

Political movements in Bahrain across the long 20th century (1900-2015)

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Abstract

This chapter traces the birth, rise, and evolution of political movements in Bahrain throughout the long twentieth century, taking as its starting point the beginning of direct British presence in the local political scene in 1900, and ending with the aftermath of the mass protests that engulfed the islands in 2011. It highlights four intersecting dichotomies that have characterized these political movements across time: trans-sectarian versus ethnosectarian, national versus transnational, reformist versus revolutionary, and public versus underground. It sheds light on the importance of externally imposed structural factors on local developments on the island, including British colonial absolutist rule, the discovery of oil and the subsequent fluctuation in the commodity's global prices, and the rise of American hegemony. Taking its cue from the work of the autonomistas, the analysis also highlights the central role that political movements have played in shaping the actions and reactions of the state. The state's attempts to contain these movements, and the contestation between the two sides, played a central role in shaping the contours of both state and society across Bahrain's long century.

Keywords: uprising, Bahrain, political movements, trans-sectarian, sectarianism, nationalism, transnational, Gulf Arab states

Introduction

As the gales of the misnamed "Arab Spring" lashed across Bahrain in February 2011, political mobilization in the tiny archipelago became the centre of global attention. This chapter traces the birth, rise and evolution of political movements on the islands throughout the long 20th century, taking as its starting point the beginning of direct British involvement in local political affairs by sending a political representative in 1900, and ending with the aftermath of the mass protests that engulfed the islands in 2011.

It highlights four intersecting dichotomies that have characterized these political movements across time. The first is the trans-sectarian vs. ethno-sectarian, as political movements oscillated between ethno-sectarian vs. civic-based identities and demands. The second is the national vs. the transnational, as mobilization varied between pushing local-centric issues versus reaching towards other currents in the regional or global setting to draw inspiration. The third dichotomy is the reformist vs. revolutionary currents, as social movements switched between putting forward gradualist reform demands, versus taking a much more radical approach. The fourth is the public versus underground nature of the movements, as mobilization shifted between open versus clandestine forms. The two poles of each of these dimensions served as sliding scales on which the different political movements gravitated across time, combining and intersecting across these spectrums to produce distinct socio-political formations as the century unfolded.

The chapter sheds light on the importance of externally imposed structural factors on local developments on the island, including British colonial absolutist rule, the discovery of oil and the subsequent fluctuation in the commodity's global prices, and the rise of American hegemony.

However, and taking its cue from the work of the autonomistas¹, the analysis also highlights the central role that political movements have played in shaping the actions and reactions of the state. The state's attempts to contain these movements, and the contestation between the two sides, played a central role in shaping the contours of both state and society across Bahrain's long century. Such an analysis serves as a much-needed corrective to the exclusively ethno-sectarian narrative through which politics in Bahrain are usually construed, where developments are reductively essentialized to "a Sunni loyalist minority versus a Shia opposition majority".

¹ The autonomistas were a largely Italian-Marxist strand of analysis that shifted the focus away from capital towards labour, emphasizing how capitalists respond and react to contain movements and contestations by workers, thus placing actions by the latter as a central driving force in shaping social formations. For more see: Mezzadra, Sandro, and Brett Neilson. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Duke University Press, 2013, Chapter 3.

1900-1923: British colonialism and the birth of ethnosectarianism and nationalism

Our story begins in 1900 with the advent of direct British involvement in local affairs, based on the forward policy of Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India. This was encapsulated by the switch from a native agency system that relied on local agents as representatives of the British empire, to a political agency directly headed by British officers. As the pearl-diving industry and the associated imports trade boomed in Bahrain during the global 'age of capital' in the latter half of the 19th century², Curzon decided that regional intrigues with other imperial powers necessitated the presence of white British boots on the ground. Bahrain was chosen as ground zero for British presence in the Gulf.

Prior to direct British involvement, internal rule was centred around the Al Khalifa ruling dynasty since 1783. Political power took the form of a conjunctural balance of localized and decentralized forces, instead of being monopolized by a central bureaucracy. Al Khalifa would assign different fiefs on the island to different Shaykhs, with each having a large degree of autonomy in rule and collection of taxes, particularly in the villages, whose workers were subjected to bonded labour.

Externally, the regional politics of the first decades of Al Khalifa's rule were based upon the considerations of the "politics of protection", in which tribute was paid to the different military and economic powers dominant in the region. The biggest sources of rivalry were other 'Utub tribal members³, the Al Sa'ud, the Imam of Muscat, the Ottomans, and later on the Al Thani on the Qatari peninsula, in addition to Persian governors..

Once the British became directly involved in local affairs by force in 1904, they instituted a system of 'divided rule'⁴ in Bahrain. Dual authority meant that individuals on the island were to be categorized either as 'foreign' or 'local' subjects, with 'foreigners' under the jurisdiction of the British, while 'locals' be under the jurisdiction of the ruler. The sticking point, however, was that 'foreigner' was not a clear-cut category, and thus would turn into a point of contestation, with significant legal and political repercussions.

The definition of 'foreign' vs. 'local' would mainly be constructed and contested by the British based on an ethno-sectarian gaze, a systematic approach that saw ethno-sectarian cleavages as the underlying epistemic codes that shape local political power, practice, and discourse. Thus, ethno-sectarian divisions were elevated to become the most important markers of the local political map from the British point of view, while other socio-economic-political factors such as class, geography, and

² Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of Capital: 1848-1875*. Hachette UK, 2010.

³ such as the infamous Rhama bin Jabir Al Jalahma

⁴ For more on divided rule as a concept, see: M.D. Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

profession were relegated to play a secondary role to these 'primordial' forces. According to their censuses, the British saw the local society as composed of 60% Sunnis and 40% Shias. Ethnic divisions of 'Baharna', 'Persian', 'Tribes', 'Huwala', and 'Najdi' then became markers that defined the groups in which each individual should fall. These groups would then determine who was 'foreign' or 'local' and thus, entitled to British or local jurisdiction.⁵

'Divided rule' created a legal and institutional basis to catalyse political mobilization based on ethno-sectarian identities. Thus, the British passed laws and set up courts, business arbitration councils, and municipal councils that reflected the situation of fragmented sovereignty. All of these institutions were crafted from an ethno-sectarian perspective, which now had a codified legal footing with real consociational structures and institutions on the ground.

As time passed, the British and local rulers struggled to contain the increasing contradictions arising from this fragmentation of sovereign power. The local ruler contested the definition of 'foreigner' and the scope of his jurisdiction. Locals for their part engaged in both 'forum shopping' in terms of courts and laws, as well as 'protection shopping' in terms of the sovereign power to rally to for protection against other powers. Regional powers would also enter the fray and try to use the contradictions to their advantage. Three would come to exercise a significant role: the Ottomans, the Qajar dynasty in Iran, and Al Sa'ud. This was a convulsive mix. The interplay between ethnosectarianism, divided rule, and regional intrigues was firmly set in motion, with each feeding into the other.

In contrast to ethno-sectarian mobilization, the opening two decades of the 20th century also saw the rise of a modernist movement, one that was both antagonistic to and symbiotic with colonial rule. It traced itself to al-Nahda (Renaissance) that emerged across the Arab world in the latter part of the 19th century. Its protagonists in Bahrain immersed themselves in a cocktail of British anti-colonialism, literary critique, Arabism, and ecumenical Islamic reform. This mix would interact to crystallize itself by the second decade of the 20th century in a nationalist trans-sectarian discourse with strong currents of anti-colonialism and demands for civic participation in political decision-making. Many of the actors in this movement were involved in setting up al-Hidaya school in Muharraq, the first school in Bahrain independently financed by, and catering for, locals. Given that the nationalist movement took the school as its unofficial base, this caused significant anxiety to the British.

By 1922–1923, the contradictions that arose from the contested system of 'divided rule' had reached a boiling point. Neither was the ruler able to establish authority over 'locals', nor were the British able to control 'foreigners', and political mobilization increasingly turned violent. Two poles emerged

⁵ O. AlShehabi, "Contested modernity: divided rule and the birth of sectarianism, nationalism, and absolutism in Bahrain." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 1-23, pp. 4-10.

around which the different groups mobilized mainly on ethno-sectarian lines, with each pole centred around an opposite source of sovereignty: The British saw ‘Sunnis’ and ‘tribes’ as being pro-ruler and anti-British, while they saw ‘Shia’ and ‘Persians’ as being anti-ruler and pro-British.

Thus, by 1923, Bahrain was in the eyes of the British a restive set of sects and ethnicities, headed by an ineffective ruler, surrounded by regional threats from Al Sa‘ud to Iran, and showing alarming signs of emergent nationalism. The system had to be reorganized. Events reached a climax in May 1923, as the British completely took over local rule. The ruler Isa was deposed and his powers transferred to his son Hamad. The anticolonial nationalists then put forward a petition asking for reform of the political system to be more participatory and for the cessation of British meddling. The British responded by arresting and deporting them.⁶

Modernized absolutism meets petrodollars: 1923 - 1957

This juncture was important as it marked the birth of the modernized form of absolutism that would become a predominant feature of Bahrain and the Gulf Arab States in the 20th century. The British goal was not to end the rule of Al Khalifa, nor to institute a representative form of government, but to ‘reform’ the system to ensure that it was stable and compatible with their interests, largely based on models they deployed previously in other colonies, such as Basra and the Indian princely states. Weak and with few allies and many more adversaries, the newly installed ruler was to depend almost entirely on the British to bolster his position. The British would duly recruit an ‘advisor’ in 1926, the infamous Charles Belgrave, who would act as the government’s chief executive and effectively the country’s first prime minister for the next three decades.

The British wager was that the new rationalized mode of government would drive economic gains and thus defeat any opposition. However, the remainder of the 1920s were challenging years economically for Bahrain, particularly after the collapse of the pearling market in the late 1920s due to the great depression and the advent of Japanese cultured pearls. The fortunate discovery of oil in 1932 reversed the situation drastically, as Bahrain was the first of the Gulf Arab States to discover the commodity, largely saving it from the harsh economic situation that its neighbours faced in the 1930s. The new oil industry in many ways took over from the pearl industry as the major form of economic sustenance on the island. Pearl divers as an economic class eventually disappeared, and instead the oil industry became the main employer until the 1960s.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 13-17.

Thus, the government was able to achieve independence in terms of revenue from merchants and the rest of local society, as the oil revenues poured in during the 1930s. This was coupled by a program of reform aimed at modernizing the governmental bureaucracy, whose senior positions would largely be staffed by British subjects and members of the ruling family. The police force was professionalized, and all extra-state militias were disbanded. Sovereign power came to be monopolized in the hands of the ruler, with the advisor running the scene from behind. Bahrain would emerge as the role model for the rest of the region from the British viewpoint.

This system of 'modernized absolutism' came to control the local population through 'vertical segmentation'⁷ based on the ethno-sectarian gaze. From here onwards, the population was to be viewed as a collection of sects and ethnicities, with the sovereign situated at the top, gazing from the bird's eye view, and binding these groups together. Any political movements that might arise in opposition to this absolutist rule would be dealt with by being reduced to their constituent ethnicities and sects.⁸

These epochal transformations would reflect themselves on the political scene, which was racked by several bouts of social upheaval throughout the 1930s. First, was the 1932 pearlers' uprising. This was not the first time that pearl divers had staged militant action, as they were by far the most mobilized and organized workforce on the island, given the labour-intensive nature of the industry. Spurned by a set of British-imposed reforms to modernize the pearling industry, several divers staged a protest, and the police responded by arresting many of them. In response, a group of 1,500 armed pearl divers set from Muharraq to Manama and freed their co-workers.⁹ The response was swift and the uprising was put down violently and ruthlessly, with some pearl divers crucified publicly in retaliation.

Then came the 1934 "Baharna petition" movement. Baharna merchants and notables put forward a petition demanding that Shia courts be reformed and that a distinct school be allocated to Shias. Most notably, they called for a greater ethnicity-based representation in Majlis al-'Urf (the business arbitration council) and the Manama Municipality council, claiming that the Shia are the 'majority

⁷ Abdulhadi Khalaf, 'Contentious Politics in Bahrain', in *The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Oslo* (1998), <http://org.uib.no/smi/pao/khalaf.html>

⁸ O. AlShehabi, "Contested modernity...", p.21.

⁹ M. Almahmood, 'The Rise and Fall of Bahrain's Merchants in the Pre-oil Era' (MA Thesis, American University, 2013), p.71.

of the population'. This heralded the explicit emergence of ethno-demographic arguments of 'minority' vs. 'majority' into politics.

Throughout the 20th century, ethnosectarian-centric political mobilization in Bahrain would mainly manifest itself in Shia-centric movements.¹⁰ The unique experience of bonded labour directly under tributes paid to the ruling family in the villages, which were overwhelmingly composed of Baharna, coupled with the fact that the rulers were from a different sect, as well as the emergence of the religious institutions of Ashoora processions and the Ma'tams¹¹, provided the socio-economic backdrop that cultivated the formation of Shia-centric movements to address their grievances throughout Bahrain's modern history. In contrast, and although tribes were present as a form of political mobilization, there was a marked lack of political movements self-identifying and shaping their political discourse and mobilization primarily as 'Sunni' throughout the 20th century.¹²

This did not prevent the British and subsequent local rulers from reading all political movements in ethno-sectarian terms. Hence, although the nationalist movement from 1923 explicitly adopted a trans-sectarian discourse, the British labelled the movement as mainly being driven by 'Sunnis', given that the propagators of the movement were mainly members of that sect. Such a labelling of the nationalist opposition as 'Sunni' by the British would continue well into the 1950s.

1938 marked the rise of another nationalist movement, with the nationalist current continuing to gain strength in the upcoming decades. It began when workers from the oil company Bapco struck and brought work at the company to a halt, after Belgrave had started a crackdown upon alleged secret labour and youth movements. The striking workers were fired. In response, notable members of both sects got together to put forward a list of demands. These included the formation of an elected legislative body, reforming the courts, and forming a committee to represent workers in the oil company.¹³ This marked the first time that both 'Sunnis' and 'Shia' would explicitly present themselves as putting forward common nationalist demands in a jointly signed statement .

This movement was also notable for following in the footsteps of similar movements in Dubai, and Kuwait—all then under British protection—calling for a greater say in ruling matters. Indeed, the Bahrain movement was directly inspired by the one in Kuwait, where a group consisting mainly of merchants demanded the establishment of an elected assembly with wide ranging executive and

¹⁰ For a similar analysis in Iraq of Shia-centric mobilization see: F. Haddad 'Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection in Post-2003 Iraq' (Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016),

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408>

¹¹ Ma'tams are Shia religious places of worship that also act as focal points for social meetings and organizing, including funeral and wedding ceremonies.

¹² As we will see, this would change with the 2011 mass protests.

¹³ Almahmood, *The Rise and Fall*, pp. 80-81.

legislative powers. They were successful in setting up the assembly, and reached the points of even demanding control over the anticipated oil revenues from the ruler. Recognizing the danger, the British and the ruler colluded to forcibly put down the assembly after nearly a year in power.

In Bahrain, the British also recognized the links in demands put forward in the two countries and moved swiftly to put down the movement. Belgrave labelled it in ethno-sectarian terms as one mainly driven by “Huwala”, a Sunni ethnic local grouping. He moved to divide the movement by granting reform in Shia courts, in return for a promise from self-identified "Baharna" notables to suspend their support for the movement as it was put down.¹⁴

The tectonic events of the Second World War coincided with a relatively quiet local political scene. Bahrain's involvement in the war was mainly as a refuelling spot for allied planes and a hospital transit stop for their injured soldiers. Due to this, the Italian air force unsuccessfully attempted to bomb the oil refinery in Bahrain. Price and quantity controls on staple foods were imposed locally, to stop an impending famine which claimed the lives of several individuals. Continued oil production and revenues, however, helped Bahrain to avoid the terrible economic conditions faced by its neighbours such as Qatar, where the population decreased considerably due to economic hardship. Radio and written propaganda by both the British and the Germans during this time intensified, reflecting their worries regarding political agitation, as several flyers from supposed underground local groupings began to appear.

One development of note during this period was the founding of the first fully articulated organized political movement in Bahrain. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1941 by a band of students in Al Hidayah school in Muharraq, under the name of Al Islah Society. Never to play a dominant role in Bahraini politics, and distinguished from Muslim Brotherhood chapters elsewhere by the close involvement of individuals from the ruling family in its founding and membership, it did however herald the establishment of organized political parties in Bahrain. It played a prominent role in the protests that wracked Bahrain after Al-Nakba (catastrophe) in Palestine and the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, as well as sending a small number of fighters to join the Arab armies that participated in the war.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.83.

1953–56: Nationalism takes centre stage

The 1950s was a revolutionary period in the Arab world, with the rising tide of Arab Nationalism, heightened by the charismatic figure of Jamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt. These regional developments echoed strongly in Bahrain, where a vibrant local press and several cultural and sports centres had emerged throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

These brewing developments needed a catalyst that would transform them into a larger movement. This was provided by the sectarian violence that was ignited after clashes during the Ashoora processions of 1953, which were soon followed by the 1954 taxi drivers' labour strikes protesting the monopoly of British companies in car insurance provision. To address these ethno-sectarian and anti-colonial tensions, several meetings were held between members from both sects, which culminated in the election of a Higher Executive Committee (HEC) composed of eight members - four Shia and four Sunnis - to articulate their political demands to the local ruler and the British. Although nationalist, the HEC was very aware of the sectarian undertones to its emergence, and this explicitly played out in its choice of membership composition. The demands put forward included the establishment of a legislative body, a general legal code, labour unions, and the reformation of the court system. These, as we have seen, had become recurrent demands that were not dissimilar from those put forward by the nationalist movements in 1923 and 1938.

At first, the British and the local ruler refused to formally deal with the HEC, but the strong momentum and nationwide reach of the movement finally forced the authorities to officially recognize it. The HEC collected twenty-five thousand signatures in support of its demands—a remarkable feat in a country whose population barely numbered one hundred thousand and fifty thousand at the time. The British advisor and the rulers then resorted to the well-worn tactic of ethno-sectarian divide and rule, labelling the movement as mainly driven by 'Huwala', and creating an alternative committee of Shia notables under their wing, in the hope of splitting and weakening the HEC. Finally, the authorities seized an opportune moment to forcibly end the movement. When violent protests broke out in November 1956 to denounce the tripartite aggression against Egypt after the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, they were used as an excuse to arrest and deport the leaders of the HEC, with many sent into exile on St Helena Island.¹⁵

¹⁵ AlShehabi, Omar Hesham. "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* 21.1 (2013): 94-127, pp. 100-102.

1956–1971: Revolutionary fervour and the move underground

Although the HEC was dissolved prematurely, it left a long lasting legacy that continues until today. It arguably constitutes the crystallization of modern Bahraini nationalism, becoming an idealized source of inspiration for subsequent political movements. It also successfully formed Bahrain's first labour union, which was disbanded with the end of the HEC, as well as actively being involved in drafting the country's first labour law of 1957. It also acted as a catalyst for governmental reforms, as the state responded to the crisis by ending Belgrave's services, who was retired on health grounds, and by commissioning a British-led inquiry into how to reform the state and its ruling structures, a recurrent move in the face of crises. In fact, state governance fell into limbo for a while, with no clear leader to replace the adviser, until a new ruler, Sheikh Isa, took over helms in 1961, while his brother Khalifa bin Salman emerged as effectively the head of the government in the 1960s, a position he holds until today. Hence, this period saw the rise of a local technocracy, with a plethora of British advisors still playing a role in the background. Modernized absolutist rule was increasingly taking on a local flavour.

The dissolution of the HEC marked a new epoch in the history of Bahraini political movements. In essence, the HEC confined its demands to political reform within the existing system of British and Al Khalifa rule. The political movements that emerged in its aftermath, however, saw these aims as not reaching far enough. They went underground and took a much more radical approach. Their goals were no longer reform, but the overthrow of the regime, using armed struggle if necessary.

Two clandestine movements were to dominate the local scene over the next decade. The National Liberation Front (NLF) was a communist movement that was established in 1955, with its creation heavily influenced by its ties to the Iranian Tudeh party and the Iraq Communist party. In contrast, the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN) originated in Beirut, aiming to establish a vanguard secular movement focused on the liberation of Palestine and the wider Arab World by revolutionary means. Between 1958 and 1959, the group began enrolling some Bahraini students in Beirut and Cairo in its ranks. The movement subsequently expanded rapidly in Bahrain, with several hundred local members joining.

Both movements were strongest in the urban parts of Bahrain, establishing footholds in the cities of Muharraq and Manama. The relationship between the two movements was always ambivalent due to their ideological differences. The MAN viewed the Arab world as its natural homeland and the main focus of its activities. It saw the NLF as an internationalist agent that did not have the region's interest at heart, with its equivocal support to the Palestinian struggle clouding its legitimacy. In return, the

NLF viewed the MAN as a parochial upstart laced with nationalist xenophobia and limited horizons. The idea of Arab nationalism did not sit naturally with communists.

The activities of the two groups climaxed with the March 1965 uprising, which became a legendary event in both movements' historiography. The spark was ignited when the local oil company announced it was laying-off several hundred workers, which quickly developed into mass protests, mainly in the cities of Muharraq and Manama.

The protests were not planned, and they caught both the MAN and NLF by surprise. The cadres from both movements spontaneously led the protests and tried to coordinate between each other, but the hastily assembled coalition rapidly fell apart when faced with state repression. Many of the cadres were arrested and eventually the protests fizzled out, but not without leaving a significant imprint on the future of the island's political movements.

For one, the uprising signalled a major reshuffle within the underground movements on the island, particularly within the ranks of the Arab Nationalists. The Arab Forces' defeat against Israel in the June 1967 War signalled the final death blow to the MAN, and in its place arose the Marxist forces within the MAN. They would initiate a new movement in the late 1960s, which would eventually solidify under the banner of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG). The movement refocused its attention to the Arabian Gulf instead of the wider Arab world, adopted Marxism-Leninism as an official ideology, and advocated the use of armed struggle.¹⁶ The PFLOAG became increasingly involved in the Dhofar revolution in Oman that lasted from 1965 to 1976, with several Bahraini cadres joining the fight in Dhofar.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the British announced in 1968 their intention to withdraw from areas east of the Suez, including the Arabian Peninsula. To fend off any potential Iranian claims to Bahrain, a UN commission was sent to the island to inquire about the local population's desire for independence. The pre-ordained outcome was the establishment of the independent state of Bahrain in 1971 under the rule of Al Khalifa. As the British withdrew, a new major superpower ally for the now independent regime appeared on the horizon, as the United States of America became the dominant military and political force globally. This was epitomized by the expanding US Navy presence on the island, with the US Navy 5th Fleet eventually coming to be situated in Bahrain.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 100-107.

¹⁷ Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

1970s: Labour, parliamentary rule, and the rise of the Petro-Modernist Emirate

The year of independence also marked the establishment of the Constitutive Committee (CC) for the General Federation of Workers in Bahrain, the first organized public mass movement in Bahrain's independent era. As the industries and sectors in Bahrain's economy expanded, so did the labour movements situated within them, with labour strikes intermittently erupting across the different sectors in the late 1960s. The CC signalled a major shift within the tactics of Bahrain's political movements, shifting once again away from clandestine political activity toward public coalition-building. It organized petitions for the establishment of a general labour union, with chapters across the diverse industries and sectors, and it was able to garner nearly five thousand membership signatures in its support. Although the CC was spearheaded by individuals from PFLOAG, NLF, and MAN, it was not organized along party lines, and included many independents among its members. The CC acted in public rather than focusing on clandestine activity. Its composition and goals were formulated without any regard for sectarian or ethnic considerations whatsoever, the first public-coalition to achieve such a feat in Bahrain's modern history.

The authorities repeatedly refused to grant recognition to the CC. The deadlock climaxed in the March 1972 uprising. Workers at the local airline company went on strike after a group of workers were brought in from Pakistan and they were asked to train them. Suspecting that the migrants were brought in to replace them, the workers initiated a strike that closed down the airport. The strikes quickly multiplied across the island's sectors. The authorities deployed the military, and the protests were put down, with members of the CC either imprisoned or escaping into exile abroad.¹⁸

During the uprising, however, state authorities promised the CC members that they would go beyond simply granting them labour-centric demands; they were aiming to introduce comprehensive political rights. This was optimistically viewed as a promise to implement broad political reform. The activities of the CC, combined with British pressure for some semblance of political reform, hastened the establishment of the Constituent Assembly of 1972, a partly elected assembly that was tasked with drafting a constitution for the country, in an attempt to placate rising political tensions.

The PFLOAG and NLF would coalesce once again with other Arab Nationalist figures to form the "Shehabi bloc," although the alliance ended up boycotting the Constitutive Assembly elections due to differences within the two movements regarding participation in the elections. This was one of several blocs forming at that period, with a range of nationalists, village-based Shia religious clerics, and loyalist groupings emerging. The elected legislative assembly of 1973 quickly followed, with the

¹⁸ O. AlShehabi, "Divide and rule...", pp. 113-121.

Shehabi bloc acting as a precursor to the "People's bloc," a similar-minded grouping of leftist and Arab Nationalists who would contest the parliamentary elections and win eight seats. Nationalists, independents, and Shia clerical figures came to compose the other blocs within the newly elected assembly.

The parliamentary experiment did not last long. The legislature locked horns with the government on a proposed "state of emergency" law and the proposed lease renewal for the American naval base on the island. The government grew increasingly frustrated, and reacted by dissolving the assembly and suspending the constitution and declaring a state of emergency, which was to last for the next twenty five years.¹⁹ Many individuals were arrested, including former parliamentary members. The crackdown focused mainly on leftists and Arab Nationalists, with the rural conservative clergy acquiescing, as the authorities made it clear that this crackdown would not reach them. Accusations of the use of torture, always present in previous epochs, increased. The repression culminated with Bahrain's first two political torture martyrs. Said Al-Uwainaty from the NLF and Muhammad Buchiri from the PFLOAG were arrested and accused of murdering a prominent Shia religious cleric, and subsequently died in jail. Thus ended Bahrain's first experiment with democratic political institutions in the independence era.

The oil boom of 1973 and the backing of the Americans gave the newly independent government confidence to push forward with a modified version of absolutist rule, heralding the rise of the petro-modernist emirate.²⁰ Fuelled by huge increase in petrodollars throughout the 1970s, the governmental bureaucracy and the welfare state expanded rapidly along with the economy. Rapid social change ensued. Fordist modes of consumption predominated, with locals moving out of the old cities to live in newly built suburban car-based areas and working mainly in government funded jobs, which over the years increasingly displayed an ethno-sectarian element in their allocation.²¹ The arrival of migrant workers accelerated under the rapidly consolidating Kefala system²², with the majority of the workforce becoming non-national.

¹⁹ A. Khalaf, 'Contentious Politics in Bahrain', in *The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Oslo* (1998), <http://org.uib.no/smi/pao/khalaf.html>

²⁰ O. AlShehabi, "Histories of Migration to the Gulf." *Transit States: Labour, Migration & Citizenship in the Gulf* (2015): 3-38.

²¹ Although no official statistics exist, popular perception sees the development of different ethnosectarian fiefs in the local economy, with tribal members concentrated in the military, Huwala in banking, Baharna in health, water and electricity, and Ajams (Shia of Persian descent) concentrated in the local airline Gulf Air and the aluminium smelter Alba.

²² "Kefala" refers to the set of practices and laws that govern the importation of migrant labour to the Gulf, under which each migrant worker has to have a local 'Kafeel' (sponsor) who acts as his legal guardian.

1979–2000: The Rise of Islamists

These social changes reflected onto the contours of the local political movements. The historic cities of Muharraq and Manama, for long the hotbed of opposition, were slowly emptied from citizens who moved to the suburbs as migrants took their place there. The ethno-sectarian reading of the local political map would shift as well. Thus, while during the 1920s to 1950s 'Sunnis' were seen by the British as the main source of opposition, throughout the 1960s and 1970s this perception changed to members of nationalist and leftists movements, with their bastion still being the urban centres. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s however, these forces declined, and Shia Islamist movements, with strong support in the villages, would take centre stage as the main source of opposition. Particularly, the Shia clergy, playing a largely marginal and conservative role in political movements on the island for the past 80 years, and which were until recently seen by the British as strong possible allies with the local regime, would rise to head the largest opposition political movements for the remainder of the 20th century.

Two groups would particularly have a strong influence on Shia Islamist movements in Bahrain. One was Hizb al-Da`wa al-Islamiyya (Party of the Islamic Call), commonly known as al-Da`wa, which was formed in the late 1950s in Iraq, and whose early star was Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Al-Sadr formulated his thoughts as a response to leftist thought dominant during the period, and partly drew inspiration from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood's political program. Some of Bahrain's leading Shia clergy, including Sheikh Issa Qassim, studied under Sadr.

The other was the more radical Shirazi movement, named after Ayatollah Mohammad Al Shirazi, another high ranking Shia clergy who was based in Karbala. In the 1960s, Ayatollah Shirazi aligned himself with Ayatollah Khomeini (who was in exile in Iraq), in a counterbalance to the clerical establishment in Najaf, where Al Sadr was based. His nephew, Hadi Al Modarrissi, was allowed by the authorities to settle in Bahrain in 1969, and indeed cultivated close connections with high ranking members of the ruling family during the early 1970s, a period where Shia clerics were not seen as a threat by the regime. Ayatollah Shirazi himself was also eventually exiled to Kuwait in 1970 by the Baath in Iraq, and his presence in the Gulf expanded the influence of the movement there considerably.

The 1979 revolution in Iran and the rise of the Islamic Republic had a significant impact on galvanizing Shia Islamist movements in Bahrain. Members of al-Da`wa were seen as following a more reformist and "moderate" path, while the Shirazis turned towards revolution and armed means to overthrow the regime and install an Islamic republic. The political branch of the Shirazis in Bahrain was the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain. Their efforts culminated in a failed

1981 coup attempt in Bahrain, thus marking a shift back by political movements toward a strategy of overthrowing the regime using violent and covert means.²³

The authorities responded swiftly and violently after the discovery of the coup attempt, as several individuals were arrested and long prison sentences were handed out. The tough security situation was compounded by the economic depression caused by the fall of oil prices throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s.

As the political and economic situation stalled, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent liberation marked a turning point in regional dynamics and local political movements. The 1990s witnessed once again the re-emergence of a public movement that attempted to unite the diverse political groupings together in a movement for greater political representation. Former members of the NLF, PFLOAG, along with independents and Shia religious clergy initiated the "elite petition" and "popular petition" that called for the restoration of the 1973 constitution and parliamentary democracy. By this point, Shia political Islam was the dominant form of political mobilization on the island. The backbone of the popular movements was now firmly fixed in the villages. Shia religious scholars, such as Abdul Amir Al-Jamri and Ali Salman would become the most influential in the emerging movement. As in previous epochs, the movement was met with a campaign of state violence that increasingly took on a sectarian dimension. The authorities blamed Iran for foreign interference, and the country plunged into what became known as the "nineties uprising", lasting from 1994 to 1999.²⁴

2000–2011: A Parliamentary Monarchy (of sorts)

A new ruler ascended to the throne in 1999, and at the turn of the century, Bahrain seemed to enter a new phase of political reform. The National Action Charter of 2001 promised to establish a constitutional democracy, and was passed with a referendum result of 98.4%. The new constitution of 2002, however, was written behind closed doors and with no popular input in its drafting. It did not live up to the expectations of the opposition. A half-elected legislative assembly with weak supervisory and legislative powers was established, to be elected via heavily gerrymandered electoral districts.

²³ Alfoneh, Ali. "Between Reform and Revolution: Sheikh Qassim, the Bahraini Shi'a, and Iran." *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research* 1 (2012): 1-11.

²⁴ For more see: M. Fakhro, 'The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment', in *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion*, edited by Gary Sick and Lawrence Potter, New York: St Martin's Press (1997).

The booming economic situation gave the authorities the belief that they were able to control the political situation. Oil barrel prices rose from below \$20 in 2000 to a peak of more than \$140 in 2008, with more than US\$2 trillion in resultant revenue pouring into the Gulf states. Bahrain became a hub for some of these investments, via both its burgeoning finance and real estate sectors.

The new system seemed to successfully entrench demographic and political divisions, with a dizzying array of political societies emerging under the new system that rarely found common ground. Some decided to contest the parliamentary elections, while others chose to boycott the official system altogether. Al Wifaq, the heir to the Shia Islamist movement of the 1990s, and Wa'ad, a secular-liberal society with its roots in the MAN and PFLOAG, formed the backbone of the formally recognized oppositional societies. The local Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements also established their own political societies and entered parliamentary politics. Individuals who chose to boycott the political system formed Haq, an unauthorized movement that continued the calls for a full constitutional monarchy.

Nevertheless, the government seemed to be in a comfortably commanding position. The high oil prices sustained an economic boom throughout the island, as privatization and neo-liberalism became the modus operandi, fuelled by government expenditure and soaring migration.²⁵ The officially sanctioned opposition groups were effectively contained within a weak parliament, while members of the more radical movements that operated outside of official channels were faced with jail on charges of terrorism and plotting to overthrow the regime.²⁶

February 2011 explosion and beyond

The stalled political situation unexpectedly exploded in February 2011, when Bahrain entered its most recent and largest political movement in the midst of the so-called Arab Spring.

Inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, anonymous social media activists in Bahrain called for a Day of Rage on 14 February 2011, on the anniversary of the National Action Charter. The Pearl roundabout subsequently became the centre of the protest movement for the next month. Composed of a motley collection of different political forces and individuals with no unifying thread except

²⁵ For more on the socio-economic changes during this period see:

O. AlShehabi "Radical Transformations and Radical Contestations: Bahrain's Spatial-Demographic Revolution." *Middle East Critique* 23.1 (2014): 29-51.

²⁶ K. Katzman, 'Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 2011. available at: <www.fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/158480.pdf>.

opposition to the regime, the protesters' demands varied from system reform to the regime's downfall, with the latter becoming by far the most dominant chant at the roundabout.

The now entrenched sectarian divide, heightened since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was the most formidable political obstacle facing the protesters, and so it proved this time around. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the opposition protestors were Shia. As the protests wore on, official media channels increasingly adopted an antagonistic rhetoric, which increasingly targeted the sectarian divide. Security forces were withdrawn from the streets, and over time vigilante groups appeared and sectarian clashes occurred across the island. The opposition split in their demands, with the more radical elements now openly demanding a republic. Given that all those who made the demand for a republic were from a Shia Islamist background, many Sunnis took this as a call for the establishment of an Islamic Republic, along the lines of the theocratic regime in Iran. Calls increasingly grew amongst Sunnis for a forcible government response.

Saudi troops entered Bahrain on March 14 through the causeway connecting the two countries. The King declared a state of emergency the subsequent day. The Pearl Roundabout was forcibly cleared of protesters, and over the next two months, dozens were killed, hundreds jailed, and thousands more terminated from their jobs, mainly on a sectarian basis.²⁷

The protest movement continued to show notable resilience. Protests and clashes with security forces continued, although their intensity and frequency had decreased markedly by 2015, and have largely been confined to sporadic flash protests in the villages. Thus, the government seemed able to control the security situation, if not the political one. From its side, the state has shown little intent to make substantial political reforms. Indeed, it took several antagonistic steps during 2016, dissolving Al Wifaq, the largest formally recognised opposition group, and revoking the citizenship of Isa Qassem, the highest Shia cleric on the island.

Bahrain has become a heavily politicized country, with a new cohort of youth engaging in contentious politics for the first time. A fertile, and as yet, unstable political terrain has emerged with constantly shifting contours. Society continues to be split on sectarian lines, with events in the wider Arab world further agitating the situation, especially in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. This seems to suit the regime, ensuring that no trans-sectarian movements are able to emerge like they have in the past, although the sectarian situation does threaten to spiral out of its control.

²⁷ For a detailed account of events see:

Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*. Manama: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011.

On the opposition front, the more formally established political societies, and particularly Al Wifaq, have had to compete with new groups that have emerged on the scene, such as the 14 February Coalition. These groups have resorted to anonymous mobilization with a heavy focus on direct street action, adopting regime change as their explicit aim. This sits in contrast to the demands of the formally recognized political societies, which continue to focus on reforming the system into a democratic constitutional monarchy.

These opposition movements have become extremely active abroad, marketing their cause through international outlets. The general trend has been to reach out to potential allies in the West, particularly Europe and the US, based on considerations of human rights and democracy, while in the region, most of the solidarity has been sect-based, with the most vocal and active regional support coming from Shia in Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Iran and the Eastern province in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, such ties have reflected in the opposition groups' healthy funds, setting up several TV channels, newspapers, think tanks, human right and democracy advocacy outlets, with large parts of the funding coming from sect-based funders in the region, or Western human rights and democracy advocacy institutions.

One of the most significant qualitative developments has been the emergence of what is now known as the "Sunni street", with groups such as The Gathering of National Unity and Al Fateh Youth emerging on the scene. As previously mentioned, there was little historical precedence of Sunnis mobilizing primarily as "Sunnis" in Bahrain, but the slowly brewing sectarian factors since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 exploded with the events of 2011. Although their stance so far has focused against the Shia opposition, they have also started to signal their increasing frustration with the way the authorities are ruling. They too have turned their gaze abroad, with active calls for a federal union with the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. They have also increasingly adopted the Syrian revolution as their cause célèbre regionally. Although critical of the government, they perceive Bahrain as a fault line in a wider regional battle between the two sects — a battle that requires conscientious and sustained mobilization, with the other side already far more advanced than they are in this regard.²⁸

What about trans-sectarian movements with a national outlook that try to bridge the gap between all of these divergent groups? Small attempts have been witnessed in this regard, notably by the old guard of nationalists and leftists, who have tried to resuscitate some sort of a national trans-sectarian coalition. Given that this period is marked by the most entrenched sectarian division in Bahrain's modern history, however, they face a daunting task.

²⁸ O. AlShehabi, "Bahrain's Fate: On Ibrahim Sharif and misleadingly dubbed "Arab Spring", *Jacobin*, 2012. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/bahrains-fate/>

On the regime front, and although seemingly containing the protests by 2015, one crucial factor that continues to cause it worry is its heavily dented international image, which has impacted negatively on Bahrain's trade-dependent economy. As the oil prices tumbled in 2015, the economy has further stagnated, with the public deficit and debt climbing at alarming and unsustainable rates, forcing the regime to undertake a series of unpopular steps of subsidies' removal and price hikes of basic goods in the midst of political instability.

Nor does it seem like the regime will be granted relief any time soon on the political front. As we have outlined, by now political movements in Bahrain have had a long history of mobilization for more than a century. Throughout this period, the colours and contours of these movements have changed considerably, shifting from urban to rural, secular to religious, national to transnational, public to underground, reformist to revolutionary, and vice versa. The responses to these movements have sculpted the shape of absolutist rule the petro-modernist state has taken during this time, formed under the heavy backing of British colonial and then American and Saudi protection. Indeed, it is quite certain that new and emerging political movements will continue to write several further chapters in the future of Bahrain's contested socio-political scene.