

## **Identity politics and the suppression of Shia in Bahrain**

***By Mark Barwick, HRWF Policy Advisor, presented to the International Conference on Persecution of Shia in Bahrain, 22-23 April 2016 in Brussels***

HRWF (26.04.2016) - It wasn't all that long ago that Bahrain was praised for its government's broad-based movement toward reform and liberalisation, an opening up to greater freedoms and respect for human rights. King Hamad was decorated many times over for his reform-mindedness, for improving living standards and for admitting more Shiites into government positions.

Some knew quite well that this was more window-dressing than real change. Yet friends of the house of Al-Khalifa continued to heap praise, even while watching the kingdom's descent into chaos and a worrying disregard for the basic rights of its citizens.

Some observers from the outside looking in have suggested that Bahrain was just following the familiar pattern of Islamic identity politics, that the ancient rivalry between Sunni and Shia was threatening the stability of an otherwise comparatively moderate Gulf State. However, although identity politics have not played a significant role in the current state of affairs in Bahrain, this may increasingly become a self-fulfilling prophecy if the situation does not change in the months and years ahead.

What may have been some movement toward reform has become more and more a paranoia directed against Iranian influence in the region. And it is this struggle against Iranian influence – real or imagined – that has been harshly projected upon Bahraini Shiites and that carries the potential for radicalising an already disaffected youth. In this way the government has played out a politics of fear that is already coming back to haunt it.

What this means for the forces of change within Bahrain is there must be a clear and sustained commitment to refuse the trap of identity politics and press for the creation of an inclusive and democratic Bahrain – not a Shiite Bahrain but a Bahrain where every citizen counts, where all are equally protected under the rule of law and where all citizens can participate in making decisions that affect their lives and future.

There is little doubt that Iran will try to exploit Bahrain's political chaos in these volatile times. And of course, there are Iranian agents seeking to influence the course of events in Bahrain. But the struggle for democratic reform and for human dignity in Bahrain cannot be reduced to a Shia-Sunni conflict or another example of identity politics in the Gulf.

### ***National unity and Sectarian identities***

There was an interesting study done on the conduct of military personnel during operations in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain in the course of recent political unrest. It is interesting to note the way that the dynamics of sectarian identity played out in each of the three countries.

For example, in Bahrain, when the regime deployed its security and military forces to contain and dismantle protest sites in 2011, the military hierarchy had a strong interest in favouring the status quo. Compared to Iraq and Yemen, there was much more support for the stability of the regime, even in the face of clear injustices being played out in the course of events. Military commanders wanted to protect their positions. Reform would have cost them dearly: it was the power of social and economic hierarchy that contributed to the government's ability to suppress the revolt at that time.

In both Syria and Yemen the military command fragmented and the countries slipped into civil war – but not Bahrain. Bahrain’s military remained more or less intact, and it was not just out of self-interest. There was also an element of national identity that comes to light in the case of Bahrain. The struggle in 2011 was not so much about Shiite liberation as it was about ending authoritarian rule in Bahrain. And the continuing struggle is not so much about Sunni control over a majority Shia population as it is about forging a democratic future for Bahrain.

One might say that in the end these will arrive at the same result. However, the distinction is important: the government can more easily make a case for suppressing Shia militancy than it can for suppressing basic freedoms. This is precisely how the regime has tried to posture itself: as acting to maintain peace in the face of internal and external threats to its national security. Instead of addressing the real issue of authoritarian rule, the Hamad regime has focused on troublemakers, “terrorists” and “spies” for Iran that seek to undermine and destroy the government of Bahrain. Of course, this kind of counter-insurgency strategy easily aligns itself with US policy of containment in the region.

In this way the more that vital questions about human rights and democratic governance go unresolved, the more that the country risks greater numbers of its Shia youth becoming radicalised. As stated above, while identity politics have not played a significant role in the current situation, we could expect that it will in the future if these core issues are not adequately addressed. Bulldozing mosques and Shia buildings does nothing to achieve political reform and progress on human rights. The imprisonment of peaceful opposition leaders does nothing to instil respect for the Hamad regime. And talk of national unity and respect for constitutional institutions ring hollow when hate speech from pro-government sources undermine any sense of unity and social harmony.

### ***The rule of law and the future of Bahrain***

The result has been the deepening of sectarian tensions and therefore playing into the regime’s strategy of suppressing Shia identity and cultural life in Bahrain in the name of national security. And the cycle of violence continues, raising the risk of radicalising the opposition and weakening reformist voices within government and civil society. These are the moderate voices that will be needed to help craft a sustainable political solution to the current impasse.

The struggle in Bahrain is not about Shia identity; it is a struggle for the Bahraini people and for justice and democratic rule. The sectarian composition of Bahrain is an imposition of the ruling regime and should not have real relevance to the need for overall change to the country’s balance of power in order to move forward as a nation. That means building a national identity that is based on citizens’ rights, the rule of law and democratic institutions and not religious affiliation. This is the only path toward a vibrant democratic society where all individuals’ rights and freedoms are protected with equal vigour. This is the challenge for Bahrain today and indeed for the Gulf region.