution, however, needs to be found quickly. As both camps begin to fragment, a peaceful solution to the crisis is becoming increasingly unlikely.

**Florence Gaub is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.
Boukje Kistemaker is a Junior Analyst at the EUISS.**

