

Radical transformations and radical contestations: Bahrain's spatial-demographic revolution

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Draft, 7th October 2013

This on-line version is the pre-copyedited, preprint version. The published version can be found at:
AlShehabi. O. (2014), 'Radical contestations and radical transformations: The spatial-demographic revolution of Bahrain', *Middle East Critique*, 23(1), pp. 29-51.
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19436149.2014.896596>

Abstract

This article approaches the developments in Bahrain during the first decade of the twenty-first century through a geographical, historical materialism perspective. It moves away from emphasizing the traditional narratives of events in the island as dominated by identity-based (and particularly sect-based) politics, arguing that the interactions between space, capital, and people over time are also central to explaining local dynamics. It argues that this period has been defined by a radical transformation of the spatial-demographic landscape of Bahrain, and that this perturbed state of creation and destruction on the spatial and demographic fronts crucially was reflected in a radical contestation of social identity, values and discourses. These play an important role in explaining the political explosion that occurred on 14 February 2011 and the subsequent political mobilization along sectarian and nationalist lines.

Keywords:

Bahrain, Land Reclamation, Gulf Arab States, Demography, Space, Urban Geography, Historical Materialism

Introduction

One feature of Bahrain catches the eye even before setting foot in the country. Peering out of the airplane window, one's gaze is transfixed by vast swaths of yet to be developed land, in pre-engineered geometric shapes, hugging the shoreline. This is the result of the reclamation of vast areas of the island's sea, a process that has become the most striking feature of Bahrain's spatial landscape in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. Over the past thirty years, more than 70 square kilometres of sea has been reconstituted into reclaimed land in the tiny Gulf kingdom,¹ 50 square kilometres of which were reclaimed between 2001 and 2011.² In 2008, for example, 13 square kilometres of sea were reclaimed.³ Reclamation has been concentrated mostly around the coastline of the island, with the land mass of Bahrain increasing by more than 10 percent in total. The city-island of Muharraq grew four times in size, from 13 square kilometres in 1951 to 56 square kilometres in 2008.⁴

The vast majority of reclaimed land has been allocated for creating new commercial and real estate "mega projects" of the luxurious and gated community style. By 2008, more than 20 of these gated mega projects had been or were being built, with the aim to create more than 60,000 new residential units with corresponding commercial and office spaces.⁵ One can relate the process that blurs the "natural" and the "man-made" to Neil Smith's thesis on the "production of Nature."⁶

1 I. Al-Sayed (2005), 'Territorial and Coastal Usurpation', *Presentation to The Secretariat and Four Associations Forum*, 10 November.

2 Data compiled from *Central Informatics Organization Website*, viewed 10 April 2012, <http://www.cio.gov.bh/CIO_ARA/default.aspx>.

3 *Al-Waqt* (2011), '13 Million squared meters is the size of reclaimed land in Bahrain', 19 February, viewed 16 June 2011, <<http://www.alwaqt.com/art.php?aid=152174>> (Arabic Text).

4 B. Mohammed (2010), 'Muharraq grown by four-fold', *Gulf Daily News*, 22 June, viewed 16 June 2011, <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=280747>>.

5 DTZ Middle East Market Update Series (2008), 'Bahrain September 2008'.

6 N. Smith, (2001). *Uneven Development*. Oxford, Blackwell.

In this case, “nature”, the actual physical land, becomes an essential part of the production process. Nature is part of the human construct, and the abundance of dredging ships, cranes, and lorries burying the sea and reconstituting it into land make this feature abundantly clear. Both society and nature are produced, transformable and capable of being recreated.

To understand this phenomenon better, one has to go back to the economic boom that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have experienced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, mainly fuelled by the meteoric rise in oil prices. Barrel prices rose from below \$20 in 2000 to \$80 in 2005, reaching a peak of more than \$140 in 2008. The resultant oil export revenue in the GCC was estimated at nearly \$1.5 trillion dollars⁷ in 2000-2005, with net foreign assets reaching more than \$1.5 trillion by 2009.⁸

The GCC countries have become an important nexus within the global capital circuit. Although a large portion of this excess capital was invested abroad, especially by the large sovereign wealth funds of several GCC countries, huge sums also were invested in the region. Bahrain became one of the main hubs for the investment of GCC money, both via its burgeoning finance sector and its real estate. There was an intimate relationship between the two, and in many instances it was difficult to tell the difference between them. Real estate and construction constituted 9.8 per cent of GDP in 2007,⁹ with an annual growth rate of 7.1 per cent, making up 33 per cent of all domestic banks' loans (the highest component within the Banking sector).¹⁰ The GCC

7 P. Devaux (2006), 'Oil bonanza and banking activity in the GCC countries', *Conjuncture*, Economic Research – BNP Paribas, December.

8 Q.J. Minas (2008), 'GCC's private wealth reserves over \$1.5 trillion', Saudi Gazette, 1 November, viewed 14 June 2011, <<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2008110120771>>.

9 Global Investment House (2009), 'GCC Real Estate Sector – Changing Times!' Global Investment House, February.

10 Ellaboudy (2010), 'The Global Financial Crisis: Economic Impact on GCC Countries and Policy Implications,' *International Research Journal of Finance and Economics*, 41. INCLUSIVE page numbers.

nature of these investments was underlined by the fact that the biggest real estate company in Bahrain was from the UAE, with the rate of inter-GCC investments in Bahrain's six largest construction projects reaching 100 per cent.¹¹ These projects took on the form of the mega real estate developments that have become so fashionable in the gulf in the past decade, and they were built mainly on reclaimed land.

The most fruitful way of understanding this process of capital formation is via David Harvey's theory of capital's production of space,¹² where capital creates new "spatial-temporal fixes" (spatial-fix for short) to operate within. Both of Harvey's two key features when discussing spatial-fix appear strikingly clear in Bahrain. The first, the literal meaning, refers to the "fixed" part of capital, i.e., it is the built, non-mobile infrastructure of airports, roads and ports that is embedded on the land. Thus, it is necessary for capital to have a presence in physical space in order to move over space and induce profit-making activity.

The other meaning of 'spatial fix', the metaphorical, refers to capital's problem of over-accumulation. With the lack of new productive ventures and the increasing competition between capital due its high mobility in the global financial markets, the over-accumulation of capital threatens to lower profit rates. The solution to this problem, or the metaphorical "fix," is for capital literally to create new markets for the absorption of capital via the creation of space. Thus, excess capital is invested in building new roads, ports, airports, and even cities, i.e., investing in building the infrastructure for the production of new space for capital to operate within.¹³ Once this is achieved, the surplus capital then can be used in the new markets and production activities that are created within this enlarged space, thus "fixing" the problem of over-accumulation.¹⁴

11 A. Hanieh (2011), *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 105.

12 D. Harvey (2003), *The New Imperialism* (Oxford).

13 Harvey calls this process "temporal deferral" or "scale enlargement."

14 Harvey calls this process "Absorption through Spatial enlargement."

The sea reclamation in Bahrain is a novel and near-perfect example of capital's 'spatial fix.' The large flood of regional capital created by the oil boom threatened to cause a serious case of capital-over-accumulation. A new regional outlet was needed. One of the main opportunities was to be found in the local real estate sector. By the nature of real estate and construction, large swaths of land are needed to render the sectors viable. Given Bahrain's small size, and the fact that the most desirable and high value areas were to be found along the northern coast of the island and close to the two major cities of Muharraq and Manama, such high-value land came at a premium.

The sea was to prove a perfect solution. Literally, new land was to be created out of the sea by dredging 2.5 million tons of sand from the seabed annually to build new man-made islands. The newly created land required the necessary infrastructure, such as roads, fibre optic cables, electricity, water desalination, etc., in order to make economic activity operable in this created space. Most of Bahrain's non-oil economic activity poured into this process. Although no overall figure exists, the value of 65 km of appropriated land handed over to private investors for this process (which comprised only a portion of the total land allocated for such projects) was valued conservatively at \$40 billion, with no revenue to the government coffers in return.¹⁵ By 2010, the combined value of projects under construction in Bahrain was valued at \$28.6 billion.¹⁶ This included such wide varying projects as the Formula 1 (\$300 million), the Financial Harbour (\$1.3 billion), and expanding the airport (\$200 million).¹⁷

15 M. Mahdi (2010), 'Bahrain public lands sold and rented to private investors', *The National*, 25 March, viewed 14 June 2011, < <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/bahraini-public-lands-sold-and-rented-to-private-investors>>.

16 MEED (2009), 'A steady approach benefits Bahraini property and tourism sector', 29 October; viewed 16 June 2011, < <http://www.meed.com/supplements/2009/bahrain-report-2009/a-steady-approach-benefits-bahraini-property-and-tourism-sectors/3001754.article>>.

17 AMEinfo (2004), 'Bahrain boosts infrastructure spending', 7 March; viewed 14 June 2011, <<http://www.ameinfo.com/35803.html>>.

This land reclamation presented a problem. The sea, although not owned by anyone and previously considered public property, represents an essential part of Bahrain's social and physical makeup. Historically, the sea has been the main feature of society in Bahrain (with the term literally meaning "two seas" in Arabic). It constituted the economic backbone and the major source of sustenance, shaping the lifestyle of the local inhabitants. The vast majority of the population was concentrated in villages and cities along coastline. Prior to the discovery of oil, the local economy concentrated on entrepot trade, pearl diving, agriculture and fishing. Although the economic importance of pearl diving and fishing has declined, there still is a strong attachment to the sea in the community.

The newly created islands and the associated reclamation process had a devastating impact on those who depended on the sea. Ecologically, sea reclamation had three strong negative by-products. First there was the sea that was "buried" (the word used to describe the process locally) to create the new land. The second impact was on the destroyed seafloor that was dredged for gathering the sand needed for reclamation. Finally, the dredging process created a trail of silt - clouds of sand- that extended far beyond the area where dredging occurred. This cloud of silt covers coral reefs, suffocating them in the process.¹⁸ As a result, the array of fish types found in Bahrain declined from over 200 to 50.¹⁹ Fishing production decreased from 16,000 tons to 6,000 tons annually in a period of four years from 2006 to 2010.²⁰ An estimated 90 per cent of fishing habitats

18 I. Al-Madany, MA. Abdall, & ASE Ebdu (1991), 'Coastal Zone Management in Bahrain: an Analysis of Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Dredging and Reclamation,' *Journal of Environmental Management*, , 32, pp. 335-348.

19 Bahrain Chamber of Representatives (2009), 'The investigative committee in land reclamation confirms that the existence of transgressions and the lack of supervision on reclamation activities in the kingdom.' *Bahrain Chamber of Representatives website*, 28 July; viewed 14 June 2011.
<<http://www.nuwab.gov.bh/MediaCenter/News/Show.aspx?NewsId=2907>>.

20 S. Al-Halwachi (2010), 'Land reclamation shrinks fish production in Bahrain from 16 thousand to 6 thousand tonnes annually,' *Al Wasat*, 20 November; viewed 14 June 2011,
<<http://www.alwasatnews.com/2997/news/read/511015/1.html>>.

were completely or partially destroyed,²¹ having a direct impact on 6,830 local fisherman in Bahrain.²²

As Harvey amply illustrates, “accumulation by dispossession,” draws closely on Marx’s concept of “primitive accumulation” of capital. To recall, “primitive accumulation” for Marx marked the original process by which capital was accumulated, which was that necessary first step to create a sufficient amount of privately owned capital to set the process of capital formation in motion. Marx famously expounded his view on the enclosure of the “commons” land in England between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, which laid the foundation for the development of modern capitalism. This enclosure did so in two forms, one by establishing the private properties and land needed for capitalist production, and two by creating the necessary labour force by forcibly driving the peasantry off the land. Notable examples were Parliament’s Acts for Enclosures of Commons “by which the landlords grant themselves the people’s land as private property, decrees of expropriation of the people.”²³ Harvey reformulated this concept to “accumulation by dispossession” to emphasize the fact that “primitive accumulation” keeps repeating in the history of capital and is not a one off phenomenon:

What accumulation by dispossession does is to release a set of assets at very low (and in some instances zero) cost. Over-accumulated capital can seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use.²⁴

21 A. Al-Maskati (2010), ‘Al-Fadhalah: 90% of fisheries are gone because of reclamation’, *Al-Wasat newspaper*, 14 June, viewed 11 June 2012, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/2816/news/read/430751/1.html>>.

22 A. Al-Jabal (2002), ‘Fishing stocks in Bahrain,’ *Ali Al-Jabal Site*:-, viewed 14 June 2011, <www.aljabal8.com/modules/mydownloads/visit.php?cid=12&lid=29>.

23 K. Marx (1867), *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 27.

24 D. Harvey (2003), *The New Imperialism*, Oxford. pp. 145-149.

As is evident, the control and ownership over land often plays a crucial role in this process. The transfer of the ownership of reclaimed land to private individuals and companies in Bahrain is a novel innovation in the history of accumulation by dispossession. Overall, the process began by registering the title deeds of large swaths of the sea, usually several square kilometers in area, in the names of individuals or institutions with considerable influence in the upper echelons of the political ladder. These large plots of yet to be created land would then be divided into smaller plots that would be sold at extremely low prices to real estate companies and project developers. These developers then would be in charge of the reclamation process and seeing that the land is turned into profitable business projects, most often mega real estate developments.²⁵ The return to the state coffers in most of these projects is negligible, and in fact in many cases the state had to contribute for building the infrastructure for such projects. As a result, more than 90 per cent of the coastline became privately owned,²⁶ with 90 percent of reclaimed land projects going to private ventures. At least 65 square kilometres, with a combined worth of more than \$40 billion, changed hands from public to private.²⁷ It is apparent that the spatial landscape of Bahrain has undergone a radical transformation over the past ten years, with the destruction of the old shoreline accompanied by the creation of new cities and physical space, driven by a process of the spatial fixity of capital and accumulation by dispossession. How did such processes interact with the people on the ground?

“Natives”, Expatriates and Naturalized Citizens

The population of Bahrain has itself undergone a radical transformation over the past ten years.

25 The 2010 investigation by the “Investigative Committee in the State's Public and Private Properties” in the Bahrain Chamber of Deputies provides in-depth examples of specific cases of public land appropriation for private use.

26 H. Al-Madhoob (2010), ‘National Properties Committee: The struggle will continue until the retrieval of the citizen’s lands’ *Al Wasat*, 12 May; viewed 16 June 2011, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/2805/news/read/420213/1.html>>.

27 M. Mahdi (2010), ‘Bahrain public lands sold and rented to private investors’, *The National*, 25 March; viewed 14 June 2011, <<http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/bahraini-public-lands-sold-and-rented-to-private-investors>>.

These demographic transformations are in large part a reflection of the twin processes of capital's spatial fix and the local political structure, largely built on demographic control and hegemony. This took on the form of engineering and segmenting the population into expatriates versus citizens in a unique case of divide and rule, with further segmentation within each group. A case in point are sect issues, which always have been a point of contestation in Bahrain. There is a significant presence of both Sunnis and Shias, the two main branches of Islam. John Lorimer's estimates at the beginning of the twentieth century put the proportion out of 99,075 locals at 60% Sunni and 40% Shia.²⁸ The last available public census with religious affiliation, that of 1941, showed a roughly equal split,²⁹ with 52 per cent Shia and 48 per cent Sunni Bahrainis. indicating a population composition that has shifted considerably, which is not unusual in an entrepot state characterized by constant migration. It is mostly quoted in current times that Shias make up 60-70 per cent of the population of citizens, although no hard data is available. What is certain is that the sectarian composition of the island is a deeply contested issue. The ruling Al Khalifa family belongs to the Sunni branch, while the majority of other Sunnis are composed of either Arabs with tribal backgrounds, or 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 cities and agricultural villages, and “Ajam” individuals of Persian origin. There is also a presence of other communities, including Afro-Arabs, Jew and Banya.³⁰

Sectarian and ethnic delineations among citizens consistently have formed a part of the power and governance structure under the local rulers and British protection prior to independence in 1971. “Vertical segmentation” was

²⁸ ----- J. Lorimer, (1908) *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, Vol. 11 Geographical and Statistical.

²⁹ The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 371/149151 “Population Census of Bahrain.” 31 December, 1955.

³⁰ For more, see R.S. Zahlan (1989), *The Making of the Modern Gulf States* (London: Routledge) pp. 47-48.

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. 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.³¹

Vertical segmentation has been a long-standing strategy employed by the local rulers to counter any potential political opposition. It was deployed in the period of the Higher Executive Committee of 1954-1956, the first cross-spectrum popular movement on the island to call for greater political representation. The government, then under British protection, tried to counteract the HEC by creating an alternative committee of Shia notables to split the “Shia street.” It was to be used once again in the 1990s, when the rulers tried to counter the opposition, now mainly seen as Shia religious activists, by trying to lure the “Sunni Street” by painting the civil unrest as a Shia-led attempt to undermine the country and threaten the regime.

Beyond citizens, the other group that also plays a significant role in Bahrain’s demographic landscape are “expatriates,” mainly composed of individuals working in the country and their families. Expatriate presence on the island took off in earnest with the boom that followed the discovery of oil in 1931 and its commercial production in 1932. By 1941, the number of expatriates was 16,000 out of a total population of 90,000, mainly concentrated in the oil industry and related sectors. The number of expatriates reached 24,401 out of a total population of 143,145 in 1957.³² Expatriate presence was to increase significantly after what is dubbed “the first oil crisis” in the west, when oil prices spiked after the decision by Middle East oil producers to limit oil supplies to the global market in response to the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel. By

31 A. Khalaf (1998), ‘Contentious politics in Bahrain: From ethnic to national and vice versa.’ Oslo: The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle East Studies.

32 The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 371/149151, “Population Census of Bahrain,” 31 December 1955.

1975, the number of expatriates in the country had tripled to 60,000, constituting 22.9 per cent of the population and 37 per cent of the work force. By 2000, their numbers had more than quadrupled to 261,000, making up 40 per cent of the population and 63 per cent of the workforce. Once again the boom in the first decade of the third millennium accelerated the rise in expatriates even further, and by 2008 expatriates had for the first time become the majority in the country, with their numbers more than doubling in eight years to reach 570 thousand, making up 51 per cent of the population and 78 per cent of the work force.³³

The 2010 census shows that out of 666,000 non-nationals (54 per cent of the population), the vast majority (562,000) were Asians, the majority of whom were from the Indian subcontinent (Indians alone are estimated to number about 300,000). Arabs (including GCC nationals) made less than 67,000, with their presence down from about half of total expatriates at the middle of the past century. North Americans and Europeans numbered nearly 16,000.

Most of the expatriate labour force (307,000 in 2009) is concentrated in the unskilled worker category. The biggest employers by far were the construction sector (32.8 per cent of total employment, with expatriates comprising 89.8 per cent of construction workers), followed by wholesale and retail (17.9 per cent of total employment, with 81.6 per cent of workers being expatriates respectively), manufacturing (17.2 per cent and 75.1%) and household domestic employment (9.1 and 87.9 per cent).³⁴ Given the type of work, males outnumbered female expatriates roughly 3 to 1. These numbers are certainly underestimates, as they do not include the large numbers of “illegal workers”, who number in the tens of thousands at least. For example, 60,000 “illegal residents” took up a government amnesty that ran until January 31 2008, and the

33 M. Baldwin-Edwards (2011), ‘Labour immigration and labour markets in the GCC countries: national patterns and trends’, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London School of Economics, Working Paper Number 15.

34 Ibid.

general federation of Bahrain Trade Unions indicated there still were 46,000 “runaways” after this period, amounting to 10 per cent of the work force.³⁵

Data on class distribution among expatriates is non-existent, but some estimates can be reached based on the national census of 2010. The census shows that there were more than 24,500 GCC, North American and European residing in Bahrain; the vast majority of these can be considered as upper to upper-middle class income earners. Another figure could be reached based on the number of expatriates who live in private or garden villas, which was 24,000.³⁶ Both of these figures need to be used cautiously, as the second figure disregards wealthier expatriates who live in flats, while the first figure disregards wealthier expatriates who are not from the above nationalities.

Lower income expatriates may be estimated from the number of expatriate workers in construction, manufacturing, household domestic services, agriculture and fishing, and transportation and storage: over 200,000.³⁷ This figure excludes those expatriates in limited-pay jobs such as municipal cleaning). The remaining expatriate community, no larger than 200,000, may be considered as middle class.

The most extensively researched phenomena in English about expatriates in the GCC is the “institutional violence” practiced against them.. Andrew Gardner,³⁸ for example, carefully has documented the system of “institutional violence” that expatriates face in Bahrain. Physical assault,

35 TradeArabia (2010), 'Amnesty chance for illegal Bahrain residents', 21 February; viewed 14 June 2011, <http://www.tradearabia.com/news/law_175193.html>.

36 Author calculations from the 2010 Bahrain Census.

37 M. Baldwin-Edwards (2011), 'Labour immigration and labour markets in the GCC countries: national patterns and trends', Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London School of Economics, Working Paper Number 15.

38 A. Gardner (2005), 'City of Strangers: The Transnational Indian Community in Manama, Bahrain, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, Tucson.

abuse due to the Kafala system, and the outlawing of strikes and labour unions are but a few of the forms of segmentation and domination that occur within the system. It also is taken as accepted wisdom that the presence of such a large expatriate labour force in the region is due to the excess capital available locally, and subsequently the severe shortage and need for labour that this creates. This is certainly an important factor, but it is an incomplete explanation. It is not simply a matter of supply and demand, because it is necessary to understand the *form* that this expatriate influx has taken (including, e.g., the decreasing reliance on Arabs within the expatriate community). A much more fruitful understanding comes from interpreting the current demographic makeup as emerging from the twin processes of capital formation and demographic management for political and social control by the state. Both Adam Hanieh and John Chalcraft have emphasized this aspect in different ways.³⁹ Hanieh employs a different variation of the concept of the “spatial fix” of capital, where in this metaphorical meaning it is a solution to capital’s dilemma of requiring labour while also needing to guard against any potential unrest that might arise from the presence of a significantly large labour force in an industrialized society, including the development of a labour class consciousness. Capital’s fix is to create a space of labour that is global, relying on the global market as a whole for the provision for labour. Thus:

[T]he process of class formation in the Gulf has been spatially structured – institutionally reflected in the reliance on temporary migrant labour flows and an extremely restrictive notion of citizenship.⁴⁰ ...

Temporary migrant workers find themselves competing with hundreds of millions of compatriots dispersed across the Middle East and South Asia. For these reasons,

³⁹ A. Hanieh (2011), *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan); and ? Chalcraft (2010),

⁴⁰ Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class*, p. 19.

the spatialization of class – the fact that class is formed through a relationship established between spatially distinct sets of social relations – acts to depress the price of labour power and magnify the exploitation of these workers.⁴¹

Thus capital found a “spatial fix” by turning to the global labour market to provide the necessary labour for surplus capital, ensuring that this class of expatriates is from diverse countries and backgrounds to avoid any class or national solidarity that might develop, and which is endowed with very limited political, social or economic rights. Chalcraft tackles the social and political control inherent within the expatriate-citizen distinction from a different angle, arguing that since the 1973 oil crisis, it has acted as a form of “hegemony” in the Gramscian sense, where the threat of Arab nationalism or any other form of opposition from expatriates is minimized by their segmentation from different countries. The “native-foreigner” divide also could be used as a method for the elite to appear as the defender of citizen’s interests, with the state able to portray itself as able to protect citizens from the threat of the “other” outsider. Similarly, the state would be viewed by expatriates as defending their interests locally against the “restless natives”.⁴²

To these forms of control, we can add a further element. Another significant function played by the reliance on an expatriate workforce is to limit the influence of citizens within the productive sphere and contain any possible labour threats that might materialize from locals. Bahrain has a long history of labour unrest, with organized movements and strikes being a recurrent feature since the 1920s. A major feature from the reliance on expatriate labour was to weaken the influence of the local population in production and limit any strike possibilities. With citizens now constituting less than a quarter of the labour force, any potential industrial unrest the ramifications of would be minimised. This is reflected by the steady drop in the percentage of Arab workers since the 1970s,

41 Ibid, p. 52.

42 J. Chalcraft (2011), ‘Monarchy, migration and hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula’, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London School of Economics, Working Paper Number 12.

with the government perceiving them as bringing in Pan-Arab and revolutionary ideas that might influence the local population.⁴³

A final social group within Bahrain illustrates further the use of population for social and political control: the “politically naturalized” citizens. Since the mid-1990’s, and increasingly in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the opposition in Bahrain has accused the government of fast tracking the citizenship of carefully selected foreigners in order to change the demographic makeup of the country. The “politically naturalized,” as they are called, are Sunni Muslims mainly from Bedouin Arab tribes in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as ethnic Baluchis from Baluchistan province in Pakistan; These groups are perceived as having close ethnic and or cultural links to the local rulers.

There are no official numbers on the extent of political naturalization. The most reliable estimates put the number of those politically naturalized between 2001-2007 at 61,000 to 62,000.⁴⁴ This estimate was derived by taking the historical natural growth rate of the Bahraini population and looking at the difference in the population number based on historical growth rates and the official population number given by the ministry of information. The official number presents an impossibly high natural growth rate with an unexplained increase of at least 62,000 in the period under consideration, or approximately 15 per cent of the citizen population.

In the strict sense, the politically naturalised do not seem to serve any direct economic purpose. They are employed in large numbers in the security and defence forces, however, increasing the perception that they have been brought in to control the local population. This systematic use of foreign forces is a tradition that goes back decades. The British first used this policy in the nineteenth century, when they brought to the Trucial coast—contemporary Bahrain,

43 I argue this point more in-depth in:

O. AlShehabi (2012), *Uprooting: Mega Real Estate and the aggravation of the demographic disorder in the GCC*. Beirut, Centre for Arab Unity Studies.

44 A. Marzooq (2011), ‘780 monthly naturalized individuals in Bahrain’, *Al-Wasat*, 19 March; viewed 16 June 2011, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/2021/news/read/284690/1.html>>.

Oman, Qatar and the UAE--divisions composed of men from Baluchistan and the Indian sub-continent to help establish control over the local population. The use of foreign security forces limits the risk of identification with locals and of defection, and fears about loyalty are less of an issue, as long as they are provided the right material incentives.

Thus, the current population composition rose from the twin processes of capital accumulation and political and social control (including containment and even social engineering). Indeed, the large influx of non-Bahrainis to the island, both expatriates and naturalized citizens, signifies not only a transformation in the demographic *characteristics* of the population, but also a radical *physical transformation* of the population, as the people inhabiting the island have increased in numbers substantially with the composition of the population changing considerably as a result. Individuals increasingly are stratified into citizens or expatriates. Heavy reliance is placed on imported expatriates for productive labour use with limited political and labour rights, while the role of citizens in labour is extremely marginalized. Within each group there is further stratification based on nationality, ethnicity, class and sect. Thus, there is stratification and engineering of the population makeup into different categories, each with different rights, benefits, and there is little possibility for cross-interaction and solidarity between them.

Urban Geography of Bahrain

It is obvious that the spatial and demographic currents in Bahrain are intimately related, with both the size and the population of the island experiencing a simultaneous and significant expansion over the past few decades. How have these two currents interacted together to form the geographic landscape of Bahrain? This interaction involves a bewildering mix of class, nationality, ethnicity and sect in urban sprawl, historic city centres and the newly created mega-projects on reclaimed

land. In what follows I provide a brief outline of the general themes and currents of this “uneven geographical development”⁴⁵ that characterises the landscape of Bahrain. My main focus is on the general map, disbursement and interaction between the different currents, focusing particularly on the historic city centres, rather than the conditions of life within each of them.

In particular, two features of Bahrain give its development a unique trajectory when compared with other Arab states on the shores of the gulf. The first is historical continuity both on the spatial and the demographic front. Unlike other Arab cities along the Gulf coast, the cities and villages of Bahrain still retain a significant part of their old spatial configuration, with their old layout of narrow alleyways and neighbourhoods largely intact for more than a hundred years. On the demographic front, a sizeable proportion of citizens still live within the historical confines of these cities and villages, with a strong attachment to these areas. Thus, they continue to display a sense of historical continuity both on the spatial and population front.

The other unique factor is Bahrain's spatial intimacy, characterised by the small geographic area of the country. Historic city centres, villages, new suburban areas, and the latest “mega real estate projects,” all are within a stone’s throw of each other. This spatial intimacy, combined with the afore-mentioned historical continuity, has made the “old” and “new” meet within an extremely confined and interconnected area.

Historically, Muharraq and Manama were the two major urban centres of Bahrain, with 60 per cent of the population in 1957 living within the confines of the two cities and the rest disbursed in villages across the island.⁴⁶ This started changing after the advent of the oil era, particularly after

45 For more on “uneven geographic development,” see D. Harvey (2006), *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

46 Bahrain Census 2010, Kingdom of Bahrain Central Informatics Organization; viewed online, 16 June 2011, <http://www.cio.gov.bh/CIO_ENG/SubDetailed.aspx?subcatid=256>.

the oil boom that followed the first “oil crisis” in 1973 and the subsequent population boom both in citizen numbers and in expatriates. In 1941, there were 14,380 housing units in Bahrain. By 2001, there were 106,000.⁴⁷ This number reached 151,580 units by 2010.⁴⁸

For citizens, the most preferred housing option was a private home in the urban sprawl that began developing on the island. Locally referred to as “villas,” such homes make up 54,983 of the total local households of 93,653. Urban sprawl began to develop mainly in the uninhabited parts in the middle of the island and on the outskirts of the old cities of Manama and Muharraq. The houses for citizens in these urban sprawls have been built with considerable subsidy from the government. This was part of the social contract underlying the rentier state, where the government would provide privileges and benefits strictly limited to local citizens (as opposed to expatriates), including free health, education and subsidized housing, in return for political allegiance. Between 1975 and 2002, a total of 61,509 families had benefited from loans from the ministry of housing.⁴⁹ These houses were to be built in newly designed suburbs and model towns across the island, similar to those found in North American suburbs. An example of this is Isa town, the first model town that commenced work in 1967 in the middle of the main island.

Over the last decade, naturalised citizens also came to play a part in this process, with many of them living in the newly developed urban sprawl. Their presence has led to tensions, as they were seen as taking over housing that should have been allocated to “real” citizens. Living in

47 O. Al-Hassan (2007), ‘Khalifa bin Salman: He chose achievements, so the prize chose him,’ *Bahrain News Agency*, 28 April; viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://www.bna.bh/coverage/press/25.php>>.

48 Bahrain Census 2010, Kingdom of Bahrain Central Informatics Organization; viewed online, 16 June 2011, <http://www.cio.gov.bh/CIO_ENG/SubDetailed.aspx?subcatid=256>.

49 M. Saeed (2008), ‘Al-Dhahrani refuses to ratify MPs’ letter demanding the lands’ masterplan from the political leadership’, *Al Wasat*, 18 June; viewed online, 16 June 2011, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/2112/news/read/300915/1.html>>.

mixed areas also placed the naturalized citizens in direct contact with “native-born” citizens, often leading to friction and sometimes even violence.

For example, one well-known incident in 2009 involved clashes between members of a Sunni family and some of the politically naturalized, with the event becoming a cause célèbre on the island.⁵⁰ Indeed, Sunnis frequently complain that they have been the most to suffer from the effects, as the politically naturalized tend to take up jobs in the security forces and live in areas that historically have been predominantly Sunni neighbourhoods.

From the expatriate point of view, the situation varied considerably depending on class. The majority live in flats (33,787), concentrated in Manama (21,920) and Muharraq (4,589). Most of the better off lived in gated compounds or villas in the leafy suburbs of Budaya or Saar in the northern or central parts of the island (more than 6,700 households). With the opening of the new mega- real estate projects on reclaimed land, a significant number moved to such developments, particularly the development on Amwaj island. Indeed, the overall image seems to be that these new mega projects are catering primarily for better-off expatriate residents in the islands.

A significant portion of lower-income expatriates were concentrated in labour camps. No precise data is available on the number of these labour camps, but informal observation suggests that they hold a sizeable proportion of the households. Unfortunately, given the transient, undocumented or illegal nature of many expatriates, data is non-existent, and the 2010 census is not very useful in this regard.⁵¹ Labour camps generally would be on the outskirts of the cities or close

50 M. Singh (2008), 'Councillor calls for calm' *Gulf Daily News*, December 15; Viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=237697>>.

51 For example, the 2010 census documents only 46,554 expatriate “households” with a total of 163,095 members. This compares with a total official number of expatriates of 666 thousand.

to industrial areas, disbursed across the island, and sited away from the locals. Usually a company would rent the camp for its employees, mainly workers in the construction or industrial sectors.⁵²

The dynamics in the old city centres and their peripheries are probably the most interesting feature of the geographic map of Bahrain, as they represent the focal point where the different spatial and demographic forces intersect and often collide. Middle class expatriates --those in semi-skilled and skilled professions and services, and mainly hailing from the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines or Arab countries--would generally live in apartments in or near to the two historic city centres, particularly in Manama. There are also a significant number of unskilled and lower class expatriates living within the confines of the old city, mainly in old houses in the historic city centre. These are houses whose original local inhabitants vacated and then turned into apartments and shops for rent, or just rented out in their original condition to expatriates. The majority of these houses are in Muharraq (more than 6,300) and Manama (4,300). More than 4,600 Bahraini households lived in these houses in Muharraq and more than 1,200 households in Manama. In contrast, the official 2010 census documents only 1,133 expatriate households living in these houses in Muharraq and 637 in Manama. This is probably an inaccurate statistic, given the status of most expatriates who live in these dwellings. They mostly would be low-paid workers in the services industry who are “free-visas,” an arrangement by which a local sponsors an expatriate to remain in the country, but who then has to make do by finding his own work for any third party employer, i.e., they are “illegal residents” in Bahrain.

Another factor that complicates the changing demographics in the city centre of Manama has been Bahrain’s emergence as a well-known weekend destination for GCC nationals, mainly Saudis, who come to the island for pleasures that are not available in their country. This includes

⁵² For a detailed description of types and conditions of labour camps, see A. Gardner (2005), ‘City of Strangers: The Transnational Indian Community in Manama, Bahrain.’ Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona.

alcohol and prostitution, but also cinema complexes and retail shopping malls that offer a more relaxed social atmosphere where both sexes and families can mingle. In 2009, for example, 8.7 million tourists visited the island, including 6.8 million who came across the causeway that links Saudi Arabia to Bahrain.⁵³ Most of the hotels that cater to the visitors are located in the city centre of Manama.

Thus, the historic cities have become a fluid and increasingly shifting mix of commercial shops, hotels catering to Saudi and other GCC nationals on weekend pleasure trips, locals who are either too poor or too stubborn and rooted to move out (and are disproportionately of an older age), and increasingly expatriates of the lower to middle class.

This situation is not constant but is steadily changing. The ratio of nationals living in the old districts is steadily decreasing, and the numbers of commercial shops and hotels and units rented out to expatriates is rising. There are no accurate data on this, but some statistics provide insight. For example, between 2006 and 2010, in the second electorate district in Muharraq, a district that lies in the heart of the historic city, the number of eligible voters fell by more than 40 per cent..⁵⁴ Such a decrease in 4 years shows the rate at which locals have been vacating the historic city centres. As more shops spring up, more houses are vacated to be rented to expatriates or turned into shops, and as the city becomes more congested and the number of familiar faces in the neighbourhood decreases, the push gets stronger for locals to move out. The opportunity to move to one of the new housing opportunities in the urban sprawl of the island, away from the historic centres, and to rent out the vacated old house for profit, further increases the incentives to move. These incentives get stronger the more the process accumulates, reaching a tipping point where

53 *Al-Ayam* (2010), 'Tourism in Bahrain has huge potential to grow,' *Al-Ayam*, 14 September; viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/2112/news/read/300915/1.html>>.

54 H. Al-Fardan (2010), 'The number of potential voters decreases in 12 out of 40 districts,' *Al-Wasat*, 26 August; viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/elections/page/471570.html>>.

locals no longer find the historic city centre desirable as a living space.

One final ingredient has to be considered in the mix of urban sprawl and historic cities. Most of the new mega projects on reclaimed land lie not far from the historic city centres, which (used to) lie on the shores of the island. Manama is a case in point: overlooking the old city centres are the twin towers of the World Trade Centres and the twin towers of the Bahrain Financial Harbour, two of the most high profile mega projects built on reclaimed land and targeted mainly toward commercial clients.

These mega projects are not very different in style or scale from the projects that have that have been developed in the other GCC states over the past ten years. This has recently generated the view of the “modern changing,” or transient city in the GCC.⁵⁵ In such a city, the architecture is dominated by a culture of change that looks for whatever is new, grand, and modern. A discord occurs between the general architecture of the city, and the people who inhabit it and their culture. What once was an old housing district, a palm grove, or even sea could change within a few months into a gleaming skyscraper or a shopping mall, with very little or no input from those who actually inhabit the city. Indeed, even the people themselves become transient to a large degree, both in terms of the fact that the majority are expatriates or tourists with a limited stay in the city, and the fact that the locals' profession or even living locations have to alter to reflect these changes. A person who once was a fisherman might wake up to find that the sea is gone, and that he must cope with this new geographic and economic reality. Indeed, he even may find out that he has to move several kilometres away to a new urban sprawl because his current location is more desirable as a new shopping mall or apartment block.

55 See, for example, M. Al-Nuaim (2009), ‘The city in the Arabian Gulf between the oil boom and the financial crisis: The case of Dubai and its imitators.’ In A. Al-Kuwari (ed.), *The third oil boom and the consequences of the global financial crisis: The case of the GCC* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies).

In Bahrain, this new phenomenon of the transient city confronted the historical continuity of the old cities in both their spatial and demographic aspects within an extremely circumscribed area. This lies at the heart of the uneven geographical development that characterises Bahrain. Centuries-old dilapidated dwellings lie juxtaposed next to shining new skyscrapers, with fishermen's boats sharing the same seafront as private beaches of the gated real estate projects. Locals, expatriates of varying classes and newly naturalized citizens all interact and intermix within the confines of the historic cities and villages, creating a mix that can be bewildering, sometimes even jarring to an outsider.

Radical transformations and radical contestations

It is quite clear that both the spatial and demographic spheres over the geographic landscape of Bahrain have undergone radical transformations. The discourse that emerges around such issues—that mix of viewpoints, opinions and memory that shapes the public and social outlook, although based on the material conditions on the ground, may not correspond exactly to them, and indeed is susceptible to shifting, altering and completely changing. It intersects with what media outlets report, previously held beliefs in society, and the general interactions and developments that happen on a social and political level. Indeed, as Harvey points out, social perceptions interact with objective material changes on the ground, with each feeding into the other.⁵⁶ He elucidates that in great “space-time compression” periods, society's conception of space and time alters tremendously, and people inevitably experience strong contestations and a perturbed state of social values and perceptions, giving rise to various forms of nationalism, sectarianism and other reactions to such radical changes, which in turn also affect material factors on the ground:

⁵⁶ D. Harvey (1990), 'Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80, 3, pp. 418 – 434.

A revolution in temporal and spatial relations often entails, therefore, not only the destruction of ways of life and social practices built around preceding time-space systems, but the "creative destruction" of a wide range of physical assets embedded in the land-scape.⁵⁷

Rapid changes in the objective qualities of social space and time are both confusing and disturbing, precisely because their revolutionary implications for the social order are so hard to anticipate.⁵⁸

Harvey uses as an example the massive changes in the social conceptions of space and time brought about in the first half of the nineteenth century through the advent of the rail network, which enabled many parts of the European continent to be connected together for the first time by trips of only a few hours. He connects the general "time-space compression" experienced during the eventual culmination of the 1848 revolutions that swept across Europe.

Time-space compression has certainly played an important part in Bahrain over the past decade, but it does not quite capture the extent and form of the changes on the island. Bahrain's spatial-demographic transformation over time involved the creation of new land and simultaneous destruction of the sea, the literal importation of a new population (both expatriates and naturalized citizens), among many other changes.⁵⁹ Hence I prefer to label these transformations simply as "radical spatial-demographic transformations" over time, largely driven by capital and state interests. I use the term "radical" in order to emphasize that these changes have been nothing short of deeply radical and indeed revolutionary. I use "spatial-demographic" to emphasize that both the

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 425.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Granted there is a dialectic and interlocking relationship between such changes and time-space contraction. The advent of a modern transportation network, for example, allowed expatriates to be readily imported to Bahrain for production purposes, a clear case of how spatial contraction led to demographic transformation. The transformations in space and demography however, imply more than simply space-time compression (e.g., the increase in physical land size by reclamation), and hence I prefer to use the more general term of "spatial-demographic transformation."

spatial and demographic landscape have been altered *physically* (as well as socially). Central, to these processes, of course, has been the role of the state and capital in driving these spatial-demographic changes.

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze each of the discourses that emerge among the different social groups and the interactions between them. It would be interesting, for example, to investigate the discourses prevalent in the different classes and nationalities of expatriates living on the island, or within the local business elites. Here, however, I focus on the discourse that has developed within the opposition circles of citizens. The focus will be particularly on two strong themes that have emerged within the *politics of resistance* around demography and space: demographic engineering by the government, and theft of public lands, particularly the sea. These two discourses have become a dominant theme within the local politics of resistance to the state, and other than the form of the actual political regime itself, have become the main focus within the political opposition, cutting across different divides within it. Both can be seen within a general movement for “the right to city,”⁶⁰ and for the right of citizens collectively to have a say and to participate in the process of urbanization engulfing the island and in shaping their own geographic space and environment.

The domestic political structure enabled in no small part the extreme form of urbanization and ‘spatial fix’ of capital that has taken place on the island. In its essence, political power over domestic matters is concentrated in the hands of a small ruling elite, while popular input in decision making is severely limited, a situation that is similar in the rest of the GCC (with the possible exception of Kuwait). The executive branch of government is completely non-elected, while the legislative assembly is partially elected via extremely distorted voting districts. The supervisory

60 H. Lefebvre (1996), “The Right to the City,” in H. Lefebvre, E. Kofman and E. Lebas (eds.) *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 63-181.

roles allocated to the legislative assembly are significantly weak, with minimal input in drawing up budgets or investigating institutional corruption. The judicial system lacks independence and relies on the executive branch both for funding and its composition.⁶¹ This lack of judicial and legislative autonomy is reflected in into the public's limited participation in the process of urban planning. Even though there are elected municipal councils, these bodies spend most of their time wrangling with the ministry of municipalities on daily maintenance issues and the operation of public services (garbage collection, inserting speed bumps on roads, etc). Public input in formulating strategic economic policies and urban master plans is negligible, as foreign management consultancy firms mainly undertake such planning. The most important economic sector, oil , is in the hands of the government, which decides how and where to allocate oil revenues in the budget. In short, there are relatively few instruments by which the public can influence or shape economic and urban projects that have been sanctioned or approved at the highest level.

Over the past thirty years, the discourse in Bahraini politics has shifted from Arab nationalism and leftist opposition, which dominated in the 1950s to the 1970s, toward more religious and sect-based politics. By the first decade of the new millennium, groups that define themselves in Shia religious terms mainly influenced the opposition. This holds true for both formally recognised political societies, such as Al Wefaq, the largest political society on the island, and Haq, a movement that is not part of the formal system. Although Haq did include secular members, it is dominated by figures who define their identity and outlook in Shia religious terms. The main difference between the two groups revolves around acceptance of the political system imposed in 2001. Haq rejects this political system, which is based on a new constitution in 2002 that allowed for limited political participation via popular election of half of the legislative body. Al Wefaq, although acknowledging the limits of this system, choses to participate in it. There are also

61 For a review of the political system in Bahrain, see C. Mallat & J. Gelbort (2011), 'Constitutional Options for Bahrain,' *Virginia Journal of International Law*, 2, 1, pp. 1-16.

secular-leftist organizations in the opposition, notably Wa'ad and Al Menbar Democratic Society, but their influence largely has waned since the 1960s and 1970s. The other significant political groups on the island are Sunni religious societies, in their Muslim Brotherhood branch (Al Menbar Islamic Society) or Salafist branch (Al Asala). Both are perceived as supporting largely pro-government positions.⁶²

Apart from the structure of the political system, the issue of public land and political naturalisation came to dominate the political demands of the opposition. In terms of public lands, this further was fuelled by the severe shortage in housing units for nationals, an issue that signalled a breakdown in the traditional rentier system's pact of providing housing assistance to citizens. The shortage of housing is a constant feature and demand in Bahraini politics. The limited availability of public land, the ever-increasing prices, and the population growth have created an unending demand for housing. The waiting list for government-assisted housing exceeds 45,000 households, and it is increasing by 7,000 yearly. The average waiting time for a house has reached 17 years, and would require BD 2.25 billion of government expenditure to satisfy.⁶³ In contrast, the new real estate mega projects, which promise to deliver 60,000 high-end luxury units, are out of reach for the vast majority of Bahrainis. Furthermore, these new developments are being built on what many Bahrainis view as expropriated public land (or more accurately sea), thus creating a perception of theft. Moreover, the situation threatens a breakdown in the traditional rentier system pact, which has been one of the main pillars of allegiance to the government.

Two parliamentary enquiries were launched on the issue, one as an enquiry into the theft of

62 K. Katzman (2011), 'Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy' *Congressional Research Service*, 2 March; viewed online, 16 November 2011, <<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/158480.pdf>>.

63 N. Zain (2010), '2.25 Billion Dinars needed to meet the demand for housing', *Al-Waqt*, 17 April; viewed online, 16 June, <<http://www.alwaqt.com/art.php?aid=206611>>.

public lands and another into sea reclamation. Many of the statistics cited above are from these two enquiries. Interestingly, neither enquiry named any of the main culprits behind the expropriations of land, but instead their reports relied mostly on the passive voice (e.g. “the value of land stolen stood at”).⁶⁴

Crucially, the issue surrounding these lands cut across the political spectrum and society, bypassing the usual Shia-Sunni divide. Many parties, political societies, civil society groups and sections of the broader society coalesced around the issue. A loose coalition of environmental activists, fishermen, politicians and local councillors held several events, talks, and demonstrations on the consequences of land reclamation. This mobilization cut across all citizen groups and threatened to build a national opposition to the government on common, non-sectarian grounds. It worked as a way to lessen vertical segmentation and to strengthen the idea of citizenship through having common grievances and facing common threats. Indeed for all intents and purposes, Bahrain had turned from a collection of scattered villages and towns, which were geographically distinct up until the mid-1970s, into one large urban city in terms of physical geography. The distinction between different villages and towns for the most part has become mental and based on familial ties and history rather than actual physical divides.⁶⁵ This elimination of distance and actual space between the different parts of the nation (a clear case of what Harvey calls “time-space compression”), in conjunction with the common threats faced by them, started a common base for a united and even a national based consciousness for opposition.

Political naturalization also cut across the political spectrum, albeit, given its demographic

64 This is a common phenomenon in Bahrain and other GCC states, where usage of passive voice constructions insulates the authors from having to identify directly the agents or culprits.

65 Sanabis, Jidhafs and Daih are good examples of this phenomenon. To an outside observer, the divide between these three villages is non-existent, with Sanabis and Daih being virtually contiguous and being separated from Jidhafs on the other side only by a two lane road. The rivalry and distinctions between these villages still run strong, however. Never tell a person from Daih that he is from Jidhafs or vice versa!

dimensions, with a bit more reservation. The fact that that many of the politically naturalized work in jobs traditionally held by Sunnis and live in areas that are majority Sunni also helped in closing the divide on the issue, which became one that affected everyone on the political spectrum. One of the biggest demonstrations in the country's history was on political naturalisation, drawing tens of thousands of protestors in 2009.⁶⁶

Even the issue of expatriates living in historically local areas drew attention from across the political divide, particularly in the old city centres. "The bachelors," as many expatriates locally are called (in reference to the fact that the majority of expatriates are males who live without their families), have become a feature in the political discourse, with calls to move them outside of the traditional city centres, and with members of Bahrain's assembly (MPs) suggesting that Manama has become more like Kerala.⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that, given that the economy is seen to depend on expatriates, and that expatriates are perceived as less of a threat to the benefits and privileges of citizens, the calls were much less about reducing their numbers and more about relocating them away from citizens. This contrasts with the case of the politically naturalized, who are seen as directly threatening citizens' benefits and their identity. Thus, there are political demands centring on ending the naturalization process and rescinding the "illegally" given citizenships.

The extreme nature of these forces and the constant shifting and changing of the discourses that surround them, made for an explosive mix that threatened to erupt given appropriate circumstances.

66 M. Abdulla (2009), 'A huge march demands the cessation of political naturalization,' *Al-Wasat*, 31 January; viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/2339/news/read/35365/1.html>>.

67 M. Al A'Ali (2009), 'Wooing Bahrainis Back to Manama,' *Gulf Daily News*, December 04; viewed online June 14 2011, <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=265890>>.

14 February 2011 Protests

Following the wave of uprisings across the Arab world that toppled two leaders in Egypt and Tunisia, mass protests reached Bahrain. Cyber activists chose 14 February to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the National Action Charter, a referendum intended to herald a new political era on the island after decades of political unrest. This signaled their belief that the new political system had not met their aspirations. The events between 14 February and 15 March, at which point a state of emergency was declared that put a temporary halt to the mass demonstrations, present a perfect showcase of how the spatial and demographic currents within Bahrain came to dominate the local scene. They also illustrate the turbulent and explosive nature of the discourses associated with these changes. Indeed, the discourses would shift from day to day, illustrating the extreme impact of the forces involved.

The importance of the “appropriated public land” discourse was exemplified when Sh. Ali Salman, head of the opposition Al Wafaq society, held up a deed in a press conference. He alleged that the deed showed the reclaimed land on which the Financial Harbor project was built had been sold to the prime minister for 1 Bahraini Dinars (\$2.5 US dollars). Subsequently, protestors held up 1 BD notes in demonstrations to highlight the issue.⁶⁸

The impact of the demographic currents surfaced from the first day, when graphic videos of the security forces’ attacks against protestors allegedly showed actions involving some foreign or politically naturalized security forces. Such videos would reappear once again when fights allegedly

68 A. Al Hussaini (2011), 'The One Dinar Protest', *Global Voices*, 7 March; viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/03/07/bahrain-the-one-dinar-protest/>>.

broke out between Shia locals and recently naturalised students at schools.⁶⁹ Scuffles also allegedly occurred between local and politically naturalized youth in Hamad Town, a suburban town of mixed composition. These incidents left several injured.⁷⁰

Some expatriates on the island also were involved in the ensuing events. Groups of expatriates attended pro-regime demonstrations, whether willingly or not, helping to swell the size of the demonstrations. There also were reports of anti-government demonstrators attacking working class expatriates in Manama.⁷¹ The main local English-language newspaper, *The Gulf Daily News*, carried several comments and letters by expatriates expressing their frustration with the anti-government demonstrators and highlighting their support for the government. The majority of expatriates, however, remained on the sidelines, with little direct input into the events.

The discourses regarding the “foreigner-native” issue and the theft of public land was gaining ground during February and March 2011, and it seemed they might be able to unite citizens from across the political spectrum, providing a serious threat to the regime. The dominant discourse in the end, however, came to be an old-new one: the Sunni-Shia divide. Harvey comments that this is not surprising in periods of extreme space-time compression, where “more rather than less of the world's population clings to place and neighborhood or to nation, region, ethnic grouping, or religious belief as specific marks of identity. Such a quest for visible and tangible marks of identity is readily understandable in the midst of fierce time-space compression.”⁷² Given the nature of the opposition over the past two decades, which was mainly organized around Shia-religious lines, the

69 Y. Al Slailse (2011), 'Bahrain: Schools Break Out in Protest', *Global Voices*, 2 March; viewed online 14 June 2011, <<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/03/02/bahrain-schools-break-out-in-protest-videos/>>.

70 Reuters (2011), 'Sectarian clashes erupt in Bahrain,' *Reuters*, 3 March; viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/03/us-bahrain-clashes-idUSTRE7227N420110303>>.

71 BBC News (2011), 'Bangladeshis complain of Bahrain rally 'coercion,' *BBC News*, March 17; viewed online, 14 June 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12773696>>.

72 D. Harvey (1990), 'Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80, 3, pp. 418 – 434. This quote extends over 16 pages of text????? Please check.

vast majority of demonstrators were Shia. The government over time came to push the argument that these protests were organized by Iranian and Hizbullah-backed Shias. An anti-opposition and largely Sunni political group, 'The National Unity Gathering,' emerged to counter the demonstrators and provide a voice for the "Sunni street." After a state of emergency was declared on 15 March, followed by a security clampdown, the dominant discourse was a split between pro-opposition Shias and anti-opposition Sunnis. Subsequently, talk of demographic engineering and the theft of public land took a back seat to daily updates regarding the security clampdown and the Sunni-Shia divide that has engulfed the island.

Nothing encapsulates the extreme spatial and demographic transformations and the associated revolutionary shifts in discourses and social perception as Lulu, or the Pearl Monument that was at the centre of the opposition's movement. Previously a busy traffic roundabout with no particular historical significance except for an eye-pleasing pearl monument at its centre, Lulu became the focal point of Bahrain's opposition protest movement, with thousands of individuals gathering daily during the February-March period. Built on reclaimed land, it was located on what used to be "Sanabis" sea, a coastline named after a nearby village that once overlooked the (now reclaimed) shoreline. On one side of the monument stood the Al Lulu Towers,, one of the new real estate mega projects on reclaimed land. On the other side lie the four villages of Burhama, Sanabis, Jedhafs and Daih, Shia villages that used to be on the seashore but now lie several kilometers inland. Close by is the central market of Manama and the districts of Salmaniya and Nuaim, parts of the old city that now are inhabited largely by expatriates. Across the road from the roundabout rise the twin towers of Bahrain Financial Harbour, a busy commercial centre that has come to epitomize the mega real estate projects erected on reclaimed land.

A combination of fate, quick thinking and Bahrain's heavy traffic allowed the funeral procession for one of the those killed on 14 February to reach Lulu, turning it into the protesters' equivalent of Tahrir Square in Cairo. Different stalls, lectures, displays of public art and

demonstrations took place daily at the site.⁷³ Originally built on reclaimed sea, Lulu was reclaimed back as a public space for social protest. As the opposition's protest movement developed during February and March, the National Unity Gathering in turn also chose a public location of their own to hold protests: The Al Fateh Mosque, which ironically also is built on reclaimed land. Two large-sized demonstrations were held at Al Fateh between 14 February and 15 March, emphasizing that the group had their own demands, which were different and often directly opposed to those of the protestors at Lulu. In fact, Al Fateh and Lulu became the two icons of the diverging political movements on the island.

In a remarkable showcase of the contradictions involved, the government abruptly tore down "Lulu" one day after it had cleared the protestors from its premises. Thus, what once was Sanabis sea, which land reclamation then turned into a traffic roundabout, which in turn the opposition then turned into a public space at the heart of their activities, suddenly was turned into a pile of rubble, with the destruction broadcast on national television. The memory of Lulu in turn become a symbol of resistance and "steadfastness" for the opposition, one which for them encapsulates their fight against oppression, with its figure ordaining most of the opposition's pictures and paraphernalia. Many opposition protests since then have faced off with the police in attempts to march back to where the roundabout once stood, with several individuals succeeding in darting across heavy police presence to reach the former site of Lulu. The area remains a closed area heavily fortified by security and military personnel.

For many in the Al Fateh group, Lulu became a symbol of treason: the birthplace of a coup attempt by one side of the population against the other without any attempt at consultation or reaching out to the other side. For the government, it was a memory of a dangerous revolt best

⁷³ I have written more extensively on the Pearl Round about in O. AlShehabi (2011a), 'The community at Pearl Roundabout is at the centre,' *The National*, 1 March; viewed online, 11 June 2011, <<http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/the-community-at-pearl-roundabout-is-at-the-centre>>; and idem, (2011b), 'Political 'art' blossoms in Bahrain,' *The Guardian*, 6 March; viewed online, 11 June 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/06/bahrain-protests-art-political-pearl-roundabout>>.

erased through physical destruction, although it still is forced to guard its location heavily lest the opposition return to the original site of their movement. The authorities even have gone to the extent of withdrawing the local “500 fils” coins, which carry the symbol of the pearl roundabout. The memory of Lulu is a powerful symbol in today’s Bahrain, evoking the simultaneous creation and destruction of space, identity, memory⁷⁴ and their different contestations across extremely politicized and opposed demographic groups. Many more detailed and elaborate accounts, no doubt, will be written on the spatial, social and mental significance of this monument.⁷⁵

What next?

The future path for Bahrain remains uncertain, but what is clear is that the extreme transformations on the spatial and demographic fronts and the associated contestations between the different political factions will continue to play a pivotal role. On the spatial front, too much has been invested by too many vested interests in the mega-real estate projects on reclaimed land, many of which lie in a state of unfinished limbo. Indeed, if one is to set foot in Bahrain, the current landscape would look like a jumble of half-finished highways and buildings, as well as yet to be developed reclaimed land. The importance of the spatial spheres also could increase with the incessant demand for housing from citizens.

The demographic front, currently enveloped within a discourse of the Shia-Sunni divide, also will continue to play a dominant role, probably in more ways than one. The interplay between expatriates, locals and naturalized citizens will be crucial. Shifts within the dominant discourse could occur here. If citizens start viewing naturalized individuals or expatriates as a threat, the discourse once again could shift from the current Shia-Sunni split to a more nationalist tone. On the other hand, if the Sunni-Shia discourse continues, then some Sunnis who are loyal to the

⁷⁴ For more on the powerful role of memory, see T.C. Chang and S. Huang (2005), ‘Recreating place, replacing memory: Creative destruction at the Singapore River,’ *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 46, 3, pp. 267 - 280.

⁷⁵ For details on the memorialization of Lulu, see Amal Khalaf (2013), ‘Squaring the circle: Bahrain’s pearl roundabout,’ *Middle East Critique*, 22, 3 (Fall).

government could start aligning with “naturalized citizens” and “expatriates” against “Shias” much more explicitly. Another factor could be a movement emerging within expatriates for better living, economic and political rights. This would not be far-fetched, as there already have been recent strikes by expatriates over living conditions and pay.⁷⁶ Many decision makers, including those in the government, would like to think that they are able to predict which of these factors and corresponding discourses will come to dominate the scene, hence enabling them to plan how best to manage and control them. The radical nature of the local spatial and demographic transformations, as well as the fact that the “Bahrain issue” has become politically regionalized to incorporate US, Iranian, Saudi and GCC involvement, makes any notion that one accurately can predict or tightly control what will emerge from these highly charged, constantly shifting and extreme forces seem like wishful thinking.

⁷⁶ A. Haider (2010), 'Strikes on rise', *Gulf Daily News*, April 10, viewed 14 June 2011, <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=275350>>.

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