<ATL>Protest, Sects, and the Potential for Power-Sharing in Bahrain</ATL>

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<H1>Abstract</H1>

In this short intervention I explore the scope for power-sharing as a means of resolving conflict between rulers and ruled across Bahrain. Unlike other states in the Middle East where power-sharing has been posited as a solution to violence and division, conflict in Bahrain is structural, erupting in violence sporadically, yet framed around ways of ensuring the survival of the ruling Al Khalifa family. This, I argue, poses challenges to the application of traditional power-sharing approaches that have been deployed elsewhere. In spite of this, power-sharing continues to be viewed by many opposition figures as a viable means through which peace can be realized between the regime and opposition figures. Such moves are seen by many Bahrainis to be a means through which equality and a vibrant form of citizenship can be realized. I examine and reflect on three moments of political possibility in Bahrain: 1973–1975, 2000–2002, and the 2011 Arab uprisings. I argue that while power-sharing appears to offer a means through which to address tensions within divided societies, power asymmetries across the state mean that the Al Khalifa face little pressure to adopt this approach, choosing instead to exert sovereign power over social divisions with support from external backers.

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<H1>Introduction</H1>

On 14 February 2011, protesters occupied Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout, expressing frustration at the rule of King Hamad and the Al Khalifa monarchy. The protest movement drew support

from a range of different constituencies, with chants of 'not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini' becoming commonplace across Pearl Roundabout. A month later, forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) under the banner of Operation Peninsula Shield crossed the King Fahd Causeway in support of the monarchy, whose security services cleared the roundabout and destroyed the monument to Pearl Diving which had become synonymous with the uprising (Mabon 2019; Matthiesen 2017).

Before embarking on a reflection about the scope for power-sharing to address conflict in Bahrain, it is worth stressing that while divisions between rulers and ruled have begun to map onto the country's Sunni and Shi'a communities, conflict across the archipelago transcends the framing of divisions along purely sectarian lines. Instead, it stems from a range of challenges including political and economic stagnation, a lack of transparency and accountability, a failure to adopt good governance, corruption, human rights violations, and regional dynamics, all of which cut across identity groups.

In spite of this complexity, power-sharing continues to be viewed by many opposition figures as a viable means through which peace can be realized between the regime and opposition figures. Such moves are seen by many Bahrainis as a means through which equality and a vibrant form of citizenship can be realized. Yet in conversations with Bahrainis in exile, they also express concern about the historical precedent set by the regime to crush any hope of power-sharing agreements, citing Al Khalifa behaviour during the early 1970s and 2000s, as discussed in more detail below. As a divided society, power-sharing appears to offer a way of circumventing grievances between rulers and ruled across Bahrain. Yet in the years following the clearing of Pearl Roundabout, a crackdown on prominent Shi'a groups and their followers – along with political groups from other backgrounds – has eviscerated the space for political engagement.

Although Bahrain's population stands at around 1.3 million, it is divided in a range of ways. Roughly 50% of the population are expatriate workers, while the remaining 50% are divided between a Sunni monarch minority ruling over a Shi'a majority. In spite of this, however, Bahrain's history reveals a complex picture shaped along alternative socioeconomic, tribal, ethnic, and urban-rural lines, resulting in a history of protest driven by a range of centrifugal pressures (Fuccaro 2009).

In what follows I examine moments of political possibility in Bahrain, reflecting in particular on the moments of 1973–1975, 2000–2002, and the 2011 Arab uprisings and their

aftermath. I argue that while power-sharing appears to offer a means through which to address tensions within divided societies, power asymmetries across the state mean that the Al Khalifa face little pressure to adopt such an approach, choosing instead to exert sovereign power over social divisions with support from their external backers. My analysis of these three moments offers a reflection on what appeared to indicate movement towards consociationalism through a process of reconciliation, albeit ultimately ended by Al Khalifa sovereign power. Amidst these failings, I suggest that perhaps a form of 'informal' power-sharing and bargaining – such as that seen in Kuwait – may eventually enable Bahrain to work towards building peace.

<H1>The 'Constitutional Experiment'</H1>

After Bahrain's independence in 1971, a National Assembly was established that allowed for two-thirds of the members to be elected, following the model of the 1961 Kuwaiti constitution, which itself addressed a divided society (Herb 2002:46). In pursuit of this, Bahrain's ruling family proposed to establish a constitution in 1973 which brought together representatives of different communities. Described by Abdulhadi Khalaf (2000) as a 'remarkable document' due to the guarantee of civil and political rights, it was underpinned by a claim that all actions should take place within the ambiguous stipulation of being 'according to law', giving the regime scope to restrict actions where necessary. In spite of this, the ensuing elections returned a democratic parliament comprised of two blocs that was representative of the political currents of the time, although largely pro-regime. Moreover, the constitution opened up political space for new expressions of agency, albeit once again curtailed by the stipulation of acting 'according to law'. In spite of these positives, however, the constitutional experiment was short-lived, as Emergency Laws were enacted in 1974 along with the abandonment of the National Dialogue designed to bring rulers and ruled closer together.

Across the decades that followed, unrest was a common feature of political life spanning a range of grievances, most notably socioeconomic frustrations and political inertia. Unsurprisingly, the presence of a large Shi'a population was seen as a source of domestic unrest by the regime, particularly after the events of the 1980s, when the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain – a group operating with the support of the Iranian Quds Force –

attempted to overthrow the Al Khalifa family and impose a regime following *veleyat-e faqih*, or Islamic governance (Alhasan 2011). Although the attempted coup was unsuccessful, the legacy of these events continues to haunt Shi'a communities across Bahrain, framing them as Iranian fifth columnists doing the bidding of a perfidious foreign policy agenda concocted in Tehran (Mabon 2019).

Although clear divisions were emerging between rulers and ruled, this was complicated by the influence of external powers, which ranged from the nefarious actions of Iran to the 'status quo' support for the Al Khalifa from neighbouring Saudi Arabia, perhaps best seen in the building of the King Fahd Causeway, designed to allow fast access to Bahrain in case of crisis. As a consequence, whenever unrest broke out in the decades that followed, it was regularly framed as resulting from external manipulation, which further complicated any efforts to share power and ignored the domestic forces operating across the archipelago (Wehrey 2013).

<H1>Hamad and the National Charter</H1>

After the death of Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa in 1999, his son Hamad was named the new Emir. Although seen as a hardliner, on coming to power Hamad was all too aware of the challenges facing the state. Therefore, alongside freeing political prisoners and planning to visit key opposition sites, he immediately began a process of political liberalization by setting up a National Action Charter in 2001. A key feature of this charter was to change the title of Emir to that of King, seeking to move political life towards a constitutional monarchy, albeit with little effort to address broader demographic and socioeconomic challenges, particularly with the country's Shi'a groups. The National Charter began by engaging in serious dialogue with the opposition movement, while creating space for people across the archipelago to express political agency, perhaps best seen in promises about an elected parliament.

The National Action Charter was supported by 98.4% of Bahrainis (Schmidmayr 2009:2). However, much like the events of 1973–1975, the Emir then unilaterally imposed a new constitution on the people, introducing a bicameral parliament with an elected chamber and an Al Khalifa-designated chamber (Nonneman 2006:9). The bicameral system was seen as a means of preserving the status quo (Schmidmayr 2009:3), where the unelected upper house could block any reforms emerging from the elected lower chamber. Unsurprisingly, this

was met with much anger amongst opposition groups, who decided to boycott upcoming elections. This resulted in opening up political space for Sunni groups, including the *Ikhwan* and Salafists.

The imposition of the new constitution on the people removed any scope for power-sharing or resolution of the tensions between rulers and ruled, and by 2002 all dialogue and efforts to include disparate social groups within the political project had been abandoned. At the time, the unrest across Bahrain was essentially a consequence of broad social, economic and political frustrations, cutting across sectarian communities. Nonetheless, it contributed to the breakdown in trust and relations between the Al Khalifa and opposition groups across the archipelago and would later contribute to problems in reconciliation efforts after the Arab uprisings in 2011.

<H1>Protest and Sectarianization</H1>

The latent frustrations which characterized Bahraini politics after Hamad came to power erupted on 14 February 2011 as the Arab uprisings reached the Gulf. Protesters gathered in prominent public spaces demanding political reform, an end to corruption, and greater political accountability. The protesters included people from all facets of the Bahraini population, united with a common voice demanding reform, best seen in the chant 'not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini'. Frustrations were exacerbated by economic inertia and corruption, seen particularly in the case of the Prime Minister. Although the Al Khalifa exert sovereign control over the Kingdom of Bahrain, this is done within the confines of red lines articulated by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and is played out in the context of factions within the ruling family (Gengler 2013). As a consequence of these challenges, the presence of Sunnis at the protests was a source of great concern for the Al Khalifa, who became increasingly worried at the capacity for unity amongst the protesters.

After the uprisings were ended through a combination of the Bahraini Security Services and a GCC military force, a National Dialogue was once again called for, bringing together the regime and opposition groups. Initially well received by opposition figures, it quickly became apparent that there was no serious inclination to resolve the crisis. Although the Crown Prince was regarded as a key figure in this dialogue, appearing to take the

opposition's grievances seriously, this was a great cause for concern to many in Bahrain's capital Manama, as well as in Riyadh, prompting his withdrawal from public life in 2013.

The reason for the Crown Prince's removal stemmed from Riyadh's concerns about the possible repercussions of a move towards democracy for the Saudi Kingdom's own Shi'a population, exacerbated by burgeoning fears about increased Iranian influence across the Middle East. Indeed, many in Saudi Arabia saw suggestions for the creation of an elected second chamber in their own country as a red line beyond which they would not go. As a consequence, pressure from Saudi Arabia resulted in the end of the National Dialogue in Bahrain. In its place, a process of sectarianization took place, framing the Shi'a opposition groups as working to topple the Al Khalifa and bring an end to their rule (Mabon 2019; Matthiesen 2013; 2017). This process led to the evisceration of the opposition groups: while some were arrested and a number of them killed, others were stripped of their citizenship and forced to leave Bahrain.

<H1>Power-Sharing to the Rescue?</H1>

Although consociationalism appears to offer a means through which divisions in Bahraini society can be overcome, a range of forces impact on these efforts in a negative manner. Allison McCulloch (2020) refers to two factors that can facilitate the success of power-sharing and prevent such peacebuilding efforts from failing. The first of these is *external support* which, in the case of Bahrain, is perhaps the biggest impediment to a long-term resolution of tensions between rulers and ruled. The Al Khalifa continue to be supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as by the US and the UK, both of which have military bases in Bahrain. The process of sectarianization – and fears about possible Iranian manipulation – have left the Al Khalifa with a number of powerful allies who seem unwilling to support any transformation of power across the archipelago beyond a superficial limit (Mabon 2019; Matthiesen 2017).

The second factor concerns the management of security provisions, in particular, the sharing of key government portfolios in a manner which is proportional to the make-up of the population. In the case of Bahrain, however, prominent portfolios are kept in the hands of officials loyal to the regime and populated almost exclusively by Sunnis, including a number from outside Bahrain who have been promised Bahraini nationality if they serve in the riot

police or the military. This process is designed both to address demographic imbalances and to ensure that members of the security forces are willing to follow orders and use force against Shi'a groups. Furthermore, these asymmetries of power, propagated by external actors, appear to prohibit the establishment of a formal process of power-sharing along sectarian lines.

Underpinning all of this – and the very logic of consociational power-sharing itself – is a lack of trust between the different actors across Bahraini society. History has already shown that it is 'not easy for the Al Khalifa to give part of their power to the people', as seen in the events of 1973, 2002 and 2011.**<FN1>** This lack of trust can have serious repercussions for the peacebuilding process and efforts to foster serious dialogue between members of the ruling family and opposition groups and, ultimately, for power-sharing. Trust is also further eroded as complex identities are reduced to sectarian allegiances. While a key criticism of power-sharing is its inability to include a wide array of issues, identities, and individuals beyond the specific divisions within a conflict, understanding and acknowledging these factors is essential for resolving the tensions in Bahrain, where the process of sectarianization has constructed divisions along geopolitically charged sect-based lines and ignores the latent structural factors that have prompted unrest in the country in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Mabon 2020).

While some opposition figures see power-sharing as a means to address the various challenges experienced across Bahrain – and others even call for the complete toppling of the monarchy – Bahrain's geopolitical importance and the efforts of the Al Khalifa to retain power have created conditions that make such outcomes unlikely. Moreover, structural inequalities which span material and ideational aspects will have a serious impact on any efforts to build consensus.

Indeed, much as Paul Dixon highlights elsewhere in this special section (**PRODUCTION NOTE: INSERT REFERENCE**), power-sharing may do little more than establish – or in the Bahraini case, reinforce – sectarian authoritarianism as a mechanism for managing conflict. The Bahraini case is different from Lebanon and Iraq, for example, in that it does not require power-sharing to bring an end to ethnic conflict but, rather, to address the structural violence and discrimination present in the country's governance system. From this position of asymmetrical power, even *getting to yes* – the first stage of the power-sharing lifecycle as

posited by Allison McCulloch and Joanne McEvoy in this collection (**PRODUCTION NOTE: INSERT REFERENCE**) – appears to be an insurmountable hurdle.

<H1>An Informal Alternative?</H1>

While formal power-sharing agreements appear unlikely given the power imbalances, geopolitical pressures, and factionalism in the ruling family, perhaps informal relationships such as those which can be seen in nearby Kuwait offer scope for an alternative future arrangement. In Kuwait, another society that is divided along sectarian, tribal, and economic lines, the Al Sabah monarchy has cultivated a carefully calibrated set of relationships with tribal and religious elites designed to balance against potential threats, which has been largely successful throughout the country's history. This, in turn, has opened up scope for dialogue in times of crisis, along with the cultivation of a malleable system that permits the regime to maintain power (Freer 2018). Indeed, and in spite of sectarian schisms, Kuwait has been able to withstand societal tensions and to thrive economically.

While not necessarily the most desirable outcome, perhaps a gradual approach is what is required to achieve peace and some kind of political representation in Bahrain. Speaking with Bahrainis both in the Kingdom and in exile, equality and citizenship are central to their visions for reconciliation, albeit contingent upon dialogue. While a National Charter is regarded as the means to achieve this, building trust is an essential first step, enabling all parties to cultivate trust in the other. Of course, this will be difficult to achieve given Bahrain's recent history, not least because a wide array of latent structural grievances continue to resonate across a small archipelago that is also shaped by the geopolitical forces reverberating across the Middle East.

<H1>Notes</H1>

[1] Interview with a former Bahraini politician, London, 2019.

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