

BAHRAIN'S SECTARIAN CHALLENGE

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BAHRAIN'S SECTARIAN CHALLENGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A little over four years after Sheikh Hamad bin `Isa al-Khalifa announced a sweeping reform plan, Bahrain's fragile liberal experiment is poised to stall, or, worse, unravel. The overlap of political and social conflict with sectarian tensions makes a combustible mix. If steps are not urgently taken to address the grievances of the large and marginalised Shiite community -- as much as 70 per cent of the population -- Bahrain, which is often touted as a model of Arab reform, could be in for dangerous times. The U.S., which has extolled Bahrain's reforms and is the country's principal benefactor, should moderate its praise, urge the government to see through what it started in 2001 and find ways of raising the delicate issue of sectarian discrimination.

Bahrain's problems go beyond sectarian discrimination to include protracted conflict between government and opposition, mounting unemployment, high rates of poverty, and a rising cost of living: establishing a stable political system requires altering relations between government and citizens as a whole.

The government recently has taken steps to repair what was once a dysfunctional autocracy. Still, it so far has failed in two important respects. First, reform has been uneven, leading many domestic critics to view it as an attempt less to establish a new political contract between rulers and ruled than for the royal family to formalise and institutionalise its grip on power. Secondly, it has done virtually nothing to tackle sectarian discrimination and tensions. Indeed, the latter have been exacerbated, as the majority Shiite community feels increasingly politically marginalised and socially disadvantaged.

Bahrain's Shiites also suffer from, and are angered by, widespread suspicion among officials and Sunnis regarding their national loyalty and ties to co-religionists in Iraq and Iran. These views stem from misconceptions regarding relationships between the Shiites' spiritual and political leaderships. They ignore the broader trend over the last two and half decades, which has seen the country's sectarian tensions fuelled far more by local political and social frustration than by national religious irredentism.

Of greatest concern today are increasingly aggressive moves by the government, which more and more resorts to police tactics and authoritarian measures to maintain order. At the same time, the moderate Shiite leadership's control over more confrontational elements within its community is showing signs of wear. While some opposition members advocate reconciliation, others are pushing for a more dramatic showdown. As this dangerous dynamic sets in, government and opposition moderates may lose their tenuous hold on the situation. Both need to act quickly to prevent this from happening.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Bahrain:

1. End discriminatory practices against the Shiite community by:
 - (a) ceasing manipulation of Bahrain's demographic makeup through political naturalisation of foreigners and extension of voting rights to citizens of Saudi Arabia;
 - (b) halting inflammatory rhetoric that casts doubt on Shiite loyalty and labels the political opposition a sectarian movement;
 - (c) recruiting Shiites into the Bahraini Defence Forces and domestic security forces in order to diversify their makeup;
 - (d) ending informal and formal practices that prohibit Shiites from living in predominantly Sunni residential areas;
 - (e) passing a law that clearly defines and renders illegal religious or ethnically based discrimination;
 - (f) conducting a national population census that reflects Bahrain's complexity, including information on religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status; and

- (g) creating a national forum in which political associations and government officials can discuss challenges facing the country and the best ways to move forward.
2. Deepen the political reform process by:
- (a) redrawing electoral districts to reflect demographic and sectarian realities more accurately;
 - (b) enhancing the elected chamber's legislative authority by either reducing the size of the appointed chamber to twenty or defining its role as exclusively consultative, as outlined in the 2001 National Action Charter;
 - (c) granting the elected chamber the power to draft and initiate legislation;
 - (d) rescinding restrictions on formation of political parties and halting harassment and surveillance of non-violent opposition activities; and
 - (e) ensuring that appointments to high government office are based on merit and appointing persons who are not members of the Al-Khalifa family to key ministerial positions.
3. Promote respect for the rule of law by:
- (a) passing legislation protecting freedom of expression and association, in accordance with international standards;
 - (b) ending politically motivated arrests and freeing political prisoners;
 - (c) ensuring that all citizens and residents of Bahrain, including members of the ruling family, are held accountable for offences such as exploiting public office for private enrichment; and
 - (d) enforcing transparency in government financial dealings and the financial holdings and interests of all officials of cabinet rank and above.
4. Expand recent efforts to address the worsening socio-economic and unemployment crisis by:
- (a) criminally prosecuting employers who hire expatriate labourers with illegal work visas;
 - (b) broadening opportunities for technical and professional training;
 - (c) expediting implementation of labour market reforms outlined by the crown prince's office and the business community;

- (d) requiring transparency in public and private commercial business transactions; and
- (e) privatising land owned by the royal family and making it available for purchase by citizens either with the help of short-term government subsidies or fairly determined market values.

To Shiite Community and Opposition Leaders:

5. Deepen participation in the political process by:
- (a) cooperating with members of the parliament who seek to resolve the current constitutional and political stalemate;
 - (b) expanding relations with regime officials, such as the office of the crown prince, who are committed to ameliorating the social and economic pressures that affect the Shiite community;
 - (c) encouraging unemployed Shiites to participate in government job training programs; and
 - (d) offering to participate in the 2006 elections on condition that the government redraws electoral districts.
6. Promote non-violent activism and avoid threats of confrontation.
7. Formulate a political platform and agree to a codified personal status law that allows women the choice of using Sharia courts or those of the government.

To the Government of the United States:

8. Moderate praise of Bahrain as a model of reform and urge the government to:
- (a) bring the 2002 Constitution in line with the 1973 version, restoring legislative authority to the elected branch of the parliament; and
 - (b) end anti-Shiite discriminatory practices and redraw electoral boundaries to better reflect the country's demographic make-up.

Amman/Brussels, 6 May 2005

BAHRAIN'S SECTARIAN CHALLENGE

I. INTRODUCTION: A DIVIDED NATION

Bahrain, with a population of approximately 700,000, is the smallest of the nations that comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and its society is the most complex and stratified of the Gulf states. This is partly due to the origins of its leadership which, unlike most other Gulf ruling families but much like the Al-Saud in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, acquired authority through tribal alliances and conquest. Assisted by tribal allies originally from central Arabia, the Al-Khalifa invaded Bahrain from Qatar in the eighteenth century, overthrew its Persian administration, and have ruled the country ever since.¹

Just below the Al-Khalifa and their Sunni tribal allies on the socio-political ladder are other Sunni Arab families of tribal origin and then the *hawalah*, families that migrated to Bahrain over the last century or more from the Iranian coast but claim Sunni and Arab origins. The Al-Baharinah, indigenous Shiite Arabs, constitute the fifth and largest tier, with Persians -- both Sunni and Shiite -- at the bottom of the social and political hierarchy.

Social and sectarian divides clearly overlap, most notably in the case of Shiites -- an estimated 70 per cent of the native population -- who are largely excluded from senior government positions. Non-Bahrainis number almost 290,000, over 40 per cent of the population,² and most of them -- 213,000 as of 2001-- are employed, accounting for 64 per cent of the total workforce.³

¹ On the eighteenth and nineteenth century struggles to control Bahrain, see also Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (London, 2002), chapter 3.

² That figure is up from up 36 per cent in 1991 and 31 per cent in 1981, according to estimates of the Central Statistics Office.

³ Central Statistics Organisation figures, as cited in Human Rights Watch, letter to the king urging ratification of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers, 31 March 2003. The vast majority of the expatriate community is from South and South East Asia, although there are no reliable figures on its ethnic or national breakdown. Arab expatriates are regularly naturalised as

A. LEGACIES OF POLITICAL TENSION

Even prior to independence, and with British support, the ruling Al-Khalifa family played a dominant economic and political role.⁴ Between 1961 and 1999, local politics could roughly be summed up as a condominium between the Amir, Sheikh `Isa bin Salman, and his brother, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman, who is still prime minister. Facing an opposition displaying sharp class and ideological features in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Al-Khalifa sought to buttress their legitimacy by calling for creation of an assembly that would be tasked with drawing up a constitution pursuant to which a partially elected national assembly with limited legislative powers would come into being. The constitution was promulgated in June 1973, and national elections were held in early December.⁵

The experiment was short-lived but political activism continued across a broad front, progressive and conservative alike. Labour leaders organised numerous industrial strikes.⁶ In response, the ruling family issued a wide-ranging State Security Measures Law in 1975 granting the government summary powers to arrest and hold without trial persons suspected of acting or expressing views "which are of a nature considered to be in violation of the internal or external security of the country".⁷ The assembly's elected members, divided on many other issues, were united in opposition to these steps, insisting they ought to have been submitted for their approval. In August 1975, the Amir dissolved the assembly and, circumventing the Constitution, refused to call for new

Bahraini citizens, so their numbers -- which are not officially published -- are not included in the expatriate total.

⁴ On contemporary unequal land distribution patterns, see Eric Hooglund, "Bahrain", in Helen C. Metz, ed., *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), p.123.

⁵ For a concise review of these developments, see Human Rights Watch, "Routine Abuse, Routine Denial: Civil Rights and the Political Crisis in Bahrain", New York, 1997, chapter 3. Unlike the elections held in 2002, in which women voted and stood for office, the 1973 elections were restricted to male citizens.

⁶ Crisis Group interview with Abdullah Mutawea, former labour leader, Manama, 12 February 2005.

⁷ Cited in Human Rights Watch, "Routine Abuse, Routine Denial", op. cit., p.18.

elections within two months. This remains a defining moment in the relations between regime and opposition: in the view of many, the government has been operating illegally since October 1975. In the 1990s dissatisfaction with the political system and lingering frustrations over social inequalities spilled over into action as state security forces and activists engaged in a half decade of violent conflict.

B. BAHRAIN IN REVOLT

The clashes and unrest began in late 1994 in Shiite villages outside the capital, Manama.⁸ The root causes were wide-ranging: authoritarianism; the absence of basic civil and political rights; extensive anti-Shiite discrimination; corruption and favouritism within the ruling family and among those closest to it; a repressive and largely foreign-staffed security apparatus; and a stagnant economy. Shiites formed the bulk of protesters, although Sunnis embraced the goal of returning to the 1973 constitution and holding national assembly elections, and helped organise pro-reform petitions signed by tens of thousands.⁹

The government's response was brutal. Thousands of demonstrators were detained, and opposition leaders were exiled. In turn, dissident groups from outside the country, notably the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM, *Harakat Ahraar al-Bahrain al-Islamiyya*) and a resurgent Islamic Front for the Liberation

of Bahrain (IFLB, *al-Jabha al-Islamiyya li Tahrir al-Bahrain*) based in Iran.¹⁰ The next several years saw an escalating cycle of repression and violence -- including burning tyres, stoning police, and using cooking gas canisters as makeshift bombs. While the violence eventually subsided, it continued at a low level until 1999. The most deadly attack occurred in early March 1997, when five Bangladeshi workers were killed in a restaurant bombing.¹¹ Security forces, mostly recruited from the Balochi area of Pakistan, with officers from Jordan and other Arab countries, laid siege to villages and raided the homes of reputed activists. Thousands of Bahrainis were arrested and tortured.¹²

What dialogue existed between opposition and regime was fruitless, as the government detained without charge or trial, and often in solitary confinement, key opposition interlocutors, such as Sheikh Abd al-Amir al-Jamri and Abd al-Wahhab Hussein. Those who signed reform petitions, whether Shiite or Sunni, faced official retribution ranging from harassment and employment blacklisting to detention and ill treatment. Considerable ill-will persists today in many Bahraini communities, particularly in the Shiite areas, where arrest, harassment and torture were commonplace. There is little satisfaction that past grievances have been resolved.¹³

⁸ For the most detailed account of the genesis of the 1994 clashes, see *ibid*, chapter 4. The unrest is covered in Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment", in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter (eds.), *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion* (New York, 1997), pp. 167-188; Joe Stork, "Bahrain's Crisis Worsens", *Middle East Report*, No. 204 (July-September 1997), pp.33-35; Louay Bahry, "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2000), pp.129-143; Abd al-Hadi Khalaf, "The New Amir of Bahrain: Marching Side-Ways", *Civil Society*, vol. 9, no. 100 (April 2000), pp.6-13; Naomi Sakr, "Reflections on the Manama Spring: Research Questions Arising from the Promise of Political Liberalisation in Bahrain", *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (November 2001), pp.229-231; J.E. Peterson, "Bahrain's First Reforms Under Amir Hamad", *Asian Affairs* (London), vol. 33, Part 2 (June 2002); and Fred H. Lawson, "Repertoires of Contention in Contemporary Bahrain," in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, 2003).

⁹ Bahrain's domestic strife also had a regional dimension, as the country's rulers blamed Iran for instigating and supporting the unrest, while enlisting Saudi, Kuwaiti, American and British support.

¹⁰ Fakhro, "Uprising in Bahrain", *op. cit.*, pp.179-180. Fakhro describes the BFM as "mainly a rural Shi'i movement", not well organised inside Bahrain but much better organised outside. The IFLB, she adds, ran afoul of Iranian authorities in the early 1980s, and its members relocated to Syria, India, and Bahrain. In 1982 Bahrain put 72 members on trial for allegedly plotting to topple the regime. She also notes the existence of two secular movements: the National Liberation Front, composed of former Marxists, socialists, and Arab nationalists; and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, which emerged in 1971 out of the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arabian Gulf and, after being crushed in 1973, altered its goal to reform through democracy.

¹¹ According to Human Rights Watch, this brought "the number of fatalities since the unrest began in December 1994 to 24, including three police and several confirmed cases of deaths in detention, reportedly as a result of torture and severe beatings", "Routine Abuse, Routine Denial", *op. cit.*, p.37.

¹² Crisis Group interview with Adel al-Abbasi, a human rights activist who was imprisoned and tortured by the regime, Manama, 5 February 2005.

¹³ Crisis Group observed evidence of continued community outrage, and government anxiety about it, from the graffiti that dominates the walls of Shiite villages. Pictures and drawings of the names and faces of community martyrs from the 1980s until 2002 are common. Paper pictures and chalk-drawn images frequently appear on house and mosque walls, only to be periodically painted over by the government.

C. SIGNS OF AN APPROACHING BREAKDOWN?

Clashes between the government and its critics escalated throughout 2004, disrupting a period of relative calm.¹⁴ Symptoms of frustration with the government escalated, with some mimicking the pre-uprising patterns common in the mid-1990s. Most dissent activity continues to be peaceful, and most opposition figures insist on peaceful dissent. But the behaviour of even the non-violent opposition movement has become gradually more assertive, including writing petitions, holding conferences to challenge government stances, and organising public demonstrations.¹⁵ For their part, security forces have resorted to increasingly heavy-handed tactics.

The most dramatic extended episode unfolded in September and October 2004. On 25 September, a day after he denounced the prime minister, considered by many to be corrupt and abusive, Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, a prominent human rights activist, was arrested.¹⁶ In the weeks following, his supporters called for public demonstrations, some of which drew as many as 3,000-4,000 people.¹⁷ Several events turned violent and included incidents of aggression against police; Molotov cocktails

were tossed during a march from a Shiite mosque on Manama's busy Palace Road.¹⁸ On 20 October a protest of over 100 people, mostly young men from nearby Shiite villages, threw rocks at police and attempted to storm a court session in Manama. The police responded with tear gas. Nine days later, another demonstration in which tempers flared was broken up by riot police, who fired rubber bullets and tear gas.

One organiser claimed that it was difficult to restrain the crowd given its mounting frustration.¹⁹ During a visit to the Shiite village of Sitra, a cramped suburban slum home to 65,000, a resident told Crisis Group that "we would like to achieve change peacefully, but if it has to be violent, we will pay with bloodshed".²⁰ Dozens of Crisis Group interviews in poor villages and elsewhere revealed that such sentiments were widely shared and that most who held them fully expected, though they did not welcome, more unrest.

At the time, resident observers worried that a crisis was in the making. One commented that "the al-Khawaja affair came close to putting things over the top".²¹ Opposition leaders were fearful as well. In October 2004, several high-profile opposition figures visited Shiite villages to urge radicals to refrain from violence.²² While a larger conflagration ultimately was avoided, the ingredients of a more serious conflict are present since the underlying issues remain unresolved.

Al-Khawaja told Crisis Group that his intention through his speech was to provoke outrage. "Crisis sometimes leads to a solution. We were thinking of a peaceful crisis that would lead to change".²³ Although he and his colleagues denounced the violent tactics of some of his supporters, his belief that it is only through confrontation that political and social grievances will be heard and

¹⁴ *Gulf Daily News*, 22 May 2004; Aljazeera.net, 23 May 2004. The first public clash occurred on 21 May when as many as 4,000 Shiite demonstrators marched near the Dana Mall complex outside Manama in opposition to the U.S. military siege of Najaf and Karbala. Bahraini police fired tear gas and rubber bullets, wounding several. Jawad Fayruz, a member of one of Bahrain's Municipal Councils and a leading figure in al-Wifaq, the main Shiite opposition political organisation, suffered a serious injury requiring immediate surgery, most likely from a rubber bullet that struck his neck. The pre-eminent Shiite cleric in the country, Sheikh `Isa Qasim, was whisked away for medical care after exposure to tear gas. Demonstrators turned over a public security vehicle and set it ablaze while chanting anti-American slogans. King Hamad bin `Isa al-Khalifa denounced the heavy-handed use of force by the police and responded by sacking the minister of interior, Sheikh Muhammad bin Khalifa al-Khalifa.

¹⁵ An attempt to gather signatures for a petition calling for amendments to the constitution by opposition societies in early 2004 led to the arrest of over twenty activists in May. In early 2005, after collecting over 75,000 signatures, petition-writers sought a meeting with the king, who refused.

¹⁶ Al-Khawaja's detention for "inciting hatred" and accusing a member of the royal family of corruption was followed by closure of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, known for its criticism of the regime, and the `Uruba Club, where he had delivered his speech.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview with Dr Abd al-Aziz Abul, independent opposition leader and president of the Constitutional Conference's 2005 coordinating committee, Manama, 4 February 2004.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Manama, February 2005. This incident was reported by several interviewees to Crisis Group as having occurred during a procession from the Ras Ruman Mosque, a popular rallying point in Manama for civil disobedience.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview with Mahmood Ramadan, Manama, 5 February 2005. Ramadan was arrested and imprisoned for two weeks for his role in the demonstrations, even though he represented a moderate position.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sitra, 5 February 2005.

²¹ Crisis Group interview with Scott Waalkes, political scientist resident in Bahrain, Manama, 2 February 2005. Fawzi Guleid, of the National Democratic Institute, commented that "November was a crisis moment", Crisis Group interview, Manama, 9 February 2005.

²² Crisis Group interview with Dr Abd al-Aziz Abul, Manama, 4 February 2005.

²³ Crisis Group interview with Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, Manama, 8 February 2005.

acted upon is gaining resonance. At the same time, the government has tended to turn to more confrontational tactics more quickly, further fuelling the grievances that drive protestors into the streets in the first place.

February and March 2005 saw more frequent provocations from both opposition and government, Security forces arrested three bloggers for allegedly inciting hate speech on their website. Several small but tense demonstrations followed immediately.²⁴ In early March, more than 3,000 protestors demanded measures to curb unemployment and improve socio-economic conditions.²⁵ The government responded by warning citizens not to incite unrest and provoke sectarian anxieties, an implicit admission that economic grievances and sectarian problems overlap.²⁶ It also warned against hate speech and anti-government agitation that allegedly occurred during the Shiite Ashura mourning ceremonies in February.

On 25 March 2005, a week before Bahrain hosted thousands of visitors for a Formula One automobile race, the island's main Shiite political association, al-Wifaq (*Jama'iyyat al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Islamiyya*), defied a government ban and carried out a massive demonstration in Sitra calling for constitutional reform. Tens of thousands turned out in defiance of the government order.²⁷ The minister of the interior threatened legal action against the organisation and suggested he would seek its temporary and perhaps permanent closure.²⁸ Opposition leaders told Crisis Group they feared the government might also seek to arrest members of the organisation.²⁹

Framing the combustible mix is its increasingly sectarian character. The fallout over al-Khawaja's arrest thrust him into Shiite stardom. Bahrain's Shiites saw it as specifically sectarian in character and an affront to them and their interests. Details of the tension, particularly the resort by some Shiite groups to more aggressive tactics, also underscore the fragile nature of the moderate leadership's grip on a restive community. Opposition leader Dr Abd al-Aziz Abul emphasised that "the water is boiling and militants within the Shiite community are

losing patience", threatening moderates like popular leaders Sheikh Ali Salman president of the Shiite al-Wifaq Islamic Society).³⁰ The cleric Sheikh `Isa Qasim. Hassan al-Mushaymi`, a former political prisoner and vice president of al-Wifaq, suggested that a breakdown in the moderate opposition, either from government pressure or from below, would lead to the emergence of more radical organisations or compel even moderate forces to escalate their tactics.³¹

²⁴ 12 March 2005 witnessed a tense standoff between riot police and several hundred protestors. Demonstration organisers called off the protest after the event threatened to escalate into a more violent showdown. The government eventually released and dropped charges against the web-bloggers.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 28 March 2005.

²⁶ *Gulf News*, 7 March 2005.

²⁷ Reuters reported that 80,000 people marched, although the actual number was probably closer to 50,000. Crisis Group interviews, Manama, March 2005.

²⁸ *al-Hayat* 26 March 2005.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, 26 March 2005.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 4 February 2005.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 1 February 2005. Al-Mushaymi` specifically mentioned the emergence of a militant organisation calling itself Hizbollah, which reportedly has a presence on the island and is increasingly supported by angry youth frustrated with the current situation.

II. GRIEVANCES

Many Sunnis undoubtedly are active in the opposition, and it would be wrong to reduce current tensions -- particularly those relating to the political situation -- to a sectarian divide. But Shiites are hardest hit by social dislocation and endure, as they have since the late 1970s, multiple forms and levels of discrimination. Against the backdrop of frustration with Bahrain's struggling reform experiment, protracted socio-economic difficulty and anti-Shiite discrimination are generating the confrontational tendencies that emerged in 2004 and provide a decidedly sectarian hue to the island's troubles.

A. A DISAPPOINTING REFORM

In a dramatic move to end the political crisis that fomented half a decade of unrest in the 1990s, Sheikh Hamad al-Khalifa announced a strategy of controlled political reform in 2000. Many measures in the first two years of this experiment placed the country at the cutting edge of regional liberalisation. Reversing a quarter century of authoritarianism, Sheikh Hamad ended some of the most abusive practices and inaugurated institutional changes that promised a more equitable political contract between state and society. With over 98 per cent approval, Bahraini men and women voted in a February 2001 referendum to support the changes outlined in a vaguely worded National Action Charter. These included amending the 1973 Constitution to create a bicameral legislature with both elected and appointed councils. In addition to elections and voting rights for both genders, other important changes included reduced rents for state-built housing, cheaper electricity, a one-month bonus for all government workers, freer expression, and amnesty for political prisoners.

In what remains his most significant reform, Sheikh Hamad also dissolved the State Security Courts and abrogated the State Security Law that authorised them, thus abolishing key components of the state's repressive machinery and meeting a key demand of political activists.

With their overwhelming support to the 2001 referendum, Bahrainis received assurances from the king, the crown prince, and other high officials, that a "constitutional commission" would propose amendments to, rather than replacement of, the 1973 Constitution, and that the elected chamber of the new parliament would exercise sole legislative powers.³² Yet, in February 2002, on the first

anniversary of the referendum, the king (without prior public discussion) promulgated what is essentially a rewritten constitution. The furtive nature of his decision and the revelation that the opposition had not been consulted on the text shocked Bahrain's politically active community and revived deep-seated distrust of the state's intentions.³³ The king's unilateral decree exacerbated the fault-lines that separated the royal family and its critics and suggested that in spite of assurances, power and resources would remain firmly in his grasp.³⁴

Fuelling cynicism regarding the regime's intent are some of the more significant differences from the 1973 Constitution. Opposition members note that the government created an institutional and legal framework in which neither the king nor his advisors are accountable. The 40-member elected Chamber of Deputies (*Majlis al-Nawwab*) and 40-member Shura chamber appointed by the king (*Majlis al-Shura*) share equal, although limited, legislative authority. In the event of a deadlock, the president of the appointed chamber can cast the tie-breaking vote. Pursuant to a royal decree, Shura members can be appointed from a very narrow base, including the ruling family, senior retired officers, senior clergy, businesspeople, professionals, former ambassadors, ministers, and judges, as well as "those who have the people's confidence".³⁵

provisions of the 1973 original and even signed a statement to that effect, which was subsequently photocopied and distributed by al-Wifaq. Crisis Group interview with Sa'id Usbul, a non-aligned member of the opposition who was active in the early 1990s agitating for reform, for which he was fired from the Ministry of Electricity and Water (1994) and briefly imprisoned (1996), Manama, 2 February 2005.

³³ Crisis Group interview with Sa'id Usbul, Manama, 2 February 2005.

³⁴ The Al-Khalifa family holds at least 100 of the top 572 government posts, including 24 of 47 at cabinet-level posts, fifteen of the top 30 in the Ministry of Interior, six of the top twelve in the Justice Ministry, and seven of the top 28 in the Defence Ministry. The stipends of the main al-Khalifa Sheikhs -- said to number around 300-- are not publicly reviewed. Lesser members of the family earn comfortable incomes through so-called "free visas": after expatriate workers pay a fee of about \$1,300 to an al-Khalifa to get a work visa, they must find their own job and continue to pay their sponsor \$25 to \$50 a month out of a salary that may not exceed \$160. Since a 2003 study of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, which revealed many of these facts, the government has moved to curb abuses as part of an effort to rationalise the labour market and address structural unemployment problems. The crown prince in particular has actively pursued labour market reform, even bringing in the consulting firm McKinsey & Co to assess and suggest much needed changes. Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report are in U.S. dollars.

³⁵ Jalila al-Sayed, Abdullah al-Shamlawi, `Isa Ebrahim, Hassan Radhi, Muhammad Ahmed, Jalil al-Aradi, Abd al-

³² As late as 7 February 2002, the king reiterated his position that the amended constitution would not alter the important

Although voters agreed in principle to a bicameral legislature in the 2001 referendum, community leaders protest they believed the appointed chamber would be both smaller and only consultative.³⁶ Instead, the structure of the new parliament virtually guarantees that ultimate decision-making power remains in the palace. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority of the combined houses, rendering change virtually impossible.³⁷ While the power to pass laws rests with both chambers, the cabinet alone can initiate and draft legislation, and the appointed Shura chamber has effective veto power over initiatives and decisions by the elected chamber. The king retains the power to rule by decree (*marshum bi qanun*), provided such decrees do not violate the Constitution; they must subsequently be approved by both houses to remain in force, but there is no stipulated time limit for such approval to be obtained. Statutory decrees, including the many issued in 2002 prior to the first session of the National Assembly, cannot be amended and remain in force as long as the two chambers do not vote to rescind them.³⁸

Other changes from the 1973 version are seen as limiting the power of the elected chamber. Under the earlier constitution, for instance, the government could

suspend parliament for two months but then was required to hold new elections. Under the new one, the government can suspend it for four months without elections, and the king has full discretion to postpone elections without any time limit if the government -- i.e. the cabinet led by his hard-line uncle -- so advises. Likewise, the earlier version mandated creation of an audit bureau subordinate to the National Assembly; the 2002 Constitution removed the requirement that the bureau report to the Assembly. By virtue of Legislative Decree No. 16 (July 2002), the king established a Financial Control Bureau reporting directly to him, thereby removing the legislature's ability to monitor state financial affairs. Nor does the Financial Control Bureau's mandate include review of income and/or expenditures of the palace, royal family, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior.

In the years since the referendum, a stalemate has emerged between the government, including the royal family and the king's cabinet, and an increasingly large and well organised coalition of opposition societies (parties remain illegal). For many, reform of the parliament is the most critical issue, and agreement at least to debate this is a precondition for resuming participation in the political system.³⁹ Most importantly, the leading non-violent opposition organisations, the largest being the Shiite al-Wifaq, led a boycott of the 2002 parliamentary elections and have refused to recognise or work with the institution since.⁴⁰ The opposition continues to operate from outside the established political system, attempting through various means to push for change. Over time, even political constituencies that initially embraced the opportunity for participation have soured.⁴¹ A Bahraini remarked, "resolving the constitutional crisis is key to all other

Aziz Abul, "Legal Opinion Concerning the Constitutional Matter", p.58. Copy provided to Crisis Group by authors.

³⁶ Members of both the opposition and the parliament (appointed and elected) told Crisis Group that the Shura's powers needed to be readdressed, although current parliamentarians made clear that changes could only be made by participating in rather than rejecting existing institutions. Opposition members refuse to participate, arguing that by doing so they will provide de facto recognition to the parliament and Constitution, a position that one opposition leader described to Crisis Group as "non-negotiable". Crisis Group interview with Ebrhaim Sharif, 2 February 2005.

³⁷ U.S. scholar Michael Herb, in his comparative analysis of Arab parliaments, calls the 2002 constitution "a step backward" from that of 1973: "In Bahrain, the constitution is itself an obstacle to parliamentarism... [Its] provisions are powerful obstacles to progress toward democracy in Bahrain", "Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World", *Middle East Journal* vol. 56, no. 3 (Summer 2004), p.376.

³⁸ One issue raised prominently by the country's first independent newspaper, *Al-Wasat* (The Centre), was the king's "donation" of BD 10,000 (about \$26,500) to each elected deputy, ostensibly as compensation for campaign expenses, as well as BMW automobiles. According to opposition members interviewed by Crisis Group, all but one parliamentarian accepted the offer, although Crisis Group could not independently verify the claim. One elected deputy who has been critical of the government on key issues declined to criticise the king's largesse. "It doesn't affect my situation [as a critic] or my beliefs", he said. "It's OK because it came after the election. Cars are status symbols, and some MPs are poor". Crisis Group interview with Jasim al-Aal, Manama, 6 March 2004.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview with Sheikh Ali Salman, Manama, 1 February 2005.

⁴⁰ Bahrain's four opposition societies are: the Shiite Islamist al-Wifaq (*Jama'iyyat al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Islamiyya*), the secular National Democratic Action Society (NDAS; *Jama'iyyat al-'Amal al-Watani al-Dimuqrati*), the Baathist Nationalist Group (*al-Tajamma' al-Qawmi al-Dimuqrati*), and the Shiite Islamic Action Society (*Jama'iyyat al-'Amal al-Islami*). See below.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview with members of *Jama'iyyat al-Wasat al-Islami*, a Sunni group with Nasirist leanings, Manama, 7 February 2005. Members noted that they did not initially agree with the main opposition political organisations and advocated participation. In 2005, though, the group spokesperson said, "the government is not serious about reform. Because of this all the issues remain and have gotten more serious".

issues", adding that it was essential to restore the "contractual" character of the 1973 political compact.⁴²

The "constitutional crisis" is not a specifically sectarian issue, as both Sunnis and Shiites find reason for displeasure.⁴³ Yet, the Shiite community feels particularly aggrieved. Historically, it has been the most active and united in pressing for political reforms such as those promised in late 2000; during the 1990s uprising -- whose leaders were mainly Shiites -- the political discourse of all but the violent fringe focused on demands for political and institutional change. A popular political slogan was "the parliament is the answer". The National Action Charter even prompted celebrations in the Shiite village of Sitra, where the king was famously hoisted and feted on the shoulders of residents. Now, the National Action Charter and the subsequent reforms are viewed not as an honest response to community demands, but as perfidy, fuelling other tensions that are specifically sectarian in character.

B. ANTI-SHIITE DISCRIMINATION

For Shiites, that discrimination is a fact of life and the product of government political will is an article of faith. This impression is further fuelled by the state's poor handling of the issue. In the stand-off between government and opposition, high-ranking officials regularly appear to be trying to undermine opposition unity by driving a wedge between Sunni and Shiites and manipulating sectarian anxieties. Indeed, Shiites believe that the recent reform program, far from alleviating sectarian problems, has made them worse. Many Sunnis claim the notion of widespread and systematic prejudice is exaggerated. "It's not something absolute", said a Bahraini journalist sympathetic to the reformists. "Sunnis have national power, it's true, but Shiites have it in the commercial sector".⁴⁴ According to others, certain ministries and state companies -- the Ministry of Health and the aluminium and petroleum companies for example -- are Shiite "enclaves".⁴⁵ A former vice president of the

University of Bahrain told Crisis Group there is no discrimination in admissions, and the crackdown on political activity has been directed at Shiites and Sunni alike, "but only the Shiites complained".⁴⁶

In fact, the reality of formal and informal discrimination is hard to contest, and it affects a range of issues:

- **Institutionalising Discrimination.** Important parts of the political reform program which helped break up old authoritarian structures ironically have added fuel to claims of institutionalised discrimination. The most notable example involves the gerrymandering of parliamentary electoral districts to ensure majority Sunni representation despite their minority status. Thus, the sparsely populated but largely Sunni southern governorate has been allocated six seats, while the heavily populated and overwhelmingly Shiite northern governorate has been allocated nine -- a difference far less than population of the two governorates would seem to justify.⁴⁷ The issue of electoral districting was important in the decision by the four opposition societies to boycott the October 2002 elections.⁴⁸ Because the boycotting groups were mainly Shiite, Sunnis won 27 of the 40 seats.⁴⁹
- **Political Naturalisation.** Consistent with past practice, the government reportedly is pursuing policies to alter the island's demographic balance. These include granting citizenship to non-Bahrainis -- mainly Sunni Arabs from around the region -- to

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview with Ebrahim Sharif, National Democratic Action Society, 20 April 2004.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews with prominent Sunnis and Sunni political organisations make clear that without the government seriously addressing the inadequacies of the Constitution, more Sunnis are considering joining the opposition and boycotting the fall 2006 parliamentary elections. Crisis Group interviews, Bahrain, February 2005.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 7 March 2004.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview with parliamentarian Dr Salah Ali Abd al-Rahman, elected representative of *al-Minbar al-Watani al-Islami*, the local organisation of the Muslim Brothers, Manama, 12 February 2005.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 4 March 2004.

⁴⁷ As the National Democratic Institute's report on the elections pointed out, it was possible for a candidate to win over 50 per cent of the vote in the south with only a few hundred votes, while thousands of votes were needed to do so in the northern governorate and the capital. "Bahrain's October 24 and 31 2002 Legislative Elections", Washington, DC, November 2002. The allocation of the 40 elected seats among the five governorates was as follows: Northern (9), Muharraq (8), Capital (8), Central (9), and Southern (6). In its 2003 annual report, the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS, a separate institution from the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights) noted as an example that "the number of voters in the sixth directorate of the southern governorate was 398 represented by one nominee while the number of voters in the first directorate of the northern governorate was 13,655 represented by one nominee". BHRS, "Annual Report January 2001 - December 2002", p.12.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews with political activists and parliamentarians made clear that the issue was among the single most important sources of distrust. For some, drawing fair electoral boundaries not based on sectarian manipulation was a precondition for participation in future elections. For others, a decision on the part of the government to equalise district sizes would suffice for them to end their boycott. Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

⁴⁹ Abd al-Hadi Khalaf, "Bahrain's election: just what the king ordered", *Daily Star* (Beirut), 1 November 2002.

mitigate Shiite dominance. Although there are no published figures for the number of "politically naturalised", some suggest that as many as 50,000 to 60,000 have been extended citizenship in this way.⁵⁰ Exceptional measures appear to have been taken to grant citizenship to Jordanians, Syrians, and Yemenis recruited by the security services and, demographic impact aside, the heavy presence of foreigners in the military and police has provoked sharp anger from locals who consider them "mercenaries".⁵¹

In addition, the government awarded citizenship to as many as 8,000 Saudis, who claim affiliation with the Dawasir tribe that was once in Bahrain but has long resided in eastern Saudi Arabia. A Crisis Group representative, visiting Manama in March 2004, viewed a video provided by Shiite activists in which numerous Dawasir residents in eastern Saudi Arabia describe their recruitment to sign up for Bahraini citizenship without having to forego their Saudi citizenship.⁵² Adding insult to the ire caused by sectarian gerrymandering, the naturalised Saudis were transported to voting booths at the mid-point of the causeway linking the two countries to allow them to vote in October 2002. In response, the government points out that over 1,000 long-time stateless Shiite residents, the so-called *bidun*, also received citizenship in 2001.⁵³

- **Government Employment.** When it comes to the state-controlled public sector, the largest employer in Bahrain, Shiites are on the outside looking in. Although this is largely true regardless of rank, it is particularly pronounced at the heights of power, which are dominated by the ruling family, and in most sensitive sectors, like the Bahrain Defence Forces (BDF) and the Ministry of Interior. According to a 2003 report filed by the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR):

out of 572 high-ranking public posts covered by the report, Shiite citizens hold 101 jobs only, representing 18 per cent of the total. When the research was conducted, there were 47 individuals with the rank of minister and

undersecretary. Of these, there were ten Shiites, comprising 21 per cent of the total. These do not include the critical ministries of Interior, Foreign [Affairs], Defence, Security, and Justice.⁵⁴

That said, the report corroborated claims that Shiites dominate some ministries, such as the Ministry of Industry, in which they reportedly hold 50 per cent of senior posts.

Almost all Bahrainis concede the existence of discrimination in the various security services, from which Shiites have been systematically excluded at least since the Iranian Revolution. "The events of 1979, the Khomeini threat, raised the loyalty issue", a high official told Crisis Group.⁵⁵ Other officials acknowledge the problem, but aver that the state is tackling it and has recently expanded its efforts to hire Shiites.⁵⁶ The vast majority of Shiite applicants for positions in the security forces, however, continue to be denied. Crisis Group encountered dozens of village youths who claimed to have been rejected at both Defence and Interior. The result is bitterness and hopelessness. When questioned if he had applied to the BDF for employment, a young Shia labourer in Diraz remarked, "there is no point. Why even try?"⁵⁷ Another twenty-year old, who claimed he had recently been released after almost six years in prison for being related to a political prisoner, told Crisis Group he had been denied government work as a security risk.⁵⁸

- **Segregation.** Shiites also allege residential discrimination. While most live in poor villages on the outskirts of Manama, a large residential area on the island, Riffa` has been off-limits since the mid-1990s. Both Shiite and Sunnis told Crisis Group that western Riffa` is reserved for the royal family, while the east is open only to Sunnis.⁵⁹ Reportedly, Shiites are not only forbidden from living in the area, but are also not permitted to own land there.⁶⁰ Riffa`, a well-maintained and affluent

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview with Mahmud Ramadan, Manama, 5 February 2005.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview with Sa'id Usbul, Manama, 2 February 2005. Except for those recruited into the security services, non-Arab expatriates -- particularly non-Muslim immigrants from South and South East Asia -- do not enjoy access to citizenship and are not part of the process of political naturalisation.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, March 2004.

⁵³ *Bidun* means "without" -- in this case without nationality.

⁵⁴ Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, "Discrimination in Bahrain: The Unwritten Law", December 2003, p.10. The survey included an analysis of 32 ministries and the University of Bahrain.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Hamad Town, 8 March 2004.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview with Abd al-Rahman Jamshir, vice-chair of *Majlis al-Shura*, Manama, 9 February 2005.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Diraz, 5 February 2005.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sitra, 5 February 2005.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview with members of al-Ikha National Society, Muharraq, 11 February 2005.

⁶⁰ When asked about how the process actually works, a Bahraini Shiite told Crisis Group that the government reviews

neighbourhood, is only a few minutes' drive from Sitra, one of the most desperate and restive Shiite communities. The same immediate contrast is true in commercial areas, such as the Dana Mall complex near the predominantly Shiite village of Sinabis. Residential discrimination is experienced as particularly insensitive and duplicitous and viewed as further evidence of what many believe to be the royal family's "looting" of national resources. With annual population growth near 3 per cent, land scarcity is becoming a serious problem.⁶¹ Tens of thousands of poor Shiites are forced to live in cramped and poor quarters, while the royal family owns more land than it uses as well as the most prime real estate.⁶² Glaring disparities in wealth, when coinciding with sectarian divides, often trigger Shiite unrest.⁶³

C. POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment, which has been high since the 1990s, has been a major factor generating discontent among Shiites, particularly young working-age men. While officially the unemployment rate is around 15 per cent, the actual figure is likely substantially higher, mainly within the Shiite community. Indeed, according to a study commissioned by the office of the crown prince, unless radical steps are taken to reform the labour market and, in particular, to stimulate the private market, unemployment could rise as high as 35 per cent by 2013.⁶⁴ The study also revealed that over the next decade some 100,000 Bahrainis entering the workforce will be competing for 40,000 new jobs.⁶⁵ Although there are no official figures for the Shiite community, few doubt they suffer disproportionately.

The state has taken some positive steps, which are acknowledged even by some critics, who praise the king and crown prince for seeking to address underlying socio-economic problems and allowing more open

public discussion.⁶⁶ Members of parliament also have urged prompt action.⁶⁷ So far, however, few practical measures have been taken to alleviate underlying causes, and the problem is steadily worsening.

Attempts by jobless youth to hold public protests triggered unrest in the mid-1990s; similar demonstrations have occurred frequently over the past several years, the most recent in early March 2005. While the government has wisely allowed them to proceed, and they have for the most part passed without incident, structural unemployment and attendant poverty continue to spur discontent, particularly insofar as they are experienced both as sectarian -- anti-Shiite -- discrimination and as bias in favour of foreign workers.⁶⁸

Related problems, again disproportionately affecting the majority Shiite population, are under-employment and low wages. Of the 84,000 new private sector jobs created between 1990 and 2002, over 67,000 were low paying, with salaries below 200 Bahraini Dinars per month (currently about \$530). Over 80 per cent of these were given to foreign expatriates.⁶⁹ About 53 per cent of Bahraini workers earn less than 200 BD per month, well below the BD 350 (roughly \$928) required by a family of two as determined by the minister of labour.⁷⁰ Families depending on unemployed, under-employed, or underpaid breadwinners, or without a breadwinner, reportedly account for approximately half the population.⁷¹ The report commissioned by the crown prince's office noted that:

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview with Nabeel Rajab, Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, 8 February 2005.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview with parliamentarian Dr Salah Ali Abd al-Rahman, Manama, 12 February 2005.

⁶⁸ Thousands of foreign workers flock to Bahrain and elsewhere around the Gulf, attracted by opportunities for work non-existent at home. Many are willing to take jobs that pay very little. This has the consequence of depressing wages, resulting in pay that -- both for them and for poorer Bahrainis -- is often too low to support a reasonable standard of living. Expatriate labourers interviewed by Crisis Group told of purchasing illegal visas (prices range from 1,000 BD to 1,500 BD, or \$2,653 to \$3,979) from employers, which they must often spend years paying off. They are afforded few protections, and cases of abuse, particularly against women, are frequently reported in the local press.

⁶⁹ "Reforming Bahrain's Labour Market", op. cit., p.3. The research team also determined that labour costs for expatriate workers were 130 per cent less (110 BD per month) than for Bahraini works (250 BD per month), p.10.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview with Jassem Hussayn, Manama, 7 February 2005; Bahrain minister of labour comments in *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, 9 January 2004.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview with Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, 4 March 2004.

all purchase orders for land and homes in the area, unofficially rejecting those whose names appear to be Shiite.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview with Abd al-Nabi al-Ekri, Manama, 12 February 2005.

⁶² Critics point out that it would be easy for the regime to alleviate residential crowding if it opened royal lands to development. Crisis Group interview with Abdullah Mutawea, Manama, 12 February 2005.

⁶³ Lawson, "Repertoires of Contention in Contemporary Bahrain", op. cit.

⁶⁴ "Reforming Bahrain's Labour Market", Crown Prince's Court and the Economic Development Board, 23 September 2004, p.4.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Bahrain has a growing economy, but Bahrainis cannot seem to benefit...As troubling as [the] numbers are, they do not fully reveal how serious the problem is, because of those who are working, one-third are already working in jobs below their skill levels, and that will grow to 70 per cent by 2013 at current trends. This means that they are not able to earn income commensurate with their education, experience, and expectations. The prospects are disheartening: even as the economy has grown, Bahraini wages have decreased. While in 1990, the average Bahraini earned BD420/month, by 2002 it had dropped to BD352. If this trend continues, by 2013 the average Bahraini will earn just over BD300.⁷²

Crisis Group interviews and field work in poorer, mainly Shiite villages confirmed the scope of social difficulties and even serious public health threats. Villages surrounding Manama exhibited dilapidated housing, often with as many as ten or more family members in three-room mud hovels. In some instances, families shared space inside their homes with livestock, creating wretched conditions and clear health risks. There are over 40,000 families waiting for government-promised subsidised housing.⁷³ It is not uncommon for streets to be filled with unemployed or under-employed young men, many of whom express eagerness to work but are exasperated at being unable to find jobs that pay a living wage or losing them to foreign workers.⁷⁴ Compounding the difficulties and frustrations is the almost total absence of a social safety net.⁷⁵ There is no

effective state-provided insurance and only poor health facilities for residents who cannot afford private care. Meanwhile, housing and real estate costs have escalated dramatically in recent years, turning poor Shiite villages into suburban shanty towns from which residents have no hope of escape.⁷⁶

⁷² "Reforming Bahrain's Labour Market", op. cit., p.4.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview with members of the al-Ikha National Society, 11 February 2005.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews with villagers in Sinabis, Diraz and Sitra, February 2005.

⁷⁵ State-managed social security funds have recently been at the centre of corruption scandals. In April 2003, two government-managed pension funds in which virtually all private and public employees had invested teetered on the verge of collapse. Over the government's objection, deputies formed an ad hoc investigative commission that produced a 1,200-page report detailing extensive mismanagement and corruption and recommending follow-up measures. "The government played with the public wealth for 26 years", a deputy told Crisis Group, "It's time to answer up". Despite veiled governmental threats and an offer to provide generous compensation to cover losses and end the inquiry, the parliament proceeded with three weeks of hearings in April 2004, portions of which were broadcast on a government-controlled satellite television station. It remains unclear whether the government has made good on its commitment to reimburse the two funds. Crisis Group interview with parliamentarian Abd al-Hadi Marhoon, Manama, 7 March 2004.

⁷⁶ No specific figures on real estate costs are available, although several interviewees commented that the rise in costs in just the last three years was as high as 300 per cent in some more desirable residential areas. Additional pressure on land costs -- and on the amount and general affordability of land -- is created by the alleged hoarding of real estate by the royal family. Political dissidents point out that the actual area in which Bahrainis can live is severely limited by the regime, while individual royal family members own and occupy the most valuable and beautiful spaces. This leads to extreme pressure on local communities, since population growth is around 3 per cent but there is virtually no room for expansion. Crisis Group interview with Abd al-Nabi al-Ekri, former political exile and member of the National Democratic Action Society, Manama, 12 February 2005.

III. SHIITE STRUCTURES AND POLITICS: DISPELLING MYTHS

Shiite political activism in Bahrain is a complex phenomenon. In spite of decades of agitation and shared recognition about the sources of frustration, the Shiite community includes a diverse array of political and religious groupings. These differences, as well as the specific religious and political interests of the principal Shiite organisations, are poorly understood both inside and outside the country, a reality to which community leaders have contributed by failing to offer a consistent political vision. In turn, uncertainty regarding Shiite intent combined with a history of political agitation has heightened distrust of their motives. This has been exacerbated in the aftermath of the Iraq war, which intensified Sunni fears of what King Abdullah II of Jordan called a "Shiite Crescent"-- an arc of Shiite-dominated polities to include Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf.⁷⁷ A second stated cause for concern is that Shiites might seek to create a theocratic state modelled on Iran.

These fears are mostly unfounded. That Shiite activism is sectarian in character is not so much a reflection of regional or trans-national aspirations or sympathies as it is the product of historical processes and political life in the Islamic world. As we have written elsewhere:

Because of Shiism's status as the minority variant of Islam and its adherents' status as politically marginal or even oppressed communities (whether or not they have been absolute numerical minorities) in most of the states in which they have found themselves, communalism -- the defence of community interests in relation to other populations and the state -- has become the most natural form of Shiite political activism.⁷⁸

Nor is the clergy-dominated structure of Shiite political leadership necessarily a reflection of theocratic intent. Rather, the prominence of the clergy in Shiite political organisations results both from the central role accorded to clerics in Shiite society generally, as well as from a long historical process in which Shiites have been marginalised from the state.⁷⁹

A. FOUNDATIONS OF DISTRUST

While Bahrain has periodically suffered sectarian trouble, most agree that differences between Shiites and Sunnis were exacerbated and became structural only in the aftermath of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, which radicalised Shiite communities throughout the Gulf, notably in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and heightened Sunni anxiety. Hadi al-Mudarrisi and Sadeq Ruhani, representatives of Iran-based clerics, were driven from Bahrain in 1980, allegedly for fomenting anti-government activities.⁸⁰ Al-Mudarrisi, who is now based in Karbala, Iraq, and along with his brother, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi, runs the Islamic Action Organisation (*Munathammat al-'Amal al-Islami*), founded the radical Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (*al-Jabha al-Islamiyya li Tahrir al-Bahrain*) that year. A government crackdown on this and other radical outfits effectively ended their operations in the early 1980s.⁸¹ During the 1990s uprising, Iran reportedly established a link with an organisation calling itself Bahraini Hizbollah. State security forces apprehended members in 1996 and paraded several on television, where they confessed to having trained in Lebanon and Iran, planning acts of terrorism and reporting directly to Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, Iran's supreme leader.⁸²

While the widespread fear surrounding Shiite militancy was wholly disproportionate to its actual power and appeal, and outside political influence was far less significant than alleged, the government responded by aligning itself more directly than ever before with the Sunni community. Historically, this was a profound shift. Prior to 1979 the government did not pursue a specifically sectarian agenda, since it viewed the most serious threat as emanating from

⁸⁰ Al-Mudarrisi was and continues to represent the *marja`* of Grand Ayatollah Imam Muhammad bin Mahdi al-Husayni al-Shirazi, not Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, as is commonly reported by Western observers.

⁸¹ Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York, 1999), p.134.

⁸² In a Crisis Group interview, a Bahraini who called himself a former militant claimed it was true that the group had sought to stage bombings in 1995. See Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York, 2004), pp.280-281. Even in this episode the actual role of Iran is not clear and it is most likely that Bahraini Hizbullah reflected local will rather than foreign manipulation. Pollack offers the following explanation: "The Iranians were not entirely blameless; they had funded and helped organise many of the groups that did mount the protests, but it seems that having gotten them started, the groups took on a life of their own and eventually became self-sustaining entities that did truly reflect the political aspirations of Bahrain's Shi'ah".

⁷⁷ See *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, p.20.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

radical leftist organisations.⁸³ The head of one of the four main opposition organisations, himself a Sunni leftist, stated that "before 1979 it was hard to tell if the government was favouring any particular group. Afterward and until now, the government has aligned with the Sunnis". Since then, government practices, if not its stated policy, have been principally orientated toward the manipulation of sectarian differences and fears. He noted that "most of the opposition is Shiite, so the government plays the sectarian card, thus reinforcing identity politics".⁸⁴

Evidence of an anti-Shiite agenda abounds, whether in the government's refusal to staff the defence forces or Ministry of the Interior with Shiites, fearing a "fifth column", or in its deliberate playing of the sectarian card to neutralise the opposition. Commenting on Sunni-Shiite opposition efforts in the early 1990s to organise and submit petitions, two analysts noted that:

The chief regime strategy was to polarise the petition movement by labelling it Shiite -- a destabilising movement representing special pleading on the part of the Shi'a. As a result, the Shiite population was made the primary focus of punishment for having presented the petition, while the Sunnis remained largely untouched -- as if to prove that the movement had only a narrow Shiite sectarian character.⁸⁵

Little has changed in this respect. In early 2005, the government played the sectarian card on several occasions to apply pressure on local critics. Notably, officials, including the prime minister and minister of the interior, accused Shiite groups of inciting sectarian unrest and coordinating with external powers. This claim, made in early March 2005, was based on the display of pictures of foreign religious leaders, including Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, and of political symbols such as the flags of Lebanese Hizbollah and Iran during the Shiite Ashura mourning processions. The government went so far as to lodge a formal protest with Iran's ambassador, suggesting his country had a direct hand in encouraging the displays.⁸⁶

B. RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE LOYALTY QUESTION

Deep cynicism about Shiite loyalty to the state and willingness to participate in -- as opposed to dominate or even overturn -- the political system permeates the government as well as the island's Sunni community. An elected Sunni member of parliament, reflecting the views of many high-level officials, evoked the fear of external influence, remarking that there is widespread belief "Shiite actions are influenced from the outside. This is threatening to the government".⁸⁷ In interviews with dozens of Sunni Bahrainis, similar views concerning the role of foreign parties were expressed.⁸⁸ A Sunni physician whose clinic serves both Shiite and Sunni patients denounced Shiites as disloyal, advocated segregation, and remarked: "Bahrain has no community. Rather there are communities. There are long standing and deep community, historic and ethnic tensions". It is in these divisions and in the power of outside influence, he warned, "that the potential for violence exists".⁸⁹

The belief that Bahrain's Shiites take their political orders from Tehran (and elsewhere) as well as doubts about their loyalty is grounded in part in the fact that the structure of Shiite religious authority (*marja'iyya*) crosses national boundaries and that many Bahraini Shiites emulate clerics from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.⁹⁰ Seeking guidance from or emulating leading clergy (*marja' al-taqlid*) occupies a central place in Shiite theology. Current structures, in which the most respected clergy acquire large followings, evolved gradually. Although the terms of emulation have changed over time, the act of following living clerics is based on the

⁸³ Crisis Group interview with Ebrahim Sharif, Manama, 2 February 2005.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview with Abd al-Rahman al-Na'imi, previous president, National Democratic Action Society, Manama, 2 February 2005.

⁸⁵ Fuller and Francke, op cit., p.128.

⁸⁶ *al-Hayat*, 12 March 2005.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview with Dr Salah Ali Abd al-Rahman, Manama, 12 February 2005.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Manama and Muharraq, January-February 2005.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Muharraq, 4 February 2005.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Manama and Muharraq, January-February 2005. That Bahraini Shiites emulate *maraji'* is a recent development. Until late in the twentieth century, the community followed the Akhbari school, a literalist and conservative variety of Shiism that had been largely overcome by the rival Usuli branch in the eighteenth century in most Shiite communities elsewhere. Akhbari Shiites did not engage in the practice of emulation. A shift seems to have occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Hadi al-Allawi, an official with the Islamic Action Society, told Crisis Group that the differences between Akhbarism and Usulism, while they still matter for a few people, are less significant now than in the past and that as a matter of practicality, most Bahrainis now emulate living *marjas*. Crisis Group interview, 15 March 2005. For background, see Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War*, op. cit.

singular importance of *ijtihad*, "the independent exertion of the intellect in the interpretation of scripture".⁹¹

Mujtahids, those who are qualified to issue interpretations and rulings based on their knowledge of Sharia (Islamic Law) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), are widely respected figures and only achieve their status after years of study. The most knowledgeable among them, as determined by peers as well as the size of any particular cleric's following, achieve the status of *marja`* and are deemed worthy of emulation.⁹² While the *marja`iyya* plays a predominantly religious role, powerful *mujtahids* also exercise tremendous political authority. Ayatollah Khomeini's belief that the jurist should manage the affairs of faith and the state (*velayat-e-faqih*) continues to frame the political order of Iran directly, but the impact of his ideas and legacy is felt in Shiite communities elsewhere around the region as well.

Bahrain has no resident *marjas*.⁹³ As a result, most of the island's clergy and congregations look outside for religious leadership. There is considerable diversity, with as many as five *marjas* enjoying some following. These include Ayatollah Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah in Lebanon, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali Khamene`i in Iran, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Shirazi in Qom and Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrasi in Karbala. The most popular are Khomeini's successor as *faqih*, Ali Khamene`i, al-Sistani, al-Shirazi and al-Mudarrasi, although it is impossible to determine the actual numbers of followers for each.⁹⁴

The island's Shiites, including its most prominent political leaders, claim that the *marja`iyya* avoids interfering directly in Bahraini politics.⁹⁵ Still, government distrust of Shiite leaders derives mostly from fear of foreign

connections.⁹⁶ Suspicions are fuelled by the open support shown by Shiites for Iran's Supreme Leader Khamene`i in political and religious gatherings. Sceptics of the Shiite community's intent still point to Khamene`i's alleged involvement in and support for Bahraini Hizbollah's activities in the 1990s. Additional fears of foreign influence and doubts about the community's loyalty are generated by its appropriation of the political symbols of the Lebanese Hizbollah, which Sunnis see as an indication of coordination with the organisation. Images of Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's political leader, are familiar in Bahraini villages and at times are prominently displayed at public gatherings. Other Hizbollah paraphernalia -- such as flags and political slogans -- are popular at political rallies, and its television station, al-Manar, is widely watched. When Bahrainis protesting Israeli military activities in the West Bank overran the U.S. embassy in Manama in 2002, they planted Hizbollah's flag on the compound wall.⁹⁷

In spite of insistence by Sunnis and the government, for most Shiites the political role played by Sheikh `Isa Qasim, his connections to Iran, and even popular admiration for Lebanese Hizbollah are not indications of disloyalty or irredentism. Indeed, there is little evidence that the Shiite community's political objectives are shaped by outsiders; rather, the focus remains on resolving domestic challenges through local activism.

The charge of disloyalty clearly exasperates Shiites. In interviews, most expressed frustration, support for the Al-Khalifa and desire for peaceful co-existence. A prominent member of the Shiite Islamic Action Society noted that "while we represent 70 per cent of the island, we only want an equal partnership with the regime".⁹⁸ Jalila Sayed, a prominent Shiite lawyer who has worked with the government and the opposition, told Crisis Group that "citizenship and nationalism are with Bahrain and with the Al-Khalifa, as demonstrated in 2001 when Sitrans showed support by lifting the king on their shoulders" after he outlined his vision for reform in the National Action Charter.⁹⁹ "Shiites have never been

⁹¹ Ibid, p.20.

⁹² Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi`i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi`ism* (New Haven, 1985), p.188.

⁹³ The pre-eminent local clergy include Sheikh `Isa Qasim, Sheikh Muhammad Mahfuz, Sheikh Husayn Najati, Sheikh Hamad Mubarak and Sheikh Abdullah Ghurayfi. Crisis Group interviews, Manama, February 2005.

⁹⁴ Hadi al-Allawi, an official in the political organisation *al-Amal al-Islami* as well as its sister organisation *al-Risala*, a religious society which follows the leadership of the Ayatollahs Sadiq al-Shirazi (the brother of Imam al-Shirazi) and Taqi al-Mudarrisi (the nephew of Imam al-Shirazi), claims that roughly one quarter of Bahrainis follow the Shirazi *marja`*. Crisis Group interview, Manama, 12 February 2005. In other interviews, Crisis Group was told that clerics periodically shift their representation.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview with Hassan al-Mushaymi, Manama, 1 February 2005.

⁹⁶ It is not, in fact, clear if Qasim supports the principle of *velayat-e-faqih*. Some followers suggest he does not, perhaps as a result of the political situation in Bahrain, in which explicitly embracing the idea of a theocratic state would be viewed as threatening to the Al-Khalifa.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 4 February 2005.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview with Hadi al-Allawi, Manama, 12 February 2005.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview with Jalila Sayed, Manama, 7 February 2005.

a threat to the Al-Khalifa nor has the ruling family been seen as unwanted".¹⁰⁰

This sentiment appears to be shared by the overwhelming majority of Shiites. In the largest demonstration in the island's recent history, Shiite opposition leaders urged supporters to express their loyalty to the state in words and by displaying only the national flag. On 25 March 2005, tens of thousands of Bahraini Shiites obliged, marching through the streets of Sitra carrying the national flag as well as placards expressing their faith in the nation and calling on the regime to honour the demands for political reform made by loyal citizens.¹⁰¹

Moreover, and while Khamane`i is widely admired, Shiites make clear they have no interest in establishing an Iranian-style regime, let alone incorporating the island into a greater Iran.¹⁰² In support of this, they point to the 1971 founding of modern Bahrain, when they voted in a UN-administered referendum to reject incorporation into Iran in favour of independence under the leadership of the Al-Khalifa.¹⁰³ Virtually everyone interviewed by Crisis Group insisted that they continue to support an independent Bahrain ruled by the Al-Khalifa.

If support for foreign religious and political figures -- and particularly for Lebanon's Hizbollah -- is not necessarily a sign of disloyalty, it nonetheless is a clear indication of rising frustration. The exhibition of Hizbollah symbols and support for its leadership chiefly reflect the appeal of an organisation that, through determination, steadfastness and confrontation, has achieved many of its goals. In other words, it serves as a symbolic means of expressing both frustration with issues of local concern and sympathy for a more activist posture to achieve change.¹⁰⁴ Continued questioning of the loyalty of more prominent and moderate Shiite leaders -- an apparent attempt to undermine them through manipulation of sectarianism -- only deepens frustration and emboldens more militant elements.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, 7 February 2005.

¹⁰¹ Demonstration organisers told Crisis Group they believed as many as 50,000 to 80,000 participated, a number subsequently reported by Reuters. Others present at the march suggest the turnout was between 20,000 and 30,000. Crisis Group interview, Manama, 25 March 2005. The symbolic show of Bahraini flags duplicated an earlier effort to demonstrate national unity. In February 2005, during a qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain for the 2006 World Cup in Manama, no Iranian flags were raised by Bahraini fans.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 6 February 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

C. SHIITE POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

Talk of loyalty and disloyalty distracts from the facts that Shiite politics remain decidedly local and their political organisations are focused almost exclusively on domestic issues.¹⁰⁵ Although there is widespread agreement among Shiites on the need for further political reform and ending discrimination against the community, political alliances and organisations reflect broad diversity.

Sheikh `Isa Qasim plays a central political role. Avoiding affiliation with or a leadership role in any particular association, he has preferred to maintain broad appeal and independence. There are two dominant official political organisations, al-Wifaq and the Islamic Action Society (IAS, *Jama`iyyat al-`Amal al-Islami*). Since 2002 they have formed two of the four main boycotting political societies. A third important bloc, al-Ikha (*Jama`iyyat al-Ikha al-Wataniyya*), represents the large Shiite community of Persian descent.

1. Al-Wifaq

Al-Wifaq is the largest political association, with an official membership of at least 65,000.¹⁰⁶ Its leaders claim a reach even greater than its membership, suggesting that it represents at least half the population.¹⁰⁷ Although overwhelmingly Shiite, it is not a specifically religious organisation; rather, it includes successful professionals and business people as well as large numbers of poor villagers from around the island. As a result, there is no clear affiliation with any particular *marja`*, and followers of Khamen`i, al-Shirazi and Fadlallah all can be found within it.

Likewise, al-Wifaq does not espouse a specific ideological vision. Rather, it is home to a variety of political, social and religious outlooks, and its leaders emphasise that its goals are secular. As acknowledged by Ebrahim Sharif, president-elect of the National Democratic Action Society -- another of the four opposition societies that cooperate on political issues -- "people join al-Wifaq because they think it is where they should be aligned, to protect the [Shiite] community".¹⁰⁸

Al-Wifaq's ascendance within the Shiite community is recent. Broadly speaking, it replaced the Shiite Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM, *Harakat Ahraar al-Bahrain*

¹⁰⁵ This has been true since the 1980s. See Fuller and Francke, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview with Sheikh Ali Salman, Manama, 1 February 2005.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview with Hassan al-Mushaymi`, Manama, 1 February 2005.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 2 February 2005.

al-Islamiyya), which enjoyed widespread support in the 1990s even though it was illegal and most of its leadership was based outside the country.¹⁰⁹ Al-Wifaq also incorporated other political elements, such as Bahraini supporters of Hizb al-Da`wa, the powerful Iraqi Shiite political party.¹¹⁰

In the early 1990s, al-Wifaq's elected leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, lived in Qom, where he received religious training. After five years of forced exile in London,¹¹¹ he returned to Bahrain in February 2001. His grip on the organisation is not absolute; thus, he is said to have objected to its decision to boycott the 2002 parliamentary elections.¹¹²

2. The Islamic Action Society

The second largest Shiite political society, also a member of the opposition, is the Islamic Action Society, led by Sheikh Muhammad Ali Mahfuz. While it has joined with al-Wifaq and other opposition societies in calling for political reform and focusing on the need to amend the 2002 Constitution, IAS has a narrower base and more complicated agenda. It emphasises secular political objectives, maintaining a clear religious orientation and advocating a system informed by Sharia.¹¹³ In fact, the Islamic Action Society is the political twin of the local religious office, *al-Risala*, which handles missionary activities, distributes Shirazi materials and collects *khums*. The religious foundation of IAS is based on its close relationship to the al-Shirazi *marja`*, presently led by Ayatollah Sadiq al-Shirazi in Qom and Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarissi in Karbala.

Sunnis and even some Shiites view the group with some suspicion, essentially because of its roots. IAS is the successor to the small but violent revolutionary Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), which was

founded in 1980 by the hard-line cleric, Hadi al-Mudarrasi, and advocated overthrow of the Al-Khalifa during the 1990s uprising. Al-Mudarrasi fled Bahrain shortly after founding IFLB, and the government cracked down on remaining members. IFLB enjoyed a renaissance in the 1990s when Sheikh Mahfuz took over its leadership but the Islamic Action Society disavows its more hardline position regarding the Al-Khalifa.

Hadi al-Allawi, an official in both the political and religious organisations, told Crisis Group that between the two there are more than 20,000 registered members -- though again, like al-Wifaq's leaders, he claims much more extensive actual support, that between the two they represent perhaps as much as 45 to 55 per cent of Shiites.¹¹⁴ In his view, many Bahrainis prefer not to declare their support openly because the political wing is viewed as highly militant, often opting for confrontational over cooperative tactics.¹¹⁵

3. Al-Ikha

The third, and newest, Shiite organisation, al-Ikha, representing the island's residents of Persian descent, received its licence to operate in 2004. While Persian-Bahrainis constitute perhaps as much as 25 to 30 per cent of the population, the group is said to count only roughly 100 members.¹¹⁶ In spite of its small size, it speaks to a specific set of grievances and concerns shared by that minority. According to the organisation, some 99 per cent of its members trace their family's ethnic origins to Persia, although the vast majority of them and their families were born and have resided in Bahrain for hundreds of years. The group maintains no connections to Iran and makes clear that it is not seeking to isolate itself from other Bahrainis, but rather to protect its constituency from discrimination.

In spite of these organisational, theological and ethnic differences, Bahrain's Shiites share the same basic objectives, including political reform, amelioration of socio-economic conditions and an end to discrimination. Leaders and active members from each organisation are most outspoken in advocating implementation of the promises embodied in the National Action Charter of 2001 and, together with the remaining opposition societies, have chosen to focus on getting the government to

¹⁰⁹ The Bahrain Freedom Movement still maintains a presence in London, where Dr Sa`id Shihabi continues to advocate reform and speak critically of the government. It has a website on which members of al-Wifaq regularly contribute commentary.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

¹¹¹ For an account of the circumstances leading to Sheikh `Ali's exile, see Human Rights Watch, "Routine Abuse, Routine Denial", op. cit., pp.28-33.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

¹¹³ The main theological difference between al-Shirazi and Khomeini turned on al-Shirazi's insistence that the political power that derived from the principle of *velayet-e-faqih* should have been shared by a committee of *marjas* rather than any single cleric. Bahraini followers of the Shirazi *marja`* told Crisis Group that although Shirazi challenged Khomeini's right to exclusive power, there was less tension between the two Ayatollahs than between their successors. Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview with Hadi al-Allawi, Manama, 12 February 2005.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group was regularly told that "the Shirazis" represented radicalism, confirming that the belief the group is militant is widespread, even though it no longer openly advocates revolution or the toppling of the Al-Khalifa.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview with members of al-Ikha, Muharra, 11 February 2005.

compromise on the 2002 Constitution and in particular to give the elected Chamber of Deputies real legislative powers.

They do not, however, seek to replace the regime, and their generally moderate stance toward the Al-Khalifa appears to resonate widely within the Shiite community. Asked about the best course of action to resolve community concerns, Shiite villagers -- including from the most impoverished areas -- generally agreed that political and institutional reform was key, and a level playing field was required to achieve equality.¹¹⁷

Nevertheless and as noted, many Sunnis, including among the ruling family, remain sceptical. Some of the concern is grounded in the fact the Shiites' political vision fails to deal coherently or consistently with issues beyond constitutional and institutional reform. While the claim that the clergy seeks to create an Islamic state or follows orders from abroad is overstated, worries that Shiite leaders, despite repeated denials, wish to create a "state within the state" -- to carve out areas of authority for Shiites clerics free from state interference -- possess more merit.¹¹⁸

D. WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Critics focus in particular on the organisations' positions on women and social matters -- issues where the fear that autonomous zones of authority will be created is greatest. In Bahrain as elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, issues surrounding the status of women have become key markers in the struggle for political reform.¹¹⁹ Among the most pressing concerns for women's and human rights advocates are the lack of a formally codified family law and the capricious rulings of Sharia court judges, both Shiite and Sunni. Under the current system, Sharia courts for both sects are run independently from one another as well as from the government. The authority of judges is based on their personal knowledge of Islamic Law, itself

founded on tradition and past rulings. Although they are technically accountable to the government, the absence of a written law renders the judges and their decisions virtually unassailable. Charges of corruption and abuse of authority have become increasingly common, with both Sunni and Shiite women periodically protesting the existing system and demanding greater protection and central oversight.

A Women's Petition Committee was established in 2001 to combat corruption and incompetence in Sharia courts and what it described as systematic bias against women, particularly on matters of divorce and child custody. In October 2002, the government proposed separate personal status laws for Shiites and Sunnis, prompting demonstrations both by women who wanted a unified law and by religious leaders and their students and followers (including women) who opposed any change to existing arrangements. The government has not revived the initiative, in effect preserving the status quo.

Sheikh `Isa Qasim, the al-Wifaq leadership and the Islamic Action Society all aggressively oppose the suggested reforms, which they claim would violate Sharia.¹²⁰ Although some Sunnis also oppose reforming the existing system, Shiite organisations offer the staunchest resistance. Layla Rajab Zayed, an advocate of family law reform and member of the new Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, told Crisis Group that the Shiite clergy's unwillingness to moderate its stance, or at a minimum allow women to choose either state or Sharia courts, was a key reason for concern. For the clergy to urge the state to loosen its authority over them, while refusing to loosen its own authority over women, is denounced as inconsistent and hypocritical, and seen as symptomatic of a broader desire to carve out unregulated spheres of influence.¹²¹ These concerns are shared by some in the non-Shiite opposition, though they do not appear at this point likely to drive a wedge between them and Shiites on core political issues.¹²²

E. THREATS TO MODERATION

Since 2002, Shiite opposition and religious leaders have emphasised the necessity of non-violent dissent and avoiding escalation of conflict with the regime. Sheikhs Ali Salman and `Isa Qasim repeatedly press for peaceful activism, with `Isa Qasim using his Friday sermons to warn against public demonstrations and heated rhetoric. In

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

¹¹⁸ Sheikh Ali Salman explained "we are Islamist, but we don't want to pressure people to take what we want. Let them decide. Islam allows for sharing. This is democracy". He stated unequivocally that al-Wifaq did not aspire to the creation of an Islamic state. Al-Wifaq's track record on this point is consistent. Crisis Group interview, 1 February 2005. In interviews with Crisis Group, however, both Sunnis and Shiites charged Shiite clerics with seeking to create a "state within a state", a system in which they reject state interference and, therefore, retain power over social and cultural affairs.

¹¹⁹ In August 2001, the regime established the Supreme Council for Women, and in November of that year acceded to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview with Layla Rajab Zayed, Manama, 8 February 2005.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, 8 February 2005, Manama.

¹²² Crisis Group interview with member of National Democratic Action Society, Manama, 31 January 2005.

this sense, the opposition has been a voice of moderation, acting as a safety valve for the Shiite community in particular. With little to show after three years, however, there are signs that its grip on the Shiite community -- and therefore its ability to maintain calm -- may be weakening.

Al-Wifaq, while in no immediate danger of losing its status as the largest Shiite political society, is dealing with multiple internal and external pressures. Signs of division surfaced publicly in mid-2004, when some members established the Justice and Development Society (*Jama'iyat al-Adala wa al-Tanmiyya*), a group that advocated participation in the 2006 parliamentary elections.¹²³ In the view of many Bahrainis, this was directly or indirectly supported by the government, in the hope either of encouraging more cooperative members to break away,¹²⁴ or even of provoking al-Wifaq's disintegration. The ministry of the interior's initial decision to seek temporary closure of al-Wifaq in the wake of the 25 March 2005 Sitra demonstration lends credence to the latter thesis, although the ministry backed down and dropped the suit a week later. In fact, efforts to weaken the organisation may boomerang, generating resentment throughout the Shiite community and enhancing the appeal of a more confrontational approach among those disenchanted with al-Wifaq's failure to deliver. The prospect of rival, more militant organisations emerging is taken seriously by many observers.¹²⁵ The government's policy is said to be "undermining the moderates who support the Al-Khalifa", but insist on a fair compromise before entering the political field and thereby legitimising the state's institutional and political arrangement.¹²⁶

Concerned members of al-Wifaq and other opposition societies point in particular to increased disillusionment and growing attraction to confrontational tactics among young people. Al-Wifaq Vice President Hassan al-Mushaymi` warned that "there are elements in al-Wifaq that are restive", and while "people believe in Sheikh Ali Salman and in Sheikh `Isa Qasim, people are now speaking against their calls for moderation because of problems on the ground. Some other leadership could appear" that

is less interested in a partnership with the Al-Khalifa.¹²⁷ To be sure, there is self-interest in this assessment, as al-Wifaq may gain leverage with the government by branding the threat of a more radical alternative. But there is other evidence of growing restlessness.

The 2004 al-Khawaja affair, particularly the violent tactics to which several demonstrations resorted, provided one indication of increased support for a showdown with the regime. Notably, the October unrest followed direct appeals by Sheikh `Isa Qasim to refrain from violence and from confronting the regime, a directive the usually obedient appeared to cast aside.¹²⁸ While militant organisations at this point are inchoate, the potential for their emergence exists.¹²⁹ In the words of a Bahraini who himself claimed to have been a militant during the 1990s uprising and to have trained in Lebanon, "there are people who support violence."¹³⁰

Radicalism within the Shiite community is also fed in part by a sense that the island's small Sunni Salafi contingent enjoys disproportionate power and influence, encouraged in part by the state.¹³¹ The concern appears at this point to be largely speculative and is principally based on the presence of six Salafis in the elected Chamber of Deputies. Yet, images of gruesome anti-Shiite violence in Iraq have heightened fear and distrust. The recent wave of militant violence in Kuwait and Qatar also has prompted speculation that Bahrain would be the next site of militant -- and specifically anti-Shiite -- violence. In February

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview with Hassan al-Mushaymi`, Manama, 1 February 2005.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, with Jalila Sayed, Manama, 8 February 2005. As noted, opposition members made direct appeals to community leaders to end violent provocations, cooling the situation temporarily. Al-Wifaq also released a printed statement calling for an end to the violence, which helped ameliorate the situation. Crisis Group interview, Manama, 4 February 2005.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 4 February 2005.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 4 February 2005.

¹³¹ In its modern guise (since the late 1970s), "the Salafiyya movement has been closely identified with the severely puritan and backward-looking fundamentalism, based on literalist readings of scripture, of the Wahhabi tradition in Saudi Arabia", Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit., pp. 9-10. For more discussion on Salafism and its variants, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°74, *Indonesia Backgrounder: Jihad in Central Sulawesi*, 3 February 2004; Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°12, *Islamism in North Africa I: The Legacies of History*, 20 April 2004; Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°13, *Islamism in North Africa II: Egypt's Opportunity*, 20 April 2004; Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°29, *Islamism, Violence, and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page*, 30 July 2004; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°31, *Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who are the Islamists?*, 21 September 2004.

¹²³ It is difficult to determine the extent of support enjoyed by the pro-participation element. Some dismiss the group as irrelevant, while a minority argues that the emergence of the Development and Justice Society is the first indication that al-Wifaq will likely end the boycott, Crisis Group interviews, March 2005.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, February 2005.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview with Musa Musawi, Manama, 1 February 2005.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview with Ebrahim Sharif, Manama, 2 February 2005.

2005, fear spread among the Shiite community that Sunni jihadis were planning strikes against public mourning gatherings during Ashura.¹³² Angry villagers interviewed by Crisis Group claimed that if anti-Shiite acts of violence were perpetrated by the island's Salafi minority, "then we would wipe them out."¹³³

IV. CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

Amid signs of potential escalation, there remain powerful reasons for optimism. Most Shiite leaders and activists as well as government officials -- both Sunni and Shiite -- are eager to resolve differences peacefully. Parliamentarians (including Sunnis), who serve in an institution much maligned and denounced by opposition members, appear committed to addressing both specific problems facing the Shiite community and broader political issues. Many acknowledge that the institution -- which has failed to produce a single piece of legislation in its first term -- is in urgent need of repair.

But more needs to be done. The responsibility falls, in part, on the opposition. Its refusal to work with potential allies in the government, including in the institutions of which they disapprove, undermines prospects for progress. This does not necessarily mean ending the boycott of elections, agreeing to a faulty reform process or endorsing an unsatisfactory constitution. It does mean finding ways of forging relationships with sectors within the state that are willing to accomplish change on the ground, particularly the crown prince's office, which many Shiite and Sunni opposition figures acknowledge as being at the vanguard of reform.

At the same time, the leadership of al-Wifaq and other Shiite organisations must continue to call for restraint from their members. Al-Wifaq does not possess the resources to offer wide-ranging services or relief from social pressures but it has a role to play, particularly with poor villagers and others tempted by or involved in more radical organisations.

There are also important bridges to build between Shiite and Sunni communities. Shiites have largely been marginalised and stigmatised as a result of excessive paranoia since Iran's Islamic Revolution; redressing this will require Sunnis coming to terms with the character and structure of trans-national Shiite religious authority. For their part, Shiites ought to refrain from using particularly provocative symbols, notably Hizbollah banners, while the clergy should reassure those who fear a rigid and repressive attitude toward women, for example by allowing them to choose between existing Sharia courts or state-administered courts created by the government.

While citizens, both Shiite and Sunni, have an important role to play in mitigating rising tensions, the government carries most of the burden. The key is to acknowledge there is a sectarian problem which it helped to create. Resolving long-standing and more recent difficulties means moving on several fronts simultaneously.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Manama, 11 February 2005.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Sitra, 5 February 2005.

First, the government must end discriminatory practices such as political naturalisation, the gerrymandering of electoral districts, residential segregationist policies, and the prohibition on Shiites serving in the defence forces and the ministry of the interior.

Secondly, the state should follow through on the important reforms in the domestic labour market that the office of the crown prince and others in the government have suggested, including creating fair conditions for local Bahrainis to compete against cheaper expatriate labour. Transparency in the business and public sectors is necessary to rein in corruption and ensure that powerful members of the royal family do not manipulate the market. The reclamation of royal family-owned land and its resale to Bahrainis would help alleviate crowding and bring under control rapidly rising real estate costs, which effectively preclude tens of thousands from purchasing or building suitable housing.

Thirdly, the king must make good the promises he made in the 2001 National Action Charter. Considerable disappointment and frustration were generated by reform measures that strengthened the state and the monarch. Those frustrations have festered during the three years since the promulgation of the new Constitution, contributing to rising tensions. To resolve the political crisis, legislative powers should be restored to the elected branch of the parliament, either by downsizing the appointed chamber or by checking its ability to overrule elected deputies. Cabinet ministers must also be made accountable to the parliament through periodic review.

Bahrain's sectarian challenge is, for the most part, a matter that demands a shift in internal political will. But that does not mean the international community has no role to play. The United States in particular, the country's principal benefactor and architect of a recent bilateral free trade agreement, should expand its efforts to help the government see through what it began in 2001.

The question of what the U.S. can do to promote reform in Arab countries is a delicate one, particularly given widespread distrust of American motives in the region and fear of heavy-handed interference. In the case of Bahrain, however, there is little doubt that Washington already plays an influential role. While the U.S. has recognised deficiencies,¹³⁴ its criticism has been muted

and mixed with high praise. President Bush and other high officials repeatedly have extolled Bahrain as a model of reform, thereby lending important backing to its rulers. In his 2005 State of the Union address, Mr Bush noted that "hopeful reform is already taking hold in an arc from Morocco to Jordan to Bahrain".¹³⁵ In the view of opposition members, such praise comforts the government in the view that it has gone far enough and offers neither incentive nor pressure for it to do more.¹³⁶ Interestingly, and unlike in some other Arab countries, many Bahrainis, Sunni and Shiite alike, appear ready to welcome greater U.S. involvement to promote democracy by calling for a level institutional and political playing field. In fact, they are frustrated at its apparent lack of interest. Many told Crisis Group that they held little hope for genuine change absent such involvement. A group of Shiites from Sitra went so far as to say they would willingly carry the U.S. and Bahraini flags in their next demonstration if that were necessary to convince Washington to pressure their government.¹³⁷

For Washington, in other words, this is an opportunity to match policy with rhetoric, by qualifying its support for Bahrain's reforms and putting the spotlight on deficiencies, notably on the constitutional question and anti-Shiite discrimination. Even here, of course, caution is required. Hostility toward U.S. policies concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in Iraq remains strong, and too heavy-handed intervention could provoke a backlash. Likewise, there is a growing perception among Sunni groups (in Bahrain, but also elsewhere) that the U.S. has chosen to strengthen Shiites at Sunni expense.¹³⁸ At a minimum, however, the U.S. should urge the government to restore legislative authority to the elected branch of parliament and to create electoral districts that better reflect demographic realities.

Ultimately, for the Bahraini government to do nothing or, worse, return to older modes of authoritarian and police action, would likely lead to further escalation. The current situation is inherently unstable, and recent events suggest change is on its way: if not through accelerated reform then, unhappily, by a return to violence.

Amman/Brussels, 6 May 2005

¹³⁴ In its recent report on human rights and democracy promotion, the State Department noted that in spite of promising steps, "problems...remained", mentioning in particular human rights, the absence of an independent judiciary and discrimination against Shiites, women and foreigners. The report affirmed that "advancing human rights and democracy in Bahrain is a priority of the United States", United States Department of

State, "Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2004 - 2005", available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2004/43111.htm>.

¹³⁵ President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, 2 February 2005, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, February-March, 2005.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Sitra, 5 April 2005.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Muharraq, 4 February 2005.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF BAHRAIN

