

Divide and Rule in Bahrain and the Elusive Pursuit for a United Front: The Experience of the Constitutive Committee and the 1972 Uprising

*Omar Hesham AlShehabi*¹

Gulf Centre for Development Policies, Gulf University for Science and Technology

Draft, January 2013

This on-line version is the pre-copyedited, preprint version. The published version can be found at:

AlShehabi, O. (2013), 'Divide and rule in Bahrain and the elusive pursuit for a united front: the experience of the Constitutive Committee and the 1972 Uprising', *Historical Materialism*, BRILL, vol. 21 (1), pp.94-127.

<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/1569206x-12341267>

Abstract

This article focuses on the 'The Constitutive Committee', the 1971–2 mass-movement to create a general trade union in Bahrain. The first mass-movement after independence, it was also the country's first public non-sectarian organised movement. Initially a joint effort between 'The Popular Front' and the 'National Liberation Front', it represented the first formal collaboration between the two major factions of the Left, which had historically entertained an ambivalent relationship. This article traces the committee's establishment and development, culminating with the 'March 1972 uprising'. The article places the Constitutive Committee within a historical narrative that begins with the Higher Executive Committee movement of 1954–6 and leads up to the February 2011 Arab uprisings. The framework emphasises the dialectical struggles of popular movements searching for a united front for political change, faced by a regime that has mastered the use of divide and rule to entrench social and political fragmentation.

Keywords

¹ * I would like to thank Adam Hanieh, Abdulhadi Khalaf, Abdel Takriti, and Yousef Yeteem for their helpful comments and suggestions. Above all, I would like to thank my father, the late Hesham AlShehabi, and his colleagues and comrades, for the inspiration and information for this article. Any errors, omissions, and biases in this article are my own. I can be contacted at the following permanent address: PO Box 5155, Manama, Bahrain; or via email at: <omar.alshehabi@gmail.com>.

Introduction

The mass protests in Bahrain in the midst of the 2011 Arab uprisings have taken many outside observers by surprise. A common stereotype within the academic and wider literature holds that the Arab Gulf states are politically stagnant and conservative. Popular movements in Bahrain and the wider region, however, have a long but rarely acknowledged tradition that stretches back to the early twentieth century. 1971 represented a watershed year in such movements, with its repercussions directly feeding into the developments in 2011. On the 15th of August 1971, the tiny archipelago of islands located to the east of the Arabian peninsula declared its independence after more than a century of British “protection”. This was in line with the 1967 British decision to withdraw from territories east of the Suez, causing panic within the rulers of the Gulf sheikhdoms. Eight days later, the “Constitutive Committee for the General Federation of Workers, Craftsmen and Tradesmen in Bahrain” (CC) submitted its official establishment request to the authorities.

The experience of the CC would set the tone for the evolving political landscape in Bahrain for the rest of the 20th century. The first organized workers movement after independence, it became the reference point for subsequent labour organizations on the island, with The General Federation of Workers Trade Unions that was eventually officially established in 2001 directly tracing its origins to the CC. It would also be the first serious attempt post-independence to unite the different political factions into a cohesive bloc, in essence signifying the first non-sectarian public movement in Bahrain, something unprecedented in an island prone to sect and ethnic-based politics. Such movements would periodically cause the greatest domestic headaches for the ruling elite. The tone would be set for the periodic rise of popular movements for greater popular representation and integration, only to be faced by a rentier state increasingly reliant on the use of demographic management for divide and rule purposes, viewing such movements that try to overcome ideological and sectarian divides as its main internal threat.

The constitutive committee and its significance in the development of popular movements in Bahrain has received limited attention in the literature. The only substantive account given in English resources is in Nakhlah (2011)², where a brief description of the CC and the March 1972 uprising is presented. More has been written in Arabic, but the material has been largely limited to

² Nakhleh, Emile. *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing Society*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011. pp. 75-95.

the general outlines of the movement and chronicling of the events of the 1972 uprising.³ Mutaiwi' (2006)⁴ has recently published a personal account of the 1972 uprising, while Al-Shirawi (2005)⁵ provides interviews with some of the individuals involved in the CC.

This study provides an in-depth ethnographic analysis of the constitutive committee movement and the 1972 uprising, to our knowledge the first study to do so. It relies on original archival material from the British archives as well as in-depth interviews with leading figures in the CC and underground movements at the time. It guides the narration via the experience of two individuals that were instrumental in the CC and subsequent movements in Bahrain, Hesham AlShehabi and Abdulla Mutaiwi', allowing it to account for objective factors without losing sight of subjective agency. It highlights the role that personal contact and social capital accumulation plays in a small and diverse society like Bahrain. It pays particular attention to the role of the underground movements at the period, specifically the Movement of Arab Nationals (MAN), the National Liberation Front (NLF), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), a subject that has received limited attention in the English literature. The analysis places the CC within a historical narration of popular movements on the island, beginning with the Higher Executive Committee of 1954 up to the 1972 March uprising. This is followed by an overview of subsequent developments on the island up to the February 2011 uprising. The analysis is framed within the discourse of a country torn between the quest to establish a united front of diverse political leanings, sharing a common goal of establishing popular political and economic representation, versus a ruling elite that continuously thwarts such attempts by the use of demographic management and political fragmentation to preserve power in their hands.

1953-56: The HEC and the Birth of Bahraini Nationalism

The CC was conceived in the alleyways of Muharraq, the second city of Bahrain and its previous capital until 1923. Two neighbours, Hesham AlShehabi and Abdulla Mutaiwi', were instrumental in its conception. Hesham was a recent engineering graduate from the United Kingdom, while Mutaiwi' was a secondary school dropout due to imprisonment from previous political activities.

³ See, for example, a pamphlet published by the Constitutive Committee entitled:

Ta'tawur al Aw'daa al 'Umalıyya fil Bahrain. al Lajna al Ta'aseesiya le Etti'had 'Ummal al Bahrain.1977.

⁴ Mutaiwi', Abdulla. *Safa'hat min Tareekh al 'Haraka al 'Ummaliyya Al Ba'hrainiyya..* Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2006.

⁵ Al-Shirawi, Men'em. *Awraq 'Ummaliyya*. Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2005.

In March 1971, at his house, Hesham wrote the first declaration for the CC:

“It is now time to relook into the labour situation in Bahrain to guarantee a better life and future for the workers.

The General Union constitutes an open invitation to the workers, employees and small tradesmen to join an institution that cares and safeguards their interests, including better working conditions, social security, unemployment benefit, and retirement process.

The best legitimate means (to this end) is to demand the application of clauses 43 and 44 of the Bahrain Labour Ordinance of 1957.”⁶

Their inspiration came from an earlier epoch. The Bahrain Labour Ordinance of 1957 was the direct fruit of the Higher Executive committee (HEC), the first organised public mass movement in the modern history of Bahrain, lasting from 1954-1956, before abruptly being cut short by force. Although the HEC was not the first attempt at garnering greater political popular representation on the island⁷, it was the first attempt by an organised movement with a strong popular base to do so. It would constitute the first serious internal threat to the stability of the ruling regime. The conditions in the early 1950s were ripe for such a movement.

Given its strategic location, Bahrain has always been a target for the dominant imperial powers of their time, having been conquered by the Ancient Greeks, the Persians, the Early Islamic Caliphate, the Portuguese, as well as forces from the Arabian Peninsula. In 1783 the island came under the control of the Al Khalifa dynasty, a tribal clan from the Eastern Coast of the Arabian Peninsula.⁸ The British, eager to dominate the trade routes around the Indian subcontinent, became directly involved in 1861. A treaty was signed with local rulers stipulating that they would cease from actions of war, piracy and trade in slavery, in return for British protection.⁹ Henceforth the rule of Al Khalifa on the island, previously susceptible to periodic external threats from the Arabian Peninsula and Iran, would be stabilised by strong British backing.

6 Mutaiwi', Abdulla. *Safa'hat min Tareekh al 'Haraka al 'Ummaliyya Al Ba'hraiyya*. Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2006. p.49-50

7 There were earlier attempt in 1912 and 1938 by some leading merchants to press for an elected assembly. However, these attempts were quickly repressed and did not develop into a fully articulated mass movement.

8 Rush, Alan. *Ruling Families of Arabia. Bahrain: The Ruling Family of Al-Khalifah*. London: Archive Editions, 1991. p. 12

9 Ibid., p.18

Economic life on the island was characterised by a feudal structure until the 1920s, with control over plots of land and ports serving as the main source of income for the different branches in the royal family.¹⁰ The economy was heavily based on agriculture, pearl-diving and sea-trade, with pearl trading dominated by a set of families that constituted the merchant class. Manual labour in the fields and the ships was dependant on indentured servitude, with workers placed in perpetual debt that was extended down to their children¹¹.

Beginning in the early 1920s, under the supervision of Major Daly, the British Agent, some efforts at modernising the rules and governance of the country were introduced. These would be solidified in the subsequent years of 1926-1957, a period dominated by the figure of Charles Belgrave, the British advisor to the ruler. Much despised by locals, he was initially brought in by the Emir on a private contract to oversee budgetary matters of the government. He would quickly take over most administrative duties on the island. The reforms enacted would be the first serious attempt to introduce organised systems of bureaucracy in the country. Efforts were made to centralize the administration away from the existing devolved feudal system. Conditions in the labour force were reformed, with particularly harsh practices banned. Formal education, first introduced in 1919, was expanded, and directorates were set up for the provision of electricity, hospitals and telephones. Municipalities as well as courts were established.¹²

These reforms coincided with the advent of the oil era . First discovered in 1931 with production commencing the following year, Bahrain was the first of the tracial coast states to witness its transformational effects. Although still meagre by later standards, the revenues allowed for the implementation of the wide ranging administrative reforms. In general, the reforms took a top-down approach, based mainly on the decisions and whims of the local ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, and his British adviser. They were mainly transaction-focused,¹³ with no attempt to introducing any forms of political participation. Representative committees or self governing bodies were unheard of, and there was yet to be any comprehensive regulation or engagement with the local labour force. Belgrave, who was initially employed to organize the revenues of the state, ended up being the head of the police, the supervisor of all governmental departments, as well as sitting on higher and lower courts and municipal councils.¹⁴ By the 1950s, the brewing popular unrest at the lack of participation would boil over.

10 Khuri, Fuad. *Tribe and State in Bahrain*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. p.35

11 *Ibid.*, p.64

12 *Ibid.*, p. 115

13 *Ibid.*, p. 117

14 *Ibid.*, p.118

Regionally, this was the period of revolution and rising Arab nationalism, heightened by the successful coup of the Free Officers Movement in Egypt, led by Jamal Abdul Nasser, against King Farouk and his British backers in July 1952. These regional developments echoed strongly in Bahrain. The Egyptian radio broadcast “Sout Al Arab” was a particular household favourite. Clubs and societies multiplied significantly, spurred on by the formation of the first cultural and sports centre in the Gulf Arab States in 1928, “Al Bahrain Club”¹⁵ and “Al Orouba”, the first political club in 1939. These clubs would act as a meeting point for increasingly politicised individuals with greater exposure to the outside world, functioning as a dormitory for the fermentation of a new national conscience. This was complemented by the rise of a strong national press. Particularly important was the publishing house that produced “The Voice of Bahrain” newspaper from 1949. Not only would this newspaper play an instrumental role in dispersing ideas via mass printed media in an increasingly literate population, it also included within its founders some of the people who were to become most influential in the HEC.

These slowly brewing factors needed a spark that would transform them into a tangible national movement. This came in two forms. First was the sectarian violence that racked the country between 1953 and 1954. Sect issues have always been a salient feature of Bahrain. There is a significance presence of both Sunnis and Shias, the two main branches of Islam (the last available public census of 1941 shows a roughly equal split of 52% Shia to 48% Sunni)¹⁶. The ruling Al Khalifa family belongs to the Sunni branch, while the majority of other Sunnis are composed of either Arabs with tribal backgrounds, Najdis – Sedentary Arabs from Najd province in Saudi Arabia, or “Huwala”, Arabs who have come from the Eastern coast of the gulf. Shias, on the other hand, are mainly composed of “Baharna”, sedentary Arabs concentrated in agricultural villages, and “Ajam”, individuals of Persian origin. There is also a presence of other communities, including Afro-Arabs, Jew and Banya.¹⁷

Sectarian and ethnic delineations have consistently formed a part of the power and governance structure under the Al Khalifa rule and British protection. “Vertical segmentation” was

“maintained through mobilisation of tribal, confessional, and ethnic myths, through appropriate parts of communal histories, through co-optation as well as through actual use of physical force.

15 Later to be renamed Al Muharraq Club

16 FO 371/149151 “Population Census of Bahrain.” 31 December, 1955.

17 For more, see: Zahlan, Rosemarie-Said. *The Making of the Modern Gulf States, 1989*. London: Routledge. p. 47-48.

Top dogs within each vertical segment are strong enough to keep order within their sphere but not enough to prevent the regime from intervening, directly or indirectly, whenever need arises.”¹⁸

Sectarian differences were the most ingrained, if not the only, demarcation of vertical segmentation. The most demographically-diverse areas on the island were by nature the two urban centres, Manama and Muharraq, who between them accounted for 60% of the population.¹⁹ Sectarian tensions ignited on the 20th of September 1953 in the religious march of Ashoora in Manama, when skirmishes broke out between Shia participants and “fdawiya”- strongmen under the commands of the sheikhs - that left several injured.²⁰ These skirmishes then spread to Muharraq. Intermittent clashes continued, mainly fuelled by the sense of grievance at how the rulers and British authorities handled the manner. One of the more serious incidents occurred in the oil refinery area on the 15th of June 1954. A Sunni participant was killed, and the violence continued to spread when the subsequent arrests led to confrontations between Shia individuals and the police, leaving four Shias dead. The situation spiralled into a general strike in the markets and the oil facilities, ending only when the authorities formed an investigative committee into the matter.

The second spark was a strike held by taxi drivers on the island in August 1954. The traffic directorate had imposed an insurance levy that had to be bought from British companies at what was seen as high prices. The “Voice of Bahrain” newspaper adopted the strikers demands, and subsequently made contacts with the British adviser that resulted in the establishment of a cooperative insurance scheme.²¹

To counteract these rising labour and sectarian tensions, a series of meetings were held between Shia and Sunni community notables to discuss the situation between the two sects, in the hope of reaching a common understanding. An enlarged series of meetings were held in Sanabis village in October 1954, a groundbreaking event that culminated with a series of historic decisions. A Higher Executive Committee (HEC) of 120 members was to be established to represent the interests and demands of the community, who would in turn elect an executive committee of eight individuals to put forward the demands to the authorities. These demands centred around the formation of a legislative council, the establishment of a general legal and civil code for the country, the formation

18 Khalaf, Abdulhadi. “Contentious politics in Bahrain: From ethnic to national and vice versa.” Oslo: The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle East Studies, 1998.

19 FO 371/149151 “Population Census of Bahrain.” 31 December, 1955.

20 FO 371/104263 “Disturbances in Bahrain, September 1953.” 22 September, 1953.

21 Moussa, Hussain. *Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Wa'tani wal Demokrati*. Al Haqiqa Press, 1987. p. 43-47

of unions, and the establishment of a supreme court.²²

The HEC would employ two methods to achieve its aims that would be subsequently used repeatedly by other popular movements on the island. One was the collection of signatures in petitions, and the second was holding gatherings to advocate their cause in religious places, clubs, working places over the island. The HEC was able to collect 25 thousand signatures in support of its formation²³, a remarkable feat in a country whose population of citizens was barely ninety thousand in 1950.²⁴

The response of the British authorities and the local rulers would define the manner the regime would deal with any organised popular political movements for the next half a century. The strategy was simple but very effective: delay, sow division, co-opt, and if all else fails, annihilate by force. At first, the rulers refused to recognise the HEC, but the strong momentum and nationwide reach of the movement forced recognition after more than a year of activity. It took the HEC to organize a mass strike in March 1956 to finally be recognised by the government.

The authorities next tried creating an alternative committee of Shia notables under its wing in the hope of splitting the public and weakening the HEC. The endeavour was unsuccessful.²⁵ Finally, when all other tactics failed, the authorities resorted to violence. The HEC did not last long, for although it was formed in 1954, and although it was only recognised officially in March 1956, it was sent to its death bed by November 1956. Protests broke out to denounce the tripartite aggression on Egypt after the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. They started in Manama secondary school, back then the only secondary school on the island. They quickly grew to cover the two main cities of the island, and the HEC, although reluctant at first, felt it had to join the protests to appease public opinion and to prevent the marches from escalating into a violent face-off. The HEC made sure to coordinate with the British agent regarding the protest, but on the day the march quickly spiralled out of control and turned violent. The events were used as an excuse to arrest and deport the leaders of the HEC, with many sent to exile on St. Helena island. Thus ended the first organised popular national movement in Bahrain.²⁶

Although the HEC was not successful in its direct aims, it did create a long lasting legacy that

22 FO 1016/333 "Relations between Sunnis and Shiah Moslems in Bahrain." 18 September, 1954.

23 Moussa, Hussain. *Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Wa'tani wal Demokrati*. Al Haqiqa Press, 1987. p. 50

24 FO 371/149151. "Population Census..."

25 Humaidan, Ahmed. *Hay'at al Etihad al Watani fil Bahrain*. Beirut: Dar Al Kunouz al Adabiyaa, 2004. p.

26 Moussa, Hussain. *Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Wa'tani wal Demokrati*. Al Haqiqa Press, 1987. p. 68

survives into the 21st century. Foremost, it was the first organised political movement in Bahrain, and arguably constitutes the birth of modern nationalism.²⁷ Indeed, it was the first popular political movement to be recognised by any government in the Gulf Arab states. It led to wide-ranging reforms in the legal and civil codes of the country, and it forced the authorities to subsequently introduce organised committees with some semblance of limited public participation. It was even able to set up a scout organisation, which the British authorities suspected was the nucleus for a para-military force and ordered it banned.²⁸ Shortly after the dissolution of the HEC, Belgrave was also forced to “retire” as the political advisor to the ruler²⁹.

The HEC's goals were geared towards civil and legal reform combined with greater political and labour representation. It was not geared at regime change. In fact, at its start, the HEC did not take an overtly anti-colonialist stand, with most of its grievances directed towards political reforms at the local level. The British were frequently used as middle-men between the HEC and the rulers, with the HEC writing a note to ask for a viewing with Prime minister Eden when he was passing through Bahrain in 1955. This co-operative mood changed as it became evident that the British were not interested in wide ranging reforms. In essence, the HEC's demands and activities reflected a mix of grievances directed at both British presence and the rulers, and it never went beyond asking for political reform within the system. This would end up being one of the main criticisms levelled at the HEC, and as we shall see, a critical factor that led subsequent movements to go underground and become increasingly more radical in their demands.³⁰

One of the main achievements of the HEC was the formation of Bahrain's first organised labour movement and the promulgation of the Bahrain Labour Ordinance of 1957³¹. Starting in 1955, in response to the labour strike, a committee was formed to investigate the possibility of formulating a local labour law. The committee included representatives from the British, the Emir, local employers, and finally the HEC. In a period that spanned over two years and more than 50 meetings, a draft for a new labour law was meticulously formed.³² This law constituted a significant advancement in labour powers and would remain the most labour-friendly legal document in the 20th century history of Bahrain. Crucially, it allowed for the formation of unions. While negotiating the text of the law, the HEC was also able to successfully form a labour union that included 6000 registered individuals, composed mainly of taxi drivers and workers at the local oil company. The

27 Humaidan, Ahmed. *Hay'at al Etihad al Watani fil Bahrain*. Beirut: Dar Al Kunouz al Adabiyaa, 2004. p.

28 FO 371/120686. “Attempts to form military boy scout organisation in Bahrain.” 1956.

29 Moussa, Hussain. *Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Wa'tani wal Demokrati*. Al Haqiqa Press, 1987. p. 64

30 Interview - B

31 FO 371/120687-120690 “Labour Law in Bahrain”. 1956.

32 Ibid.

union ended with the dissolution of the committee, and although there were significant reductions in the labour powers agreed, the law nevertheless came out as the Bahrain Labour Ordinance 1957.³³

33 Moussa, Hussain. *Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Wa'tani wal Demokrati*. Al Haqiqa Press, 1987. p. 60

1956 – 1965: The move underground

The HEC was actively present in the life and minds of the Constitutive Committee. Hesham's uncle, Mohammad Kamal AlShehabi, was the creator and leader of the boyscout movement in the HEC.³⁴ More significantly, the Bahrain Labour Ordinance of 1957 negotiated by the HEC would lay the foundation stone for the work of the CC. Part III, sections 43-44 of the labour ordinance would prove particularly inspiring. These clauses allowed for the formation of workers syndicates as long as their membership included 20 or more workers of a similar industry or profession.³⁵

Although the law was in practice frozen after the dissolution of the HEC, there was no written government decree that officially superseded or annulled it:

“The beginning was with the speeding up of labour disturbances in many companies... When I reviewed the law of 1957, and particularly that of Part III regarding the right to form labour unions, the law stated that workers have a right to organize themselves and make syndicates. I wondered has this law been superseded with another? The response came that the law was still in effect, and in particular Part III of the law has not been frozen.

After reviewing the general situation and the laws in effect I talked to Abdulla Mutaiwi'.. and it was agreed to start work based on this principle.”³⁶

Both Hesham and Abdulla had their political roots in the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN), a regional movement that reached Bahrain in the aftermath of the dissolution of the HEC. The fall of the HEC heralded a new era in Bahraini political movements. Many saw the reason for the HEC's failure as the cooperation and open relationship it enjoyed with the authorities. Furthermore, its demands and aims did not reach far enough, naively assuming that those in charge would be receptive to them. The subsequent political movements that emerged after the HEC went underground and took a much more radical stance viz-a-viz the authorities, with their outlook becoming distinctly anti-colonialist and anti-regime. Their goals were no longer simply system reform and greater popular representation, but actually overthrow of the regime.

34 Interview - F

35 Mutaiwi', Abdulla. *Safa'hat min Tareekh al 'Haraka al 'Ummaliyya Al Ba'hrainiyya..* Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2006. p.156

36 Hesham Al-Shehabi, quoted in: Al-Shirawi, Men'em. *Awraq 'Ummaliyya.* Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2005. p.71-72

Two clandestine movements came to dominate the scene within a short period after the fall of the HEC: The Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF). The MAN was a Pan-Arab nationalist movement that had its origins in the American University of Beirut (AUB). A close circle of Arab students, including the charismatic Palestinian medic George Habash, were in close contact with the influential thinker Constantine Zureiq. They began to discuss the meaning and the appropriate response to the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) and state formation of Israel in 1948.³⁷

Zureiq argued in “The meaning of the Nakba that Zionism and imperialism could only be defeated through the establishment of a united, modern nation-state that can transform society from backwardness to the modern age. In order to achieve this, what was needed was a select group of Arab youth cadres “organised and united through political parties and cohesive organisations, committed to a common and pure doctrine and bound by concrete and true loyalty.” This movement needed to be revolutionary.³⁸ Current nationalist movements, such as the Ba'ath, had lost their revolutionary zeal and were bought by the regimes. It also needed to be nationalist, as the problem with leftist internationalist organisations (like the communists) was their lack of a national focus that was tainted by internationalist agendas. Hence, the notion of Tali'a, a transformative vanguard that champions the people, was at the core of the party.³⁹

The peninsular regional headquarters of the movement was located Kuwait, where Dr. Ahmed AlKhatib, one of the founders of the MAN, had returned after his studies in Beirut. The movement's first Bahraini member was Abdulrahman Kamal⁴⁰, who was a student in the mid fifties at the AUB. He quickly ensured that Ahmed Humaidan enter the organisation, a veteran of the Bahraini 1956 demonstrations as a secondary school student and who was at the time a student with Kamal's brother in Cairo.⁴¹ Humaidan was approached in Egypt at the end of 1958 to start to recruiting for the movement in Bahrain.

Meanwhile⁴², groups of youth in Bahrain who were disaffected with the local political situation had

37 Al-Khatib, Ahmad. *Al-Kuwait, Min al-Imara ila al-Dawla: Thikrayat al- 'Amal al Wa'tani wal 'Qawmi*, 2nd Edition. Beirut: al-Markaz al- Tha 'qafi al- Arabi, 2007. p. 76.

38 Interview - B

39 Takriti, Abdel Razzaq. *Revolution and Absolutism: Oman, 1965-1976*. Dphil, University of Oxford, 2010. p.70 – 85.

40 Interview - B

41 Interview - B

42 Interview - B

started forming loose groupings of Arab Nationalist leanings. Humaidan began work in earnest when he returned in Bahrain in 1959, approaching these other clandestine embryo Arab nationalist groupings to bring them under the wing of the MAN. This would provide them with a clearer structure, sense of purpose, as well as a connection to a wider regional movement. The activities of the members focused on “education”, where recruits were exposed relevant reading material to discuss and study, as well as recruiting other members.

The response in recruitment was electrifying. Within a few months the movement had expanded hugely, reaching several hundred cadres.⁴³ This was the height of Arab Nationalism, spurred on by the rising star of Jamal Abdel Nasser, particularly after his seeming victory in the tripartite aggression in Suez in 1956. Furthermore, the failure of the HEC had radicalised many individuals to join clandestine organisations. Within these newly recruited cadres were Hesham AlShehabi, and later Abdulla Mutaiwi'.⁴⁴

The other major clandestine movement at the time was the National Liberation Front (NLF), the Communist movement in Bahrain. The establishment of the party was strongly influenced by its relationship to the Tudeh party of Iran and the communist party of Iraq. There are references for the presence of Tudeh party members arriving in Bahrain as early as the 1940s, but the NLF did not have a formal establishment on the island until February 1955⁴⁵. The Iranian nationalist Prime Minister Musaddeq was overthrown by Shah Pahlavi in a coup instigated by the CIA in operation Ajax in 1954. Subsequently some members of the Tudeh party fled to Bahrain, and they played an instrumental role in setting up the NLF. Like its Tudeh counterpart, the party avoided having any reference to communism in its name, worried about any undue suspicion from the authorities, or indeed a society that still had strong religious roots. Furthermore, this would also help it to avoid the negative connotations it might have with other communist movements in the region, particularly those of Iran and Iraq, in a country that was dominated at the time by Arab Nationalist leanings.

The relationship between the two movements was ambivalent from the start. Ideologically, there was one crucial area of disagreement. The MAN saw the Arab world as its homeland, the object of its struggle, and the end goal. It regarded the NLF as an agent dictated by an internationalist agenda that did not have the region's interest at heart. Its connections with the Tudeh party, whose views on

43 Interview - B

44 Interview – G, A

45 Moussa, Hussain. *Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Wa'tani wal Demokrati*. Al Haqiqa Press, 1987. p. 77-78

Bahrain fitted the imperialist ambitions of Iran, further alienated it from the MAN.⁴⁶ The NLF, on the other hand, saw the MAN as a regional upstart clouded with nationalist xenophobia⁴⁷. This was significant because of its ties to the Tudeh party of Iran, and the fact that some of its members were of Iranian origin. The idea of Arab Nationalism did not come naturally.

The fortunes of the two parties waxed and waned through 1960-1965. The MAN, although the more popular and widespread of the movements, suffered from its impressive initial expansion. The structure was loose, unstable and constantly being reorganised, affecting the discipline of the party.^{48 49} Furthermore, it overtly made armed struggle part of its ideology. Frequently an ideological obsession but never really a viable option given the urban nature and small size of the island, the continuous flirting with the idea of armed resistance would prove to be a reoccurring bane for local underground movements. MAN cadres from Bahrain were sent abroad on training for this cause. This quickly got the local intelligence forces interested, and the movement took hits that exposed its cadre by the end of 1960.⁵⁰ The group started splintering into other movements that kept the nationalist sentiment but were not formally part of the MAN.

Although the NLF was not as popular domestically, it did have a stronger party discipline and consequently less infiltration from the authorities. The party's main activities centred around social and sports clubs and societies, in addition to the sphere that came most naturally to it: the workers.⁵¹ It became actively involved in small-scale strike actions that intermittently occurred across the country. Like the MAN, its main activities revolved around recruitment, "education" and industrial action.⁵²

The NLF was the first of the underground movements to announce its programme in December 1962. Not surprisingly, the aims focused on union activity and defending working class interests, as well as ending British presence and establishing a democratic independent country that featured an elected parliament and equality for women. Highlighting its differences with the MAN, however, there was no mention regarding other Arab affairs or the issue of Palestine.

46 Al Mudairis, Falah. "Derasa Hawl Al Harakat wal Jama'at al Seyaseya fil Bahrain." Part 3, serialized in Al Tali'ah newspaper, 29 June 2002, Issue No. 1533.

47 Al Mudairis, Falah. "Derasa Hawl Al Harakat wal Jama'at al Seyaseya fil Bahrain." Part 3, serialized in Al Tali'ah newspaper, 29 June 2002, Issue No. 1533.

48 Interview - B

49 Interview - B

50 Interview - B

51 Al Mudairis, Falah. "Derasa Hawl Al Harakat wal Jama'at al Seyaseya fil Bahrain." Part 3, serialized in Al Tali'ah newspaper, 29 June 2002, Issue No. 1533.

52 Ibid.

The activities of the two groups were to reach a climax by the middle of the decade. The uprising of March 1965 is still referred to in legendary terms within members of both movements. As was usually the case, the uprising started due to events in Bapco, the local oil company which had announced plans to lay-off 400 Bahraini workers.⁵³ On the 5th of March, students at Manama secondary school, Bahrain's only secondary school back then, held a demonstration which was attacked by the infantry on horses. The news of the attack caused the protests to spill onto the streets spontaneously, focusing mainly in the two urban centres of Manama and Muharraq.

The quickly escalating protests had caught the MAN and the NLF with surprise and with little preparation. They were caught on the back-foot, with their moves taking a reactive rather than proactive form.⁵⁴ This created the necessity for the two to try to work together. Spontaneously, and acting more as individuals rather than members of movements, cadres from each organisation had to try to work together to coordinate on tactics.

Five days into the uprising both movements signed a joint statement outlining their demands. An amalgamation of various grievances and with no central theme, these included an end to the lay-offs at Bapco, the ability to form worker associations, and releasing all political detainees.⁵⁵

The hastily assembled coalition quickly fell apart. The disagreement went to the core of the differences between the two currents, with the MAN pushing for a regional perspective while the NLF wanting to focus on local and labour developments only. Arrests continued throughout the days, and as the cadres dwindled and the public ran out of steam, the movement eventually died out.⁵⁶ The uprising lasted for about a month, and many future leaders were to make their names in this uprising while they were still teenagers, including Abdulla Mutaiwi, who was only a fifteen year old student then.⁵⁷

The jails were filled and a popular movement had failed once again in its ultimate aims, but not without leaving a significantly imprint on the future path of history. Muharraq was nicknamed "Port Said" (in reference to the Egyptian city that became famous during the 1956 tripartite aggression), because it was a strong centre of the protests and security forces were unable to enter the city for

53 Mousa, Hussain. "Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Watani...." p. 62.

54 Interview – A, I, F

55 Mousa, Hussain. "Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Watani...." p. 86-87.

56 Interview – B, I, F

57 Interview – A.

several days. The uprising signalled a major reshuffle within the underground movements in the island, particularly within the Arab Nationalists' ranks. It was also the catalyst for the administrative and economic reforms that would shape the modern rentier state of Bahrain.

1965-1971: The Turn to the left

By the time of establishing of the Constitutive Committee, Hesham and Abdulla were no longer in the MAN, but rather in its heir, the “Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf” (PFLOAG). Made up mainly of ex-MAN and other Arab nationalism sympathisers, the new underground movement reflected the new developments to be witnessed in the aftermath of March 1965.

On the regional and international front, there were two events that significantly reshuffled the geopolitical cards. One was the defeat of the Arab Forces in the “Naksa” 67 war against Israel, which damaged the image of Nasser and was the final death knell in the MAN movement. This heralded the rise of the leftists forces within the MAN.

The turn to the left in the regional MAN cadres was brewing for some time, with many members unhappy with what they saw as the conservative “bourgeois” element within the movement, particularly in the regional Kuwaiti headquarters. This was reinforced by the Bahrain 1965 uprising, where events convinced many local members that the Kuwaiti leaders were too pre-occupied by concerns west of the Arabian Peninsula, effectively ignoring developments in the area.⁵⁸

The regionally active members of the MAN met in Beirut in December 1967 and shortly afterwards in Dubai in an exceptional meeting to discuss these grievances. Three main decisions were reached. One was to declare the MAN's branch in the peninsula as separate from the overall movement, with the Kuwaiti Branch frozen due to its perceived bourgeois slant. The second was the adoption of Marxism Leninism and scientific socialism as an official ideology. Finally, the endorsement of armed struggle in the peninsula itself was made explicit. To reflect these changes, the movement chose the “The Popular Revolutionary Movement in Oman and the Arab Gulf” (PRM) as a name.⁵⁹

In Bahrain, a series of meetings were held in early 1970 between the PRM and other leftist Arab Nationalist factions to try and unite forces under the newly emergent leftist movement.⁶⁰ After

58 Al Ekri, Abdalnabi. *Al Tantheemat Al Yasariya fil Jazeera wal Khaleej al Arabi*. Beirut: Dar Al Kunooz al Adabiyya, 2003. p. 76- 80.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 76- 80.

60 Interview – H, I, F, K

protracted and heated negotiations, a new movement was finally born, which would eventually solidify under the banner of the “Popular Front for the liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG)” in 1972.⁶¹ The frequent name changes were indicative of the turbulent and constantly changing phase that the Arab nationalist movement was going through. Hesham was elected as one of the leaders of the Bahraini chapter of this newly formed group, which will hereafter be called the PFLOAG.

Meanwhile, the British had secretly drawn up plans to withdraw from areas east of the Suez in July 1967, officially declaring its intent in January 1968. This was in no small part due to the British defeat in the port city of Eden, where the Southern Yemenis were able to gain independence at the end of November 1967. The struggle to independence in Southern Yemen was spearheaded by the National Liberation Front, another Arab Nationalist movement that was to take a turn to the left in its “corrective move” of June 1969.⁶²

There was also a mounting insurgency movement in nearby Oman which was in full swing since 1965, headed by the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF). Buoyed by the victory in southern Yemen and the close ties of the movement with its NLF, the leftist and Arab nationalist elements also started gaining momentum within the DLF. This was sealed in the Hamrin conference of September 1968, where the turn to Maoism and its theory of contradictions was official. Three main decisions were reached: organised revolutionary activity, expansion of the scope of the movement from Dhofar to the “occupied Arab Gulf”, as well as coordination with other revolutionary movements in the area. The name was changed from the Dhofar Liberation Front to the “Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf”. In effect, this was a call out to the PRM. The two movements would eventually become intertwined, with both adopting the name “Popular Front for the Liberation of the Oman and the Arabian Gulf”. Revolution and the march to the left was brewing in the peninsula.⁶³

The withdrawal of British protection and the rising revolutionary leftist tide spelt serious potential trouble for the regional sheikhs. Only a federal agreement seemed to guarantee their security. Sheikh Zayed bin Nahyan of Abu Dhabi took this matter up actively. Following joint talks with the sheikh of Dubai, the two announced the formation of a federation, to which they invited the

61 Al Ekri, Abdulnabi. *Al Tantheemat Al Yasariya fil Jazeera wal Khaleej al Arabi*. Beirut: Dar Al Kunooz al Adabiyya, 2003. p. 152

62 The “corrective move” was a reshuffle within the DLF from a purely Arab-Nationalist line towards Marxism-Leninism as a guiding ideology of the movement. For more See: Takriti, Abdel Razzaq. *Revolution and Absolutism: Oman, 1965-1976*. Dphil, University of Oxford, 2010. p.79 – 83.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 92-93

rulers of Qatar and Bahrain.

This was viewed by the Arab revolutionaries with Alarm:

“The latest episode in colonialist policy is the so-called Emirates Federation. This base deformity and impotent colonial excretion will not last...The feudalist Sultanates, Emirates and Imamates will be removed by conscious revolutionary violence. Armed struggle is the only language capable of creating the future of the exploited masses.”⁶⁴

The aim was overthrow of the sheikhdoms through violent means.

By the end of 1971 all of the Gulf Sheikhdoms reluctantly accepted their independence from Britain. Due to internal squabbling and rivalries, the rulers of Bahrain and Qatar each opted to establish their own state rather than join the proposed federal union. To counteract potential Iranian claims to the islands, a largely ceremonial UN plebiscite was held in Bahrain regarding the population's desire for independence under the rule of the local royal family. The pre-designed outcome was for the establishment for the independent state of Bahrain under the rule of the Al Khalifa.⁶⁵

The Rise of the Rentier state

Domestically, this was the era of the formation of the modern state of Bahrain. Political decision-making was run by an inner core of rulers that still regarded the country as their rightful entitlement to be “run (whatever they pretend) by the Al Khalifa as a family concern”⁶⁶. A large family by size, a distinction needs to be made between the Al Khalifa family as a whole and the ruling core within it, where most power would be concentrated and fundamental decisions made.⁶⁷ With the period of British protection drawing to a close, two individuals would come to dominate this “ruling core” and the political life of Bahrain for the next 30 years. One is the Emir, Sh. Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, formally the head of the state. More significant, however, would be his brother the prime minister, Sh. Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who still remained in his position at the beginning of

⁶⁴ Article by Dhofari revolutionaries in *Al-Hurriya*, 10/11/1969. Quoted in *Ibid.* p.93

⁶⁵ FCO 8/1363 “The claim of Iran to Bahrain.” 1970.

⁶⁶ FCO 8/1822 “Political Situation in Bahrain.” August 29, 1972. Diplomatic Report No. 420/72.

⁶⁷ Khalaf, Abdhadi. “Contentious politics in Bahrain: From ethnic to national and vice versa.” Oslo: The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle East Studies, 1998.

2011. Much more energetic and hands-on than his brother⁶⁸, he would dominate political matters on the island for the next 40 years.

His influence would be largely based on control over the economic sphere and the associated state bureaucracy, enabled by his position as the head of the cabinet. By the second half of the 20th century, there was a buildup of significant amounts of capital, spurred by the increasing revenues of oil both locally and regionally, which were looking for a local let out for investment. The social relations structured around this new capital formation would change drastically from previous epochs. Before the advent of oil, what meagre amount of capital available was mostly held in the hands of local merchants on whom the local rulers depended on for both economic activity and taxes. The equation changed significantly after the commercial production of oil, which took off in earnest after the end of the second world war. After paying a large portion of the royalties to the western partner companies, the local rulers now had a new source of funding that released them from their previous dependence on the merchants.

In fact, in many ways the local merchants and the ruling elites would combine forces to form one class that was increasingly dominant over economic matters. With oil revenues creating increasing economic opportunities on the island, cooperation with the state provided the best path for capital formation. These opportunities were concentrated in the energy-intensive industries, real estate and construction, and agencies and the services sectors. In the aftermath of the 1965 uprising, the local rulers, under guidance from the British, began in earnest to look at administrative reforms in Bahrain to counteract the rising labour and political tensions, including setting up a council for running the state (Majlis Al Dawla). An economic development office was created to attract foreign capital for joint projects, offering the foreign companies many enticements, including free land, gas, water at cheap prices, no taxes, and free zone status. The Aluminium smelter Alba and the shipping yard company Asri were by-products of these reforms.⁶⁹

These economic developments had their repercussions on the political sphere. In the first half of the 20th century, merchants, given their considerable stake and influence as the primary providers of economic activity and taxes, were strongly present in movements for greater political participation⁷⁰. The situation now reversed considerably. The rising oil revenues and state-related projects provided the best opportunities for the traditional merchant families, thus switching economic clout

68 FCO 8/1822 "Political Situation in Bahrain." August 29, 1972.

69 Mousa, Hussain. "Al Bahrain: Al Ne'dal al Watani...." p. 62.

70 e.g. the 1938 movement for greater political participation

towards the state. Capital interests dictated close cooperation with the rulers, particularly the prime minister. As the British ambassador eloquently put it, “the estate managers (are) talking the same language as the lord of the manor.”⁷¹

In short, a capitalist-state economy was in the process of formation, fuelled by the increasing oil revenues and characterised by a strong association between capital and the state. This presented a new challenge to its formation: the local population.

With the build up of an industrialised economy came a problem of how to handle the developing labour and political conscience in the rest of the population. The level of education had increased significantly, with the numbers enrolled in formal education increasing nearly thirty fold between 1940 and 1970.⁷² This went in tandem with increasing industrialisation and urbanisation. By 1957, 60% of the population lived in the two major urban centres of Manama and Muharraq, and the main employer on the island became the oil industry. Together with the regional political developments, it was inevitable that labour mobilisation and nationalism would not be far around the corner.

The new dictates of capital and the continuing aspiration by the rulers to be the main agents in shaping local affairs ran contrary to the notion of a nationalist conscience that demanded devolving power in a serious manner to the local population. The solution was to be found in the continuous employment of demographic management for political purposes, increasingly supported by the rising oil revenues. Demographic management would be achieved through the sustained weakening and fragmentation of the political and economic influence of the local population, ensuring all significant activities within society are enmeshed with and fundamentally shaped by the regime.

“Vertical integration” was still firmly embedded in the outlook of the state, but the new dangers of nationalism and the threat of a cohesive opposition movement that transcends sect and ethnic lines posed a serious threat and required other means of demographic management. On the economic front, the power of citizens was to be weakened via increasingly hiring locals in a quickly expanding bureaucratic and non-productive state sector. In return, productive economic activity was to depend increasingly on an expatriate labour force that had minimal political and economic rights or clout. This was made possible by the rising oil revenues, increasing dependence on the state as a

71 FCO 8/1822 “Political Situation in Bahrain.” August 29, 1972. Diplomatic Report No. 420/72.

72 Nakhla, Emile. “Al Bahrain: Al Ta'tawur al Seyasi fee Mujtama'a Mutahadeth”, 2006. Beirut: Dar Al Kunuz Al Adabiyya. p. 56

benefactor. Exclusive jobs, benefits and privileges were to be offered to constructed groupings of citizens demarcated by sect, class, ethnic origin and familial ties. Economic dependence on the state increased, while their influence on productive activity in the economy was to be systematically marginalised, mitigating the effectiveness of strikes as a tool.

In essence, the stability and survival of the system boiled to a system of “divide and rule” , using the strategies of penetration, fragmentation and marginalisation to accentuate the religious, ethnic and class differences between the citizens and increasingly the expatriate population, ensuring that the state was dominant in all activities of society.⁷³

This institutional power would always be backed up by a strong arm, which the state did not hesitate to use in a frequent manner. This would be based on the security and intelligence apparatuses, increasingly composed of tribal affiliates and expatriate staff (the heads would be a combination of British and local royal family members, and the staff increasingly of individuals imported from Baluchistan province in Pakistan, a practice first started by the British).⁷⁴

The rulers of Bahrain knew that they were unable to counter any external threats by force or espionage due to the small size of the island. Furthermore, they understood the crucial role that the Arabian peninsula played in the global capital circuit as the largest international producer of crude oil. Any form of political instability in a strategically located country like Bahrain could have reverberations across the world’s richest oil region. Hence external threats were mainly addressed through building security and economic alliances with the dominant global (the British and then the Americans ⁷⁵) and regional powers (increasingly Saudi Arabia) . In contrast, the island’s intelligence, security, and defence forces were directed mainly against local threats.

At independence, the new rentier state was still in its formative phase, and Bahrainis still constituted nearly two thirds of the labour force⁷⁶. The population was extremely young, with more than 80% below the age of forty. Education was on the rise and industrialisation was reaching its peak. Coupled with the leftist Arab Nationalism sweeping through the region, this was a perfect concoction for the rise of a nationalist labour movement. The country was racked by intermittent labour unrest. One notable strike occurred at the Ministry of electricity in 1968, and this was

73 Khalaf, Abdulhadi. “Contentious politics in Bahrain: From ethnic to national and vice versa.” Oslo: The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle East Studies, 1998.

74 FCO 8/1822 “Political Situation in Bahrain.” August 29, 1972.

75 The American fifth navy fleet is based in Bahrain.

76 Nakhla, Emile. “Al Bahrain: Al Ta'tawur al Seyasi fee Mujtama'a Mutahadeth”, 2006. Beirut: Dar Al Kunuz Al Adabiyya. p. 150

followed by strikes in the airport and Gulf Air in 1970⁷⁷. The Constitutive Committee was born within this atmosphere, and it would prove to be the first organised movement to be a serious test for the newly emergent state.

The Constitutive Committee

Hesham and Mutaiwi' were a product of and intimately tied to the newly emerging scene. Hesham, then 29, had recently returned from the UK, where he finished a diploma in structural and civic engineering after obtaining a scholarship from the oil company Bapco.⁷⁸ He joined the company Delong Wimpey when he came back to Bahrain, with his first main project the 1968 construction of one of the new suburban planned cities, Isa town. Abdulla Mutaiwi' was a colleague at Wimpey, working as a welder. A veteran of the 1965 uprising, he had to leave school while still a teenager due to imprisonment.⁷⁹

They contacted Yousef Subah Al Binali, another colleague at Wimpey and a member of the NLF. He in turn brought in Yousef Yeteem, another NLF member and a teacher at the time. The NLF's internal developments during 1965-1971 reads like a calm tide when compared with the tumultuous changes occurring in MAN and the PFLOAG. During this whole period, the NLF structure remained relatively constant. One episode was to change this, however, causing a serious blow to the movement.

In 1966, in retaliation to the March 1965 uprising imprisonments, a bomb planted by one of its members targeted the British head of intelligence and his Jordanian assistant. Although the operation was successful, this made the movement a target for the authorities. The NLF was infiltrated, and in 1968 the authorities were able to track down many of the leaders of the movement. They were either were arrested or fled abroad. This represented the first serious hit to the movement, and in order to rebuild a new cadre of leaders had to be developed on the ground. Yeteem and Al Bin Ali were two of them.⁸⁰

The NLF was sceptical in the beginning at the idea of the CC. This was work on a public level, which was a big departure from the secret underground activity the movement was built on. It

77 Interview - A

78 Interview - G

79 Interview - A

80 Interview - C

would also require systematic planned work with non-NLF members and indeed the PFLOAG, something unprecedented at that stage given the historical ambivalence between the two factions. Furthermore, the CC's aim was to form a general union, while the NLF's direction was towards establishing secret individual syndicates in each industry or company.⁸¹

Hesham and Abdulla were able to win them over. “We have the law on our side, and we should learn from the experience of the HEC. We are not doing anything illegal, we should work in public. Furthermore, the point here is not only to establish a general union, the point is to build a national movement that reaches and builds a solid popular base within the public and workers all over Bahrain. Also, let us aim high, and if we are not allowed to establish a general union, then we can form syndicates.” In the end the NLF agreed.⁸²

The four quickly set out recruiting others to the CC. In the end there were 12 core members, and those involved comprised an array of different leanings. It was agreed that the committee would be open to everyone and would not be exclusive to any movements or parties, a unique step in a period dominated by factionalism and underground secret activity. There were members from PFLOAG, NLF, former Arab Nationalists with no current affiliations, and even individuals with no previous political leanings. Indeed, the CC represented a wide array of different sectors, including blue collar workers such as Abdulla Mutaiwi³, but also professionals such as engineers (Hesham AlShehabi), teachers (Yousef Yeteem), and even bankers and accountants. It was in effect the first unifying movement since the HEC in 1954-1956.

Unlike the HEC, however, sect does not seem to have played any significant role in the composition of the Constitutive Committee, a first for organised public political work in Bahrain. The HEC was very aware of the sectarian tensions in the country at its time, and the handpicking of its eight leaders was carefully done to reflect the Shia-Sunni balance on the island (4 of each). This was not the case in the CC, where although both sects were represented, sect was never a factor in choice. “It simply did not enter our minds.”⁸³

In many ways the HEC was the inspiration for the CC, having been the last organised labour movement on the island. However, the situation had changed considerably by now. For a start, the individuals in the CC were not public notables, unlike the HEC's carefully handpicked eight who

81 Interview - C

82 Hesham Al Shehabi as quoted in Interview - C

83 Interview - A

were already leaders within their communities. The CC members were extremely young, with Hesham the oldest at 29. All were from poor or middle class backgrounds. The CC had to rely on a bottom-up grassroots approach to build the labour movement, while the HEC labour union was mainly imposed from above and had strong connections and cooperation with the authorities.⁸⁴

The CC had to build up a base from the grassroots level. Although ethnic and sect considerations were not important *within* the composition of the CC, they still played a role in society at large. This was particularly the case in rural areas, where ethnic mixing was less prevalent, secular and nationalist movements had a less of a hold, and the effects of an industrialized society were yet to reach the same degree of development as in the urban centres of Manama and Muharraq. The strategy employed by the CC to gain public trust and exposure relied on building up social capital via personal contact and word of mouth, the most effective way of obtaining the trust of the diverse communities in a small country like Bahrain.

The strategy on the ground was simple yet effective. There was no formal hierarchy or structure within the CC. Work was distributed according to geography and profession, with each member focusing on the region they came from and the industry they worked in, aiming to tap into the trust and social networks he already had amassed there.⁸⁵ They would use two tools first adopted by the HEC, creating a petition for the establishment of the union and collecting membership signatures via face-to-face meetings. Members of the CC would sit with groups of workers in the different companies and areas of Bahrain. They would begin by explaining that this was a completely legal and public endeavour, and that it had nothing to do with political work. They would argue that this was a pure labour organizing matter, and that they were looking to bring more rights and benefits to workers, such as better working conditions, better pay, more holidays, and a say in how matters are run in the company. They would then explain and display Part III of the Bahrain Labour Ordinance 1957, emphasising the role of labour unions and the benefits they bring to workers. Given the lack of a strong labour movement in the recent history of Bahrain, general awareness regarding labour matters and rights was extremely low. Indeed, most workers did not even know what a labour union meant or entailed.⁸⁶ Once a few well-known individuals in an area or a company signed, however, the rest quickly followed suit.

Sitra, the third largest island in the archipelago of Bahrain, gives a good example of how the

⁸⁴ For example, the drafting of the Bahrain Labour Ordinance 1957 was done in strong co-operation with the authorities.

⁸⁵ Interview - A

⁸⁶ Interview – A,E

process worked. Hassan Radhi was a member of the CC from Sitra who worked in Citibank. His background was in the MAN, but he was not a member of any political movement at the time. He served as the main contact point on the island, where the CC would ask for meetings with workers and village members.

Hajji Abdulla was present at one of the gatherings. A well respected elderly gentlemen in his village, he would typify the nature by which the CC obtained signatures for the union formation. After Mutaiwi' had given the first speech regarding the proposed union, Hajji Abdulla directed his words to the local, Hassan Radhi. "My son, you are from this village. Can you explain in a simple manner using our dialect what this thing is about?" Hassan Radhi obliged. When finished, Hajji Abdulla replied, "I see, so this is the story. Well it is obvious that anyone who does not sign this is a faggot" Everyone in the room then proceeded to sign.

When word spread about Hajji Abdulla's opinion on the matter, it was then not difficult for the signatures to snowball around Sitra. The CC was able to collect more than 500 signatures on this island alone.⁸⁷ And so it went in most other areas and companies. As soon as the CC was able to obtain the approval of some of the influential and well known individuals in the area, it was then easy to galvanize the rest to sign. The fact that it was sold as a legal and public endeavour that was not related to politics helped considerably

In conjunction with collecting membership signatures for the general union, the CC also worked on developing secret syndicates within each industry. An underground committee was formed in each industry to organize workers. The idea was to enable each grouping to quickly declare itself a legally recognised syndicate in case that the general union was refused but permission granted to form individual syndicates. This was the first attempt in Bahrain's modern history at building organised syndicates at the industry level, and its effects would shape Bahrain's union movement for the rest of the 20th century.

A good example of this was the teachers' syndicate. Yousef Yeteem combined with another member of the CC, Ali Shirawi. An ex-member of the MAN and the son of Mohammed Qassim Shirawi, the main HEC representative in negotiating the the 1957 Labour Ordinance, he and Yeteem took charge of setting up the underground syndicate in the ministry of education. The syndicate followed the example of the CC itself, combining individuals from all the different arrays of political

87 Interview - E

factions, mainly relying on PFLOAG and NLF cadre. This syndicate continued its work underground long after the demise of the CC.⁸⁸

The authorities were quick to track down the CC. The “special branch”, or the intelligence division, then headed by the newly arrived Ian Henderson, called in Hesham, Al Binali, and Mtaiwi' for an interrogation. Henderson took over Hesham's interrogation. With experience in the Mao Mao insurgency in Africa, Henderson was a Scotsman recently arrived to the Island. This was to be the first of many meetings between Hesham and Henderson, who would then become notorious throughout Bahrain for his introduction of torture techniques for 30 years, earning the nickname of the “Butcher of Bahrain”.

The three were interrogated individually, with the questions focusing mainly on the underground group that was sponsoring the activity. They all replied that there were no political movements behind this, and that this was a public movement perfectly legal under existing Bahraini law, referring to the Labour Ordinance of 1957. The security service were lost for a response, but they did not refrain from showing their anger at the situation. “If it turns out that there is an underground political movement behind this, we will strike ruthlessly.”⁸⁹ The three were released for the time being.

The CC continued work fully knowing that they were being monitored, but they moved ahead on the assumption that their activity was legal and public. Even their meetings were not held in complete secrecy. It is important to stress the significant hallmark this heralded in Bahrain's political movements, particularly at a time when the focus was on underground activity that emphasised violent struggle. Public work that appealed to the existing laws was a novel approach, and this did cause some internal difficulties. Disputes arose within the CC, with some members resigning due to suspicion of infiltration by government spies.⁹⁰ Although difficult at a time when underground movements were prevalent, this type of public action would define the type of activity that political movements would opt for the rest of the 20th century⁹¹.

The membership signatures had reached 2500 by the time of submitting the official request for the establishment of the general union on August 23, 8 days after the country's formal independence. At the directorate of labour, the minister first refused to meet them, but eventually yielded. The CC

88 Interview – C, D

89 Interview - A

90 Interview – A, C

91 Particularly in the 1990s and subsequent periods. See subsequent section.

presented its formal written request, outlining their aims of establishing a general union for workers and tradesmen under the third chapter of Bahrain's Labour Ordinance of 1957. The minister at first argued that this law was frozen. When the CC members replied that as far as they know this was not the case, he hesitated. He accepted to take the request and promised to look into the matter. He directed the undersecretary to continue to communicate with the CC on the matter.⁹²

Not long afterwards, the CC suspected that the authorities were trying to implement its usual divide and rule tactics. Hesham had a while back lodged a request for a training programme in the United Kingdom with his company Wimpy, but it was routinely ignored. Suddenly, with no prior notice, the request for the training programme was granted, on condition that he leave for the UK immediately. The other members of the CC thought this was intended to rattle the committee, making sure to sideline (albeit gently) one of the leaders and the intellectual driving force behind it. Hesham could not refuse the offer, and in the end he departed to the UK.⁹³ This was a significant blow to the CC but by that point it had been institutionalised enough to carry on. The CC continued to collect signatures and to build up its syndicate bases in each company and industry.

The CC's work was by and large independent from the underground movements to which many of its members belonged. This caused some friction with the leaders of the NLF and PFLOAG, who were not used to public activities that involved some of its members but which were not directly under their control. It did, however, release the CC members from the dictates and internal squabbling of their movements. Indeed, the movements quickly came to appreciate the power of the CC and put considerable energy into supporting it, particularly at the industry syndicates level, where their cadre were urged to recruit members to the CC and to help build up the underground syndicates.⁹⁴

One point where factionalism did enter the equation, however, was in the preparation for strikes and face-offs with the government, if such a need was to materialize. The organisers from both the PFLOAG and the NLF were both acutely aware of the problems and failures they faced in 1965. Many, like Abdulla Mutaiwi', were active participants in the March 1965 uprising. The uprising had caught the MAN and the NLF by surprise, and both were struggling to keep up with the events let alone direct them. This time both were bent on making any uprising much more organised. Members of each group in their respective syndicate were to make sure that they would be ready for

92 Interview – A, C, E

93 Interview – A, C

94 Interview – C, J

a face-off if the situation so required.⁹⁵

From August 1971 to March 1972, the CC continued to collect signature and send them to the authorities at the directorate of labour, reaching nearly 5000 signatures by then. Over time, the authorities' tone changed. Although at first polite if unsympathetic, it slowly became more threatening. It was clear that the initiative was not to their liking. The CC was instructed in not so indirect terms that they should stop their activities or they might face serious trouble, with the highest authorities not particularly happy with the project.⁹⁶

Now in the UK, Hesham was wary of any direct confrontation with the government.

“My view was generally we were too weak to enter into direct escalation and confrontation with the authorities. I believed that a popular movement within the rights guaranteed by the law would eventually solidify into an organised framework for union activity that would later be able to achieve bigger and better gains for the workers.”⁹⁷

The time would not be long before the workers and the CC were to face off with the government.

95 Interview – A, C

96 Interview – A, E

97 Hesham Al-Shehabi, quoted in: Al-Shirawi, Men'em. *Awraq 'Ummaliyya*. Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2005. p. 75.

March 1972 Uprising

On the 8th of March 1972, workers struck at the airplanes maintenance department of the local airline carrier, Gulf Air. The company had brought in a group of Pakistani workers and asked the local workforce to train them. This did not sit too well with the workers, increasingly suspicious that they were training their replacements. Air traffic at the airport was partially stopped, and the workers put forward several demands, including the ability to form a labour syndicate, pay rises, and addressing grievances regarding imported labour. Negotiations were held between a committee representing the workers and the company, with no significant breakthrough achieved.⁹⁸

The strikes started spreading. The supply division quickly followed suit one day later, and over the next few days the strikes reached the industrial zone in Mina Salman and the Health Ministry. The demands were similar, focusing on higher pay, better working conditions and the ability to form syndicates.⁹⁹

It was clear to the CC by this point that the authorities were not interested in granting their request for the formation of a labour union. Although it did not spark the initial strike in Gulf Air, it quickly put its underground syndicates and networks at the various companies into action. Unlike in 1965, the strikes in this case were largely coordinated, planned and instigated by the CC.¹⁰⁰ The decision by the founding committee to instigate a nationwide strike was further cemented when Ali Al Shirawi, one of its members, was arrested when he arrived back in Bahrain from Kuwait.¹⁰¹ Not much later Hassan Radhi, another member, was also arrested from his house.¹⁰²

On the 12th march, the striking workers organised a rally to the government council. They were met there by a group of ministers¹⁰³ and the security branch. Members of the CC stepped forward and introduced the demands of the striking workers, which by now were more organised and clearly articulated:

1. The formation of a general labour union, which has been presented to the ministry more

98 Mutaiwi', Abdulla. *Safa'hat min Tareekh al 'Haraka al 'Ummaliyya Al Ba'hraiyya*. Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2006. p.58

99 Ibid., p. 59-60

100 Interview – A,C

101 Interview - D

102 Interview - E

103 These included the minister of justice, minister of municipalities and agriculture, and the minister of labour and social affairs. Henderson and the rest of the special branch British heads were also present.

than six months ago, but without any response as of yet.¹⁰⁴

2. Provision of jobs for the unemployed Bahrainis and implementing the “Bahrainization” of the workforce
3. Increase in wages and addressing the heavy rise in inflation
4. Releasing the detained labour representatives, particularly members of the CC Hassan Radhi and Ali Al Shirawi, and to put an end to the security harassments.

The minister asked for the representatives to come back the next day, promising that no one would be arrested.

The next day, Monday the 13th of March, developments took a turn for the worse and unrest reached a peak. When the workers' rally reached the ministerial council for the agreed upon talks, tear gas and live ammunition were used. Strikes spread to the oil company, the shipping yard, and the newly built Aluminium smelter on the island.¹⁰⁵ School students participated in the protests, against the wishes of the CC. The CC felt their participation would detract from the workers' character of the protests, and they knew that the government would use school student participations as an excuse to use force against the movement, citing their willingness to incite chaos and to use minors in the process. Indeed, CC members suspected that the state authorities allowed students to leave the schools, who were only too eager to join in the protests.

The authorities quickly moved to quell the unrest. The Bahrain Defence Force was deployed on the main roads and in sensitive locations¹⁰⁶, a first in the country's history. Detentions quickly escalated, reaching 100 individuals¹⁰⁷. Although the authorities promised that the leaders of the CC were not to be arrested and continued to meet with them during the events, by the 16th of February all of the members of the CC were in jail with the exception of Mutaiwi', who fled the country abroad. Publicly, the authorities blamed the unrest on foreign meddling and support from Iraq¹⁰⁸, particularly from the Ba'athists and communists. The blaming of an external bogeyman would once again be employed by the authorities, similar to when Egyptian and Pan-Arab support was used as a pretext to crush the HEC in 1956 and the March uprising in 1965. The protesters were not able to

104 This was even though PART III of the labour law clearly stipulated that if there is no response or objection from the concerned authorities within 21 days, then the union automatically is granted the approval to establish.

105 Mutaiwi', Abdulla. *Safa'hat min Tareekh al 'Haraka al 'Ummaliyya Al Ba'hraiiniyya*. Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2006. p.61-71

106 FCO 8/1822 “Political Situation in Bahrain.” 22 March, 1972.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

match the state. The strikes were contained, the uprising was quelled, and the founding committee was officially in jail or in exile.

Legacy and Aftermath: The Elusive Quest for a United Front

The experience of the CC was significant in many respects, and it would set the tone for interaction between the state and popular movements on the island for the rest of the 20th century. It would represent the zenith of the labour movement in independent Bahrain, with its effects long outlasting its short life. Shortly after his release from exile, Mutaiwi would once again try to form a second constitutive committee.¹⁰⁹ This time the movement went underground, however, and it was sowed by division from the start, entering into quarrels with the NLF and focusing on PFLOAG members only. The activists were once again chased and imprisoned by the authorities. Significantly, the syndicates laid down by the CC would continue to operate in their respective industries over the next two decades¹¹⁰, mainly on factional bases (NLF vs. PFLOAG) and in a covert manner, although the two organisations would intermittently cooperate again.¹¹¹

In one respect, the CC was a trail blazer. It shifted the focus away from faction-based underground political movements towards public activity that relied on alliances and cooperation between different political forces in society. Such movements would be the only ones to present a serious challenge to the regime, with factional politics being much easier to handle for a system that uses divide-and-rule as a cornerstone strategy for its survival. The joint work between the NLF, PFLOAG and other independent forces in the CC was the first instance of such cooperation between two groups that would continue to have a tenuous love-hate relationship for the rest of the century. Joint work would continue intermittently, frequently outnumbered by inter-fighting and squabbling.¹¹²

In the same vain, the CC was a movement that approached political action in a manner that had no considerations of sects whatsoever, the first movement to truly achieve this in an organised and sustained manner in Bahrain. Playing on sectarian and ethnic tensions was and would continue to be one of the most tried and trusted strategies of the regime, with any movement aiming to have any

109 Interview - A

110 For more see:

Al-Shirawi, Men'em. *Awraq 'Ummaliyya*. Beirut: Dar Al-Kunooz Al-Adabiya, 2005.

111 Interview – A, C

112 e.g. in the attempt to set up a united leftist political society in 2001

semblance of success having to overcome this formidable barrier. The state would continue to view a nationally cohesive and unified movement within the local population as its single biggest threat, actively working to try and prevent it. Nonetheless, such a unified popular movement would periodically emerge in Bahrain, with the rulers viewing it as an existential threat that is to be dealt with through sowing division, stalling, co-option, and finally force.

By the beginning of the 21st century a strategy of divide and rule by undemocratic ruling regimes based on ethnic, sectarian and ideological fault lines was a common trait across the Arab world. This reflected on the political scene, where the oppositional political forces across the region were marginal, scattered, and frequently at loggerheads against each other rather than the state. This gave rise to a burgeoning literature in the region on the idea of a “historic bloc”, a term loosely borrowed from Gramsci but with a much narrower meaning. Political movements, aware of the divide and rule nature of their undemocratic states as a means to preserve power, advocated the need for a united front that is able to agree on a common set of core principles that would unite the different political factions in society around them, taking them out of their respective sect, ethnic, and ideology-based paradigms to build an alternative discourse that is set on shared principles of democratic rule.¹¹³ Hence, a historic bloc came to mean the public alliance of the different forces in society, whether Communist, Arab Nationalist, or Islamist, on the common goal of achieving democracy in an undemocratic state, regardless of their fundamental differences in their respective ideology and beliefs. Thus, the aim of democratic rule to serve as a tool to unite the different forces as well as a common end goal. As long as the diverse groups shared a united belief and genuinely practiced the principles of popular representation and accountability, then they could work together in a loosely formed bloc on the common goal of changing the current system towards establishing democratic rule. This, ran the argument, was the only way to counteract the regime’s entrenched system of divide and rule.

The Constitutive Committee was the first of many post-independence attempts by popular movements in Bahrain to unite and push the case for better political and economic representation by attempting to build the ever elusive united public front. During the March 1972 uprising, the authorities explained to the CC members that what they were asking for “was only part (of your rights), and that instead we will give you the whole”¹¹⁴. It was a promise to implement broader political and economic reforms on the island. The activities of the CC forced the authorities to

¹¹³ See, for example:

Al-Kuwari, Ali, and Madhi, Abdulfattah. *Nahwa Kutla Tarikhiyya Demokratiyya fil Buldan al Arabiyya*. Beirut: Markaz Derasat al-Wehda al-Arabiyya, 2010.

¹¹⁴ Interview – A, C

hasten their move to establish the constituent assembly of 1972 , a majority elected assembly tasked to set a constitution for the country, a significant milestone in the country's political history facilitated by the work of the CC.¹¹⁵

At first, this seemed to be a genuine change of heart by the regime and an attempt by the authorities to yield to some of the popular political demands. Hesham would return to lead the “Shehabi bloc”, once again bringing together the NLF, the PFLOAG, and other Arab Nationalist elements in an alliance that ended up boycotting the constitutive assembly due to internal differences within the PFLOAG and NLF. This was quickly followed by the elected legislative assembly of 1973, with the Shehabi bloc being a precursor to the “People's bloc”, a similar grouping of leftist and Arab Nationalist individuals that won eight seats in the newly elected parliament.¹¹⁶

The constitutional experiment was to see an abrupt end. The government, increasingly bold and confident with the rising revenues after the 1973 oil crisis and the external backing provided by the Saudis and the Americans, was to suspend the national assembly and the constitution in 1975, citing “lack of cooperation” from the parliament. The government was counting on divisions between the religious Shia bloc, the centrists, and the leftists to create a weakened and ineffective parliament. The legislature instead formed a cohesive unit that refused to submit to the executive branch on the new state of emergency law and the renewal of the lease for the American naval base on the island. The government once again resorted to the frequently used option of violence to address a perceived popular threat. The constitution was suspended, a state of emergency was declared, parliament was dissolved and many of its members arrested.

The increasing oil revenues allowed the government to embark on a programme of social spending that counteracted the repression on the political front. The continuing security crackdown and the success of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran enabled the rise of underground Shia Islamist movements, notable among them the Islamic Front for the liberation of Bahrain, allegedly responsible for a failed 1981 coup attempt. This marked a shift back by political groupings towards a strategy of overthrowing the regime using violent and covert means, with the idea of an alliance-based public movement taking a back seat.¹¹⁷

115 Khalaf, Abdulhadi. “Contentious politics in Bahrain: From ethnic to national and vice versa.” Oslo: The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle East Studies, 1998.

116 For more see:

Rabee'a, Ali. *Al Tajruba Al Maw'uuda*. Beirut: Dar al-Kunooz al-Adabiyya, 2010.

117 For more see:

See Louay Bahry, —The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf? (1997) 5(2) Middle East Policy 42.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a public movement that would once again try to unite the different political factions to push for greater political representation, with Hesham and Mutaiwi' playing a leading role in the “elites petition” and the “popular petition” movement for the restoration of the 1973 constitution and parliamentary democracy. At this point, political Islam was at its peak in the island, with the scene dominated by sectarian considerations and the opposition mainly composed of Shia religious figures. They were to build an alliance with the leftists and other independent forces in the society to spearhead a new attempt at a united front that pushed for parliamentary democracy. Once again the regime would face the movement via a campaign of violence that increasingly targeted individuals on a sectarian basis, blaming Iran for foreign meddling and plunging the country into civil unrest that lasted from 1994 to 1999.¹¹⁸

By the end of the century, the authorities, now under a new ruler faced by mounting popular anger at the political deadlock, once again seemed to concede. The National Action Charter of 2001 promised the establishment of a constitutional monarchy with greater political and economic participation.¹¹⁹ The new constitution of 2002 came to disappoint, written behind closed doors and with no popular input in its creation. It established a half-elected legislative council with weak supervisory and legislative powers, to be elected via heavily skewed electoral districts. This was in explicit contradiction to what the authorities openly promised the opposition. New labour legislation was introduced that presented much weaker labour powers than the 1957 Labour Ordinance. Part of this reform process was the establishment of The General Federation of Bahrain Workers Trade Unions in 2002, personally tracing its direct lineage to the CC of 1971-1972 and the subsequent underground syndicates that emerged from it.

The new system seemed able to successfully entrench demographic and political fragmentation, with a plethora of political societies and movements emerging that were frequently at odds with each other, failing to agree on a common approach to the new political developments. Some chose to enter into the formal political process, while others chose to boycott it. The stalled political situation finally exploded in February 2011, when Bahrain entered its latest and largest movement for more political and labour participation, encapsulated in the February 14 Uprising. This was part of the Great Arab Revolt that engulfed the region in the first quarter of 2011, which led to the toppling of two leaders in Tunisia and Egypt via a successful united front that was able to overcome

¹¹⁸ For more see:

Fakhro, Munira. “The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment” in Gary G. Sick & Lawrence G. Potter (eds), *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion*. (St Martin's Press 1997).

¹¹⁹ For more see:

Kenneth Katzman, Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy (Congressional Research Service, 2 March 2011), pp.1-4. <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/158480.pdf>, accessed 16 November 2011.

entrenched ideological divides to focus their efforts on the common demand for the establishment of democratic rule. In Bahrain, the initial demands put forward by the youth movement did not differ significantly from previous popular national movements, focusing on system reform towards a full constitutional monarchy and greater participation in political and economic matters. This quickly turned into demands for regime change towards a republic by some Shia activists, creating a split within the opposition. The government used this split to justify a violent crackdown on mainly Shi'a activists, on the basis that the movement was sectarian with backing from external actors, namely the Islamic republic of Iran. Internally within Bahraini society, this strategy has largely worked, with a deep schism in society along sectarian lines emerging by the end of 2011. The quest for a united front that is able to overcome the demographic and political fragmentation in society and push for comprehensive change still proves elusive in Bahrain.

Interviews

- A) Abdulla Mutaiwi' – Member of the CC and PFLOAG in Bahrain.
- B) Ahmed Humaidan – Leader of the MAN in Bahrain.
- C) Yousef Yeteem – Member of the CC and NLF.
- D) Ali Al Shirawi – Member of the CC.
- E) Hassan Radhi – Member of the CC.
- F) Mohammed Jaber Al Sabah – Member of the MAN and subsequently NLF in Bahrain. Former MP in 1973 parliament.
- G) Ali Rabi'ah – Member of the MAN and former MP in the 1973 parliament.
- H) Abdul Nabi Al Ekri – Member of the MAN and PFLOAG in Bahrain.
- I) Qassim Haddad – Member of the PFLOAG in Bahrain
- J) Abdul Men'em Al Shirawi – Member of the MAN and PFLOAG in Bahrain
- K) Salem Sultan – Member of the MAN and PFLOAG in Bahrain