

Authoritarianism in Bahrain: Motives, Methods and Challenges

AMSS 41st Annual Conference - September 29, 2012

Nebil Husayn

Princeton University

Abstract

This paper seeks to identify different elements in Bahraini society and government that indicate the existence of authoritarianism and repression as well as the methods which the state has utilized to maintain them. Drawing on Benjamin Smith, this study will search for elements of the coercive state apparatus and strategic alliances that encourage authoritarianism, especially in times of crisis. A number of sociologists have also identified the ideological state apparatus (ISA) as a mechanism that maintains hegemonic worldviews and limits changes in an existing power structure. In addition to the coercive state apparatus and alliances, the government of Bahrain has utilized the media, schools, mosques, private and public sector jobs as an ISA to influence and coerce public affirmation of the status quo. Tactics include the characterization of Bahrain as an Arab and Sunni country, infiltrated by protestors who are dangerous, deceitful, sectarian, and loyal to Iran. Hardliners in the government particularly promote anti-Shī'ī agendas that stigmatize, disenfranchise and repress the majority of its citizens. Various investigations have identified the claims of the state as largely fictitious; however, over a thousand citizens have been detained and some convicted and sentenced for crimes predicated upon these claims. The government has carried out a systematic crackdown of protests and justified its actions through discourses on loyalty and citizenship. Protesters were publicly accused of treason, while pro-government partisans were portrayed as loyal and loving citizens. An analysis of the claims and policies of the state indicates its fear of the political and financial empowerment of its Shī'ī population. The empowerment of such a population would greatly disrupt the unity of the GCC-led bloc against Iran, a paradigm that claims "pro-Arab must mean pro-Sunni," and the triumphalist hegemony of Sunni-Arab cultural currents which dominate discourses on history, religion, and politics. The concurrent effects of all these elements have succeeded in obstructing changes to the balance of power generally and democratization specifically. After analyzing the government's claims, this investigation will end by identifying recent developments both inside and outside of the country that have encouraged the reduction of repression in the country. There are indications that authoritarianism in the country is largely motivated by personal (ascendancy of the person and his clan) and strategic interests (sectarian and political alliances). This investigation presents a framework for understanding the ideological, political, and economic methods and motives that encourage hardliners in the monarchy to maintain authoritarianism rather than shift power toward a more democratic, parliamentary state.

Outline

As the title of my paper indicates I am concerned with the question “why is authoritarianism in Bahrain so robust?” This links to the question “why have oil-rich regimes of the Gulf survived the 20th century?” Why have they not fallen over periods of Arab nationalism and secularism or religious revival and the popularity of Islamism? Why have they not fallen in the Arab spring, where movements for self-determination have proliferated? Leading scholars in economics and political science, such as Benjamin Smith, have asked these questions over the past two decades. Accounting for factors such as oil or another natural resource, high inflation, the boom and bust effect, ethnic factionalism, and even repression (which encourages instability), they have found none of these relationships were statistically significant in explaining regime failure upon quantitative analyses of a diverse cross section of 107 developing countries from 1960 to 1999.

So what is The Short Answer? How are these regimes able to maintain power in spite of the presence of these destabilizing elements? There are 3 main qualities:

1. The CSA
2. The ISA
3. Strategic Alliances both in its Domestic and Foreign policies.

Our Five Questions:

1. What are the motives for maintaining authoritarian rule?
2. What are the methods of maintaining it?
3. What do Reformers want in Bahrain?
4. What have been effective ways in encouraging reform in the country over the past year?
5. How do we get hardliners in Bahrain, and their allies KSA, and the USA to recognize, allow or support democratization?

Let us start with the first question:

Those in power have strategic self interests in the ascendancy of the tribe, specifically the ruling al-Khalifa family. Each branch rivals the other. The eldest member of the Royal family is the Hardliner and prime minister since the post's inception in 1971, Khalifa b. Salman, who has been influential in obtaining key posts for other hardliners who support their authoritarian rule (Minister of Royal Court, Interior Minister and the Defense Forces Chief of Staff). He and other hardliners have led a sustained effort to diminish the power and goals of the Western-educated and reform-minded King (Hamad) and Crown Prince (Salman).

In general it should be clear that the royal family holds all strategic ministry positions and nearly half of the twenty three cabinet position. Patrimonialism.

Khalifa wants power and hegemony for his family and his branch and maintains a pro-saudi agenda. This means the broadcast and funding of Wahhabi and Salafi views in different institutions in addition to the alienation discrimination of its Shi'i population.

(2) What are the methods of maintaining it? Role of the ISA, CSA, and Strategic Alliances with the US and Saudi Arabia in encouraging authoritarianism.

What is the ISA? Hardliners propagate their ideology in Schools, Mosques, Media. Loyalty to the state means unyielding and uncritical allegiance to the family. Curriculums in Schools do not recognize its Shi'i and Persian heritage; rather reflecting a hegemonic discourse of Sunni assumptions and views of history and one of Arab superiority over the Persian. Shi'is are then associated with the non-Arab and non-Sunni Other that is without legitimacy. In regards to Mosques (over 30 Shi'i mosques demolished)– Media only broadcasts the sermons of Sunni communities and leaders on Friday. State Sponsored Media: also repeats these views that a loyal citizen is uncritical of government.

What is the coercive apparatus? Made up of courts, security forces, and army. Patrimonial Administration that directs courts and prisons.

Hardliners have used the courts for Repressive legal action: Dozens of Doctors and nurses have been arrested and given jail sentences spanning 5-15 years for essentially treating protestors and appearing on news networks to describe the results of the crackdown.

Police and auxiliary corps are made up of foreign troops, The foreign troops are part of a systematic program to change demographics and control the Shi'i population. These naturalized troops do not sympathize or identify with population they control and have engaged in widespread levels of mental, physical, and sexual abuse.

Finally, the army can intervene in repressing its own citizens in the last instance because GCC forces are willing to enter the country and protect oil installations in the army's place. All of these coercive branches are working to repress citizens by force, physically and legally.

Bahrain's wealth is relevant here. Smith quantitatively finds a high correlation between oil wealth and a regime's durability. He argues increased protest and repression does not statistically cause regime failure in such states. The state's continued ability to fund the coercive apparatus through its wealth is an important factor in maintaining status quo.

(3) What do Reformers want in Bahrain? Is it regime change as the government claims?

Transparency, Participation of Citizens in private and public sector, an end to discrimination. There are no high posts for Shi'a in the public sector. Equal financial benefits from the state. The democracy movement is close to 40 years old. The last monarch, Amir Isa, dissolved parliament in 1975: when those elected representatives requested the same points: transparency, increased accountability of all ministers, social equality, and citizen participation in civil society and guaranteeing human rights.

(4) What have been effective ways in encouraging reform in the country over the past year?

International pressures for change: US congress blocked an arms deal, human rights organizations have consistently publicized HR violations in the press and informed international institutions like FIFA, or Formula 1, to block the participation of Bahrain and countries with HR violations. Bahrain has responded to such sustained bad press by setting up

an independent inquiry and promising reforms that have yet to be completed.

To wrap up and engage our final question:

(5) How can one successfully encourage hardliners in Bahrain, their allies KSA, and the USA to recognize, allow or support democratization ?

Bahrain's Shi'i citizens have been demanding economic and political reform for decades. However, hardliners in control of the CSA and influencing the ISA have succeeded in obstructing major reforms. Concerted efforts for change must recognize the role of both ideological and coercive apparatuses in the alienation of many Bahraini citizens. Even if legal barriers were removed to empower Shi'is financially or politically (e.g. win key cabinet positions), narratives expressed in the media, schools, and mosques would remain deep and ingrained sources of tension. Substantive reform would require that discourses which champion Arab superiority and domination over Persians be replaced with those that admire both. Bahrain's Persian history would need to be studied rather than ignored. State media has portrayed Sunnism as orthodoxy, while Shi'ism has not enjoyed equal representation. This is in fact a legacy of Saddam Hussein who compared his war with Iran to Qadisiyya (religious conquest of the second caliph); and the discourse is currently being used amongst some Sunni supporters of the FSA in Syria. During the crackdown, branches of the ISA encouraged Sunnis to negatively portray Shi'is as dangerous and loyal only to Iran. The ISA continues to alienate Shi'is and cause them to fear persecution, radicalize, or disengage from participation in peaceful dialogue. The media and public education would need to revise narratives so that Sunnism and Shi'ism are presented as two historic orthodoxies in Islam. Public patronage of pluralism would provide an alternative to absolutist rhetoric of any hardliner or extremist groups.

Evidence indicates that Bahraini government reformers, opposition figures, and foreign players have challenged, if not discredited, some state ideologies. The *Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* has forced the government to admit its heavy use of violence and imprisonment against peaceful protestors when previously it would not admit this fact. Furthermore, the United States, Formula One and Moody's have succeeded in incentivizing reform in the country by acknowledging

news of violent repression of protestors as grounds for canceling agreements with Bahrain or downgrading government bond ratings.

Saudia Arabia has offered economic incentives and military aid to ensure the status quo in Bahrain as a response to its path in running out of oil. As a country well known for its own history of authoritarianism, discrimination and human-rights violations Saudi Arabia opposes democratization in the Gulf. As a response to Saudi pressures, it is important that the United States incentivizes reform by denying countries with egregious human rights violations access to US visas or banking systems. If the US's program of supporting democracy around the world is not enough for it to take such a stance, the prospect of increased anti-American sentiment, radicalization and terrorism should be considered the possible results of continued support for the regime. Continued repression will encourage disenfranchised and persecuted protestors to begin attacking Bahraini, Saudi and American installations and succumbing to extremist or Islamist ideologies as alternatives to democracy. No country stands to benefit from repression over long periods as it encourages the radicalization of the opposition. Furthermore, It is not in the best interests of the US to appear to be legitimating authoritarianism in the Arab or Muslim world today.

We have essentially recognized social, political and economic factors as contributing to the resilience of authoritarian rule. However, government and non-government players have all made concerted efforts to challenge state apparatuses and have achieved modest successes. Reformers – like King Hamad and C P Salman - are already convinced that the financial well-being of Bahrain depends on the successes of its own citizens. They have concluded and that continued repression will only hurt the country's international standing and lead to greater instability. However, Convincing hardliners of this framework will be an important component in encouraging democracy in the country.