



## BRIEFING PAPER

Number CBP 7513, 24 February 2016

# Political reform and human rights in Bahrain

By Ben Smith

Inside:

1. Basics
2. Political reforms
3. Recent political developments
4. UK relations



# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Basics</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Political reforms</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 National Action Charter	5
2.2 Unrest	5
2.3 2011 and its aftermath	6
<b>3. Recent political developments</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1 Regional context	9
<b>4. UK relations</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1 Security relationship with Bahrain	10
New naval base	11
4.2 Arms sales	11
4.3 Government response on human rights	12

## Summary

The attempts by the Bahraini authorities to design a political system that airs grievances and allows some public input to government without leading to the fall of the monarchy have stalled.

The demonstrations of 2011 were put down aggressively by the authorities, with the help of Saudi Arabia, and the recommendations of the Bahrain International Committee of Inquiry into the events have not been implemented thoroughly.

In the context of increased sectarian tensions in the region and the stand-off between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, the Bahraini government will probably continue to stifle Shiite dissent.

The UK has a long relationship with Bahrain and has recently cooperated on a new naval base there. Questions have been raised about the UK government licensing exports of military equipment to the country, in the light of the political unrest. British ministers say that they regularly raise human rights and democracy issues with their Bahraini counterparts.

# 1. Basics

**Head of State:** HM Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa

**Head of Government:** Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman Al Khalifa

**Last election:** Legislative, 22 November and 29 November 2014

**Next election:** Legislative, due 2018

## Area and Population

**Area:** 771 sq km

**Population (mid-2014):** 1,314,562

**Population density (mid-2014):** 1,705.0 per sq km

**Life expectancy (years at birth, 2013):** 76.7 (males 75.9; females 77.5)

## Finance

**GDP in current prices (World Bank estimates, 2013):** US \$32,890m.  
(US \$24,689 per head)

**Real GDP growth (2014):** 4.5%

**Inflation (average change in consumer prices, 2014):** 2.6%

**Currency:** dinar (BD)<sup>1</sup>

Bahrain is a collection of islands in the Persian Gulf. Having been a British Protectorate it seceded from the Federation of Arab Emirates in 1971 to become an independent state. The Al Khalifa family are Sunni Muslims, while the majority of the population (about 60-70%) of the population is Shiite.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on Bahrain in Bahrain, in Europa World online. London, Routledge. House of Commons

## 2. Political reforms

### 2.1 National Action Charter

The Emir announced in November 2000 that a 46-member Supreme National Committee (SNC) had been formed to prepare a National Action Charter (NAC), which would propose more political reforms. Among the SNC's recommendations, submitted in December, were that there should be a transition from an emirate to a constitutional monarchy, with a directly elected bicameral parliament (women would be able to vote and to stand for election), a consultative chamber that would be appointed by the Government from all sections of society and an independent judiciary. Critics of the Bahrain government dismissed the proposed transition to a monarchy as a cover for the maintenance of autocratic rule.

The new Charter was approved in a referendum which enfranchised women voters for the first time) on 14–15 February 2001 by 98.4% of the vote. The Decree Law on State Security Measures and the State Security Court were both repealed. After the lifting of travel restrictions for members of the opposition, by March 2001 at least 100 exiles had returned to Bahrain, including Sheikh Ali Salman. The government also licensed the independent Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) in March 2001.

Exiles return

In February 2002 the Emir became the King and approved the amendments to the Constitution outlined in the NAC. Municipal elections were held in May 2002. Female candidates – for the first time permitted to stand for public office – did not win any seats on the five new regional councils.

There were also general elections in 2002. Sunni Islamist parties dominated the parliament, while Wefaq, the leading Shiite party, boycotted the election.

#### **Subsequent elections**

Wefaq did stand in the subsequent 2006 and 2010 elections, gaining a total of 18 out of the 40 available seats in the present parliament. There were allegations that the government had changed constituency boundaries in order to prevent the Shiite opposition from gaining a majority.

### 2.2 Unrest

The political liberalisation process has not been convincing enough to prevent civil unrest breaking out. In 2007, with sporadic riots took place in Shia villages in that year. In 2008, the military was placed under direct royal command, protecting it from parliamentary scrutiny and in 2008 and 2009, many Shia activists were arrested for connections with an alleged terrorist plot. The arrests provoked further civil unrest.

There seem to be reasons to remain sceptical about the reform process. The system is designed to maintain the dominance of the executive branch. The king appoints the cabinet, drawing most of the important

ministers from his family, the upper house of is also appointed and is just as powerful as the elected chamber, and the king appoints the judges. Parliament cannot question the Prime Minister or pass motions of no confidence in him.

Although the reforms are partly cosmetic and political participation is hobbled by the monarchy's (and Saudi Arabia's – see below) insistence on the Sunni ascendancy, many of Bahrain's establishment would argue that they have done more than any country in the Gulf apart from Kuwait to introduce genuine political pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.3 2011 and its aftermath

As unrest swept through the Arab world in 2011, a surge of opposition activity dominated the country. Demonstrations against the continued detention of Shiite activists sprang up in and around Manama, the Bahraini capital. Protesters were killed in clashes with the security forces. Hundreds of opposition (manly Shia) activists were arrested.

All 18 Wefaq parliamentarians resigned in protest at the deaths.

On 13 March 2011 anti-Government demonstrators took control of parts of Manama following clashes with police. The following day around 1,500 troops and police officers from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar arrived in Bahrain as part of a Gulf Cooperation Council force, to help the Bahraini forces regain control. Wefaq denounced the incursion as an occupation.

The Bahrain Independent Committee of Inquiry was set up to look into allegations of abuse by the security forces during the disturbances. In November 2011, the Committee of Inquiry published its hard-hitting report on the events in the spring of that year.<sup>3</sup> The report recommended sweeping reforms to end impunity for torture and extrajudicial killings and to work towards the reconciliation of Bahraini society. Despite some changes, most reports suggest that the implementation of the reforms has been half-hearted at best. Unrest and reports of abuse continue and some fear an impending crisis. Some in the Bahraini government see a partial union with Saudi Arabia as a resolution to the crisis.

Bahrain Independent  
Committee of Inquiry

The opposition again boycotted the 2014 election, undermining the government's attempts to craft a political system that would provide a safety valve for dissent without making dramatic changes to the country's power structures.

The UK government said it was disappointed with the boycott:

Governance of Bahrain is a matter for all political parties in Bahrain. That is why we encourage all political parties, including Al Wefaq who boycotted elections in November 2014, to engage constructively in political dialogue in order to reach an inclusive political settlement. Although we were disappointed by the

<sup>2</sup> This section largely based on [Bahrain, in Europa World online](#). London, Routledge. House of Commons

<sup>3</sup> [Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry](#), 10 December 2011

## 7 Political reform and human rights in Bahrain

opposition's decision to boycott the 2014 elections, we commended the participation of a broad range of candidates which saw 14 independent Shia candidates win seats, of which three were women.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> [HC Written question – 24100](#), 26 January 2016

### 3. Recent political developments

As disappointment mounted with the Committee of Inquiry implementation, civil unrest continued to break out in Shiite villages and around the Shia mosque in Manama. A police officer was killed in an explosion in December 2014.

In December 2014 Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of the Shiite opposition, was arrested having attended an anti-government demonstration. His arrest sparked protests across the country. In June, the leader was jailed for four years on charges of inciting hatred and insulting government institutions.

Sheikh Ali Salman

Amnesty International said that the conviction contravened the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, of which Bahrain is a signatory: "It is yet another clear example of Bahrain's flagrant disregard for its international obligations, Sheikh Ali Salman has been sentenced solely for peacefully expressing his opinion."<sup>5</sup>

Human Rights Watch described Sheikh Ali Salman's trial as "grossly unfair." The court refused to consider evidence presented by the defence because it said the intent of it was "to raise doubts about the substantiating evidence that has persuaded the court."<sup>6</sup>

Human rights activist Nabeel Rajab was convicted of insulting government institutions and his sentence of six months was confirmed in May 2015. Amnesty international said that Bahrain was 'brazenly flouting its international obligations'.<sup>7</sup> The activist was later pardoned by King Hamad.

Human rights and other political organisations are highly circumscribed by the law, which allows the authorities to wind them up if they criticise the government. Activists are regularly imprisoned and torture is commonplace, according to Amnesty International.<sup>8</sup>

In July 2015 high-profile human rights organisations sent a letter to the UN Human Rights Council expressing concern at the situation, saying that over the preceding year:

Letter to the UN  
Human Rights  
Council

...the Government of Bahrain has intensified its repression of dissenting voices, including through the arbitrary detentions of high-profile opposition activists and human rights defenders, trials that fail to adhere to international fair trial standards, ill-treatment of detainees, excessive use of force, and restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly that go far beyond those permitted under international law.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> ['Bahrain opposition leader Sheikh Ali Salman jailed'](#), *BBC News Online*, 16 June 2015

<sup>6</sup> ['Bahrain: Opposition Leader's Trial Grossly Unfair'](#), Human Rights Watch press release, 25 August 2015

<sup>7</sup> ['Bahrain: Nabeel Rajab jail sentence shows authorities will not tolerate peaceful critics'](#), Amnesty International press release, 14 May 2015

<sup>8</sup> ['Five things you should know about Bahrain ahead of the Formula One Grand Prix'](#), Amnesty International press release, 16 April 2015

<sup>9</sup> [Joint NGO Letter: Human Rights Situation in Bahrain](#): To Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the UN Human Rights Council, 16 July 2015



On 21 August 2015, the trial of Ebrahim Sharif started. He had made a speech calling for political reform at a rally commemorating the death of a boy at the hands of the riot police in 2012.

In September 2015, the government claimed to have uncovered a huge cache of explosives and bomb manufacturing facilities in an underground bunker. They said that information linked the perpetrators to elements in Iran and Iraq.

Sectarian tension in the region has worsened recently, particularly after the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a leading Shiite cleric, by the Saudi government. In January 2016 the Bahraini government announced that it had arrested members of a terrorist cell linked to Hizbollah, the Lebanese group, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Experts cast doubt on the government's claims, saying that the Bahraini government has a record of making such claims on questionable evidence.<sup>10</sup>

In February 2016, Ibrahim Sharif, a former secretary-general of the National Democratic Action Society and a senior Sunni opposition leader, was sentenced to one year in prison for inciting hatred. He had delivered a speech calling for reform in July 2015, shortly after emerging from a prison sentence for actions in connection with the 2011 uprising. The speech was delivered at a meeting to commemorate the shooting dead of a 16-year-old by riot police in 2012.<sup>11</sup>

Ibrahim Sharif

### 3.1 Regional context

The possibility that the unrest in Bahrain will escalate is heightened by the growing friction between Sunnis and Shias in the region. The conflict in Iraq and Syria, particularly, has sharpened tensions and Sunnis are even more fearful of the power of Iran since the signature of the nuclear deal with Western nations.

Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen is evidence of a more muscular Saudi foreign policy, particularly aimed at perceived interference in Arab affairs by Shiite Persian Iran; if unrest in Bahrain does grow significantly, observers will be looking to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states for their reaction.

With these developments in the region, it is unlikely that the sectarian tensions in Bahrain will subside in the near future. Iran and Hizballah have already been blamed by the Bahraini authorities for fomenting unrest within Bahrain. If violence increases, whether from Shiites or Sunnis, the Bahraini government is likely to continue to blame it on external interference and to resist it strongly.

---

<sup>10</sup> ['Bahrain's claims of terror cell plot questioned'](#), *Financial Times*, 7 January 2016

<sup>11</sup> ['Bahrain jails secular opposition leader Ibrahim Sharif'](#), *BBC News Online*, 24 February 2016

## 4. UK relations

The government says that its aim in Bahrain is to help Bahrain to return to stability:

In line with the Gulf Initiative, our aim is to help Bahrain to return to a stable and reformist state with a good human rights record, while protecting our significant defence and security interests and enhancing our bilateral relationship.<sup>12</sup>

January 2016 marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UK-Bahraini relations. A treaty of friendship was signed in 1816.<sup>13</sup> That relationship causes some people concern, given the record of Bahrain on human rights and democracy.

### 4.1 Security relationship with Bahrain

The main Gulf base for the Royal Navy moved to Bahrain in 1935 and Britain maintained close defence relations with Bahrain from independence in 1971, despite the withdrawal of military assets from east of Suez in 1967. Since the deployment in 1980 of ships to protect the oil trade during Iran-Iraq war, there has been at least one British frigate or destroyer in the Gulf. Bahrain is the usual regional base for the ships, and four British minesweepers are indefinitely based there too. One of the main attractions of Bahrain as a base is the much larger US naval presence there. The large US base was originally a Royal Navy base and was transferred to the US military on Bahrain's independence in 1971.

Since 1971, Bahrain's Chief of Police has continuously been advised by a retired senior British police officer.

---

<sup>12</sup> UK Government, [UK and Bahrain](#)

<sup>13</sup> ['Launch of 200th anniversary of Bahrain - UK relations'](#), British Embassy Manama press release, 5 January 2016

## New naval base

On 5 December the Foreign and Commonwealth Office announced that the Foreign Secretary had signed an agreement with the Bahraini government for enhancements of onshore facilities at the Bahraini military's Mina Salman Port in Bahrain. The new facilities will provide the Royal Navy with a forward operating base and a place to plan, store equipment for naval operations



and accommodate Royal Navy personnel.

The Foreign Secretary said that this would enhance the UK's presence in the Gulf:

This will guarantee the presence of the Royal Navy in Bahrain well into the future. The expansion of Britain's footprint builds upon our 30-year track record of Gulf patrols and is just one example of our growing partnership with Gulf partners to tackle shared strategic and regional threats.<sup>14</sup>

Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary, said that the new facilities would enable Britain to send more and larger ships to the Gulf: "We will now be based in the Gulf for the long term."<sup>15</sup>

On hearing the news of the plans for a new Royal Navy base, Bahrainis protested in the Shia town of Sitra, calling for the expulsion of the British Ambassador, Iain Lindsay. Activists said that the granting of the base by the Bahraini government was a reward for the UK government's allegedly muted criticism of Bahrain's human rights record.<sup>16</sup>

## 4.2 Arms sales

The House of Commons Committees on Arms Exports Controls (CAEC) raised the question of arms exports to Bahrain in its 2015 report, asking

<sup>14</sup> ['UK-Bahrain sign landmark defence agreement'](#), FCO press release, 5 December 2014

<sup>15</sup> ['UK-Bahrain sign landmark defence agreement'](#), FCO press release, 5 December 2014

<sup>16</sup> ['Protests erupt over British decision to open military base in Bahrain'](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2014

for an explanation from the government as to why the export of such items as anti-riot/ballistic shields and assault rifles had been allowed.<sup>17</sup>

The Government said in response that the export licenses were justified but that they could be reviewed:

The Government is satisfied that the extant licences for Bahrain are compliant with the Consolidated Criteria. However, circumstances can and do change rapidly, leading to a reassessment of risk and, in some cases, a different decision using the same criteria. In such cases, the Government would revoke the licences.<sup>18</sup>

### 4.3 Government response on human rights

Concern about alleged political prisoners and repression in Bahrain continues to have a high political profile, particularly in view of the UK government's naval cooperation with Bahrain and prioritisation of trade with the Gulf region.

In answer to PQs about what it is doing to advance democratic rights in Bahrain, the government says that it discusses the issues with the Bahaini government:

We regularly discuss human rights and reform with the Government of Bahrain including at the biannual UK-Bahrain Joint Working Group meeting which was most recently held in November 2015. Reform programme activities delivered through the Causeway Institute have used lessons from Northern Ireland to improve community outreach and communication – particularly to a youth audience.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Committees on Arms Export Controls [Scrutiny of Arms Exports and Arms Controls \(2015\)](#) - HC 608 Published 20 March 2015, , p48

<sup>18</sup> [Scrutiny of Arms Exports and Arms Controls \(2015\): Response of the Secretaries of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Defence, Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and International Development](#), Cm 9089, 31 July 2015, p64

<sup>19</sup> [HC Written question – 24100](#), 26 January 2016

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email [hcinfo@parliament.uk](mailto:hcinfo@parliament.uk).

Disclaimer - This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).