



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Bahrain on Edge”
United States Institute of Peace
2301 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington DC
Tuesday, April 26th, 9:30am – 11:30am

On Tuesday, the United States Institute of Peace, the National Democratic Institute, the Solidarity Center, and Human Rights Watch hosted a live video-conference with senior representatives of the Bahraini opposition including: **Khalil Almarzooq**, a leading member of the Al Wefaq Islamic National Society and its bloc’s official spokesperson; Dr. **Muneera Fakhro**, parliamentary member and senior leader of the leftist Wa’ad party; **Mohammed Al Maskati**, head of the Bahrain Youth Center for Human Rights; and **Sayed Hadi al-Musawi**, a Bahraini human rights activist. The event was moderated by **Steven Heydemann**, Senior Vice President and Special Adviser to the Center for Conflict Management at the U.S. Institute of Peace and **Leslie Campbell**, NDI’s senior associate and regional director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Steve Heydemann opened by discussing the Bahraini government’s crackdown and attempts to “silence the voices of the opposition” and put an end to peaceful protests aimed at the establishment of political reform. He stated that this crackdown, which has been supported by the neighboring Gulf countries, has made it difficult for activists to participate in the political process and to talk about the issues with foreign audiences. **Heydemann noted that two of the original participants in the panelists had to withdraw following pressure and threats from the Bahraini government.** **Les Campbell** also noted the importance of this discussion and introduced **Staci Haag**, resident director of NDI’s Gulf Office who then introduced the panelists.

Muneera Fakhro began by discussing the March 17th arrest and detainment of **Ebrahim Sharif**, secretary-general of the Al-Wa’ad party, the suspected arson of Wa’ad party headquarters, and the suspension of the party on April 7th. **She noted that the mass protests which took place in Manama were not initially sectarian in nature**, as evidenced by the presence of Sunnis and members of secular political societies in Lulu Roundabout. Fakhro stated that protesters were seeking democratic reforms and demands later evolved into calls for the creation of a constitutional monarchy, not the overthrow of the king.

Fakhro stated that calls towards a national dialogue on issues such as granting parliament full powers, combating corruption, and the electing a new council to write a constitution was answered by opposition leaders. **She lauded the initial efforts of the Crown Prince, Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa for dialogue and stated that the opposition and the prince were close to an agreement when Gulf Cooperation Countries intervened by sending troops.** This intervention, essentially, crushed the protest movement and the reform movement, Fakhro stated. **The government, instead of agreeing to reforms, attempted to make it appear that a sectarian conflict had taken hold of the country to prevent actual reform from taking place.** She noted that this coincided with the deaths of 25 protesters, the firing of nearly 1000 government employees and the mass arrest and detainment of activists. She stated that opposition is continuing its calls for national dialogue and called for international support in this initiative.

Mohammed Al Maskati noted that the original intention of the protests was to address human rights violations in Bahrain and to call for the release of 23 political prisoners and not for regime change or a resignation of parliament. He also noted that the protests were not ideologically motivated and that as time went on the protesters demands evolved to include freedom of speech, the protection of universal rights, and the inclusion of youth. He stated that if national dialogue and protection of rights had been the original response of the

government, the protests would likely have subsided instead of escalating. **“The violence and repression by the regime can only beget more violence and promote radicalism,” Al Maskati said.**

Khalil Almarzooq began by stating that Al Wefaq is a peaceful and moderate society which has not and is not calling for the formation of an Islamic state, but rather for a civilian state that respects the freedom of religion and belief. He noted that despite the violent crackdown by the regime, the party has urged protesters to restrain and to not retaliate. **Almarzooq stated that the party’s vision for the future is the formation of sustainable system that protects the rights of all people and is inclusive of the ruling family, the Sunnis and the Shi’a.** The only type of foreign intervention Bahrain needs, Almarzooq stated, is for the international community to condemn the use of violence by the regime, to pressure them to institute reform and release detained activists, and possibly to moderate a new national dialogue. **He noted that while the international community originally condemned attacks on protesters, they have been relatively silent since the GCC troops intervened. “Do not let the authorities abuse their strategic relations so you will turn a blind eye on human rights abuses,” he said.**

Sayed Hadi al-Musawi discussed the dismissal of 1000-1500 government employees in the weeks following the crackdown. He noted that this was the largest dismissal action to take place in the country and has affected nearly 9000 citizens. He stated that the number of dismissals is likely to double in the coming weeks, thereby doing greater economic harm to the country. **He expressed his belief that the government’s action is a form of revenge against protesters who took part in protests and “expressed their opinion” and noted that the government has not given the workers a just cause for their dismissal.** He also noted the private sector’s discontent with the action and noted that 99.9 percent of those who were dismissed are Shi’a.

Shawna Bader-Blau of the Solidarity Center also noted the evidence of discrimination among trade unions in Bahrain, stating that the firings seem to be directly related to the participation of workers in the February protests. She called on the government to release leaders of the trade unions, who are currently detained and to end “the intense media intimidation campaign.” **Joe Stork** of Human Rights Watch stated that the events which have taken place since March 16th such as the mass arrests of doctors, journalists, lawyers and activists and the torture and death of protesters in custody are horrifying and demonstrate the “sheer vindictiveness” of the regime.

Steven Heydemann questioned the panel on how the current conditions has affected their sense of what their available options are moving forward and what the future outlook is. **Khalil Almarzooq** responded by stating that the government needs put an end to this “period of revenge” and sectarian campaign so that they can move forward and renew calls for a national dialogue. He noted that the government is using sectarianism as reason to stall reform, and stated that the opposition is ready to work with them. He also stated that the best way to gauge public opinion is through a referendum. **Mohammed Al Maskati** stated that the failure to bring about substantive change will likely push the youth towards radicalism. **Muneera Fakhro** also called on the government to end its sectarian campaign which has echoes of McCarthy-ism and to end its attacks on activists. She called for restarting the national dialogue.

Following the panelists remarks, Bahraini members of the audience expressed their belief that members of the opposition forced the government’s hand by failing to take part in the dialogue and then escalating their demands before they would agree to negotiate. The questioner alluded to the economic consequences of their actions also noted the role of extremists in the protest movement. A Bahraini businessman, also present at the event, discussed the way the protest movement has deeply divided society on sectarian lines and is being pushed forward by foreign agents. He stated that such actions have set the country back and that they must now begin again to redevelop the “progressivism” Bahrain was known for. He also noted how the movement differs from that in Tunisia and Egypt.

In response Almarzooq stated that Al Wefaq has not been hijacked by extremists, but rather they have reiterated the concerns they have had since the National Action Charter was written in 2002 over the lack of parliamentary representation. He stated that back then, the regime called on members of Al Wefaq to enter parliament and

bring about reforms through the political process; however, he noted, that even with membership in the parliament the regime has continued to hinder reforms. Almarzooq also stated that the Crown Prince and the opposition had come to an agreement on seven points of dialogue, but less than 24 hours later GCC troops entered the country and derailed the process. **He expressed his belief that such action demonstrated the regime's disinterest in reform and pointed to the sectarian and revenge campaign of the regime as they attempt to paint the opposition as sectarian extremists.** He pointed to the protest movements in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt as countries which also suffered economic consequences of the uprisings, but who are slowly moving towards recovery as protesters demands for human rights and democracy are addressed. He noted that in neither of those countries did the regime officials attack medical facilities and stated that the Bahraini government had gone further in their violation of rights. He also stated that the firing of government workers who took part in peaceful protests have also had severe economic consequences.

Les Campbell also responded by stating the Wa'ad party is a secular and multi-sectarian society and that both Al Wa'ad and Al Wefaq are considered to be moderate as they participate in a coalition government, work with human rights groups, and other political societies that represent a broad range of Bahrainis. **He also stated that the protests cannot be compared to Tunisia and Egypt, but noted that per capita participation of Bahrainis in the protest movements was actually higher than that of Tunisians and Egyptians.** He called the sectarian labeling of the movements incorrect.

In response to questions on what international organizations and the U.S. can do to help the opposition, **Muneera Fakhro** stated that they can help by exposing the opposition's case to the media and policy makers. She noted that groups like the Bahrain Center for Human Rights have maintained records of those who have been arrested or fired from their jobs and that the international community needs to be made more aware of the situation. **Fakhro also called on international organizations to pressure the Bahraini government to address the issues, call for U.N. intervention, and help restart a national dialogue.** **Mohammed Al Maskati** called on the international community and western governments to condemn the violence and arrests. **Khalil Almarzooq** outlined the opposition and the Crown Prince's moves for national dialogue which was stopped following GCC intervention. He also called for President **Barack Obama** to condemn the violence and call for reform the way he has in the cases of Syria, Yemen and Libya.

Answering other questions on why there was not an international response to the suspension of Al-Wa'ad like there was for Al-Wefaq, **Muneera Fakhro** discussed how the buildings were set on fire and how the secretary-general of the party remains in custody. **Additionally, she expressed her belief that the regime viewed Al-Wa'ad as a threat to the current system as the party is marked by gender equality, religious equality, moderation and freedom.** Additionally, they have many members who are highly respected and highly qualified individuals. **Khalil Almarzooq stated that it is the strategy of the government to create the perception that this is a sectarian movement and that having a party which unites liberals, Sunnis, and Shi'as is dangerous for them.**

Responding to a question on whether it would be acceptable to the opposition if the current government remained in place, **Khalil Almarzooq stated that what the people want is peace and stability and that this cannot be accomplished without having partners in the ruling family who are interested in reform, not just dialogue.** He stated that this should be the focus and called on the international community to support them in this endeavor and to pressure the government to end its revenge campaign. He stated that he believes hardliners in the regime are pushing for the continuation of the revenge period in hopes that the repression will stave off future protesters, but in fact he argues it only serves to anger the masses and fails to address their frustrations. In response to another question, the panelists also noted the difficulties in unifying the opposition under the current climate of fear perpetuated by the government and noted the important role the youth have played in the revolution.

Responding to a question by a Bahraini citizen on Al-Wefaq's calls to abolish the right of "naturalized citizens" from participating in the political process, **Khalil Almarzooq** stated that Bahrainis must distinguish amongst those naturalized citizens who have been living, working, and contributing to the development of Bahrain from

those citizens who were naturalized for political reasons of obtaining sectarian balance and who were brought in just prior to elections. He noted that such actions were an example of the regime abusing its powers to grant citizenship as many of those who were naturalized did not meet the constitutional requirements. He also noted the government argues that it is ill-equipped to provide Bahrainis with adequate services, but has then naturalized over 70,000 foreigners.

Les Campbell closed by stating that you can hear the frustrations of the Bahraini opposition in having their movement classified as a sectarian conflict. He stated that while the sectarian issues cannot be ignored given the fact that the majority of Shi'a and the presence of many guest citizens. **However he states, when discussing the political reform movement in the country, it is incorrect to label this as a sectarian conflict.** Campbell stated that attempts to paint this sectarian are attempts to make the movement less about real political reform and noted that starting in 2002 creation of the national action charter there were large hopes for reform. However, he notes that even then, many raised concerns that the representation of certain districts was unfairly designated.

He also states that there is a perception of an idea of moderates as well that has played an important role in the shaping of the narrative. **The ruling family's statements that they are reaching out to a moderate opposition groups gives the perception that much of the opposition is not moderate. In reality, Campbell states much of the opposition societies and groups are moderate.** Many of them, however, have been shut down and have had their leaders arrested. Al-Wa'ad, he notes has worked with NDI and Al-Wefaq has, for many years, been a moderate voice and noted that in the Pearl Roundabout to help moderate positions of the young people. He also noted how the Bahraini government has attempted to go after intellectuals and stated that their process of arresting the moderates, firing the middle class, making illegal the publication of moderate newspapers, is not a constructive response to the events. He called for a constructive and protracted dialogue.