

Title: Analysis: Bahrain folds 25 years of state of emergency.

Date: February 14, 2001 **Publication:** United Press International

LONDON, Feb. 15 (UPI)

Bahrain is preparing to make probably the most important changes of its modern political history after it gained independence from British rule in 1971.

Some 217,000 Bahrainis are set to participate in a referendum this week that could lead to the abolition of a 25-year state of emergency and the return of parliamentary life in a democratic royal state as promised by the country's Emir Sheikh Hamad Bin Issa al-Khalifa few days ago.

However, achieving this goal and making it a success is not necessarily guaranteed and remains linked to many complicated factors that are internal, Gulf, regional and international.

Undoubtedly, it is extremely difficult to predict the impact of these factors on the future of this tiny Gulf country, which is deprived of abundant oil but is strategically vital to the United States as was clear during the 1991 Gulf War.

Bahrain is located in a very tense region in the world at the crossroads between Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia, a country only 15 kilometers away and linked to Manama by a bridge.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Bahraini government and opposition are adopting calculated and realistic steps to successfully conduct the two-day referendum scheduled to begin on Wednesday.

The new charter proposed by the emir includes vital reforms such as restoring the parliament dissolved in 1975, and establishing a constitutional monarchy, an independent judiciary system and a free press.

The charter was to be fully implemented by the year 2004 and was meant to open a new page in the political life of Bahrain which has witnessed dangerous disturbances that have left at least 38 dead in five years.

In the past few days, the emir also issued a general amnesty under which some 400 political opponents were pardoned, including all prisoners and opposition members living abroad. These steps were taken to fulfill a request by the opposition to improve political climate in the country so that the referendum would succeed.

The general amnesty has always been one of the opposition's main demands and a pre-condition to taking part in the new political life which the emir promised would be based on sharing authority and respect for "freedom, justice and equality without discrimination because of race, religion or sex."

Among those who were released were opposition leader Abdel Wahab Hussein, a former teacher who was arrested in 1996 and sentenced to prison on charges of taking part in inciting anti-government actions which were led by the Shiite opposition who demanded the restoration of parliamentary life.

The parliament, which was elected in 1973, was dissolved two years later by late ruler, Sheikh Issa bin Salman al-Khalifah. Accelerated developments in the past few days have indicated that the new emir and his government on one hand, and the Bahraini opposition with its various factions on the other, are moving towards this goal in a realistically responsible way new to the Gulf and even Arab countries.

Although the main opposition group, the Movement to Free Bahrain, expressed doubts about the referendum, it soon announced its appreciation of the emir's measures, only focusing criticism on the National Charter project in arguing it was not up to the people's aspirations. The organization called for abolition of the emergency law and the participation of international observers in the referendum but opened the door to dialogue with the government by hinting that it was ready to ease the tone of its opposition.

For his part, the emir visited one of the prominent Shiite religious leaders, Sayyed Ali al-Ghoraifi, in a move described by the government as aiming at consolidating national reconciliation. Ghoraifi praised the emir, saying his "initiative to reactivate democracy during the past two years is being blessed by all, principally the religious leaders."

For sure, the economic difficulties facing Bahrain and its continued budget deficit (reaching \$1 billion); the dispute with Qatar over a number of islands in the Gulf; decreased Iranian threats against the legitimacy of al-Khalifa Sunni regime in a country of a Shiite majority; and the focus of the Bahraini opposition on political means in their struggle against the government have played essential roles in developing this important political overture in the region.

The Qatar-Bahrain dispute involves the two oil-rich islands of Howar and Skhour al-Fasht, controlled by Bahrain and the Zobara sector on the Qatari coast, claimed by Manama. It dates back to 1939 when Britain --then the ruling mandatory power in the region -- decided to grant Bahrain the Howar island. Qatar never accepted the decision, and the dispute turned into an armed struggle until Saudi King Fahd finally intervened to calm the situation. However, despite their old conflict, Qatar and Bahrain maintained normal diplomatic ties.

The Bahrain authorities have been engaged in a bitter struggle with the opposition that turned bloody and violent in 1996 when police confronted demonstrators protesting death sentences against three opposition members -- Ahmed Abdallah al-Asfour, 30, Youssef Hassan Abdel Baqi, 31, and Ahmed Houbay, 30 -- on charges of bombing a restaurant that killed seven people.

A number of opposition members fled the country while others were jailed. International human rights groups organized campaigns to defend the political prisoners estimated at many thousands at the time, who were reportedly subjected to torture by Bahraini security services.

Bahrain then accused Iran of being behind the disturbances which eased after the new emir came to power following the death of his late father, Sheikh Issa bin Salman, nearly two years ago.

Mansour al-Jamri, leader of the Movement to Free Bahrain, and the leftist leader Abdul Rahman Nuaimi, who has lived in Syria for 25 years, welcomed the new charter and expressed hope that it would be the beginning of more reforms.

Al-Jamri, who lives in London, said the Manama government finally realized that the Bahraini problem does not require "a security solution," noting that there are between 300 and 400 opposition members living abroad while the number of political prisoners varies between 400 and 500.

Bahrain has a population of 650,000 with the majority Muslim Shiites and 40 percent foreign descendents.

(c) 2001 UPI All rights reserved.

Copyright 2000 by United Press International.

News Provided by COMTEX (<http://www.comtexnews.com>)

COPYRIGHT 2001 United Press International

This material is published under license from the publisher through the Gale Group, Farmington Hills, Michigan. All inquiries regarding rights should be directed to the Gale Group.