

High hopes, little progress

HOUSSEIN MOUSSA



Shaik Hamad Essa Alkhalifa's accession as the new Amir on 6 March 1999 raised high hopes of reform after 30 years of stagnation. Encouraging steps were taken regarding civil and political rights. The ruling establishment clearly opposed the Amir's reforms, however, and few substantive changes were made.

The Amir ordered the release of 789 political detainees and the return of 32 political exiles with their families. He allowed some freedom of expression. The Amir gave a key speech on National Day, 15 December 1999, in which he formulated his future policies. The following were emphasized:

- He does not discriminate among citizens and all citizens are equal regardless of religion or ethnic origin.
- He urged writers and intellectuals to criticize government officials, and he urged the officials to accept criticism.
- He stated that economic development should benefit impoverished people and create jobs for the unemployed.
- He promised to furnish a housing plot with basic services for all those without houses.
- He promised to grant citizenship to all those entitled to it.

The people of Bahrain welcomed these promises and debated this and other Amiri statements positively. The ruling establishment clearly opposed the Amir's reforms, however, and few substantive changes were made.

A turning point came on 21 October 2000, at the opening of the 3rd term of the appointed, consultative Alshura Council. In his keynote speech, the Amir announced that he would reveal his envisaged changes on National Day, 15 December 2000. On 25 October 2000, the Amir appointed a 46-member committee to draft The National Charter. The National Charter, which was designed to get the country out of its impasse, passed by 98.4% of the electoral votes. The Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Bahrain (CDHRB) has issued a booklet on The National Charter.

The year 2000 did not witness any shift in traditional policies. The CDHRB issued a report, "Critical Evaluation of Social Development in Bahrain", which was published by Social Watch in its report to Geneva Summit on Social Development in June 2000. This report evaluates government policies on social development in 2000 with reference to the ten commitments made in Copenhagen and confirmed by the Geneva Summit.

No major changes in spite of current prosperity

There was no major change in the economic, social, cultural and legal environment that would encourage social development. A dramatic increase in oil prices increased state revenues by at least 50%. At the opening of the Alshura Assembly on 21 October, the Amir ordered a bonus of one month's salary to government employees and a one-month allowance to retired employees, a 50% cut in electricity rates and reduction of custom fees on several items. Unfortunately, private sector employees who form the majority were not rewarded. A government program providing financial support to citizens newly employed in the private sector was continued.

There were no improvements in legislation or in the strict enforcement of legislation to protect local labour and the low-income majority. On the contrary, the Alshura Assembly discussed draft legislation on privatisation that is alarming in its potential impact on rights and welfare of workers.

Politically, the country witnessed relative détente. Some freedom of expression was tolerated. People were able to raise concerns about economic difficulties, unemployment and distorted development. Because of this relative margin of freedom and the work of NGOs, especially their activities related to the Geneva Summit, people were generally more aware of their rights and the problems facing the country in 2000.

No poverty eradication strategy

There is no official strategy and no target date for poverty eradication. The government claims that incentives provided for foreign investors will create jobs and prosperity. Adjustment policies hurt low-income people. With privatisation of the service sector, the costs of electricity, sanitation, water supply, and housing will increase and the burden will be heavier on low-income citizens. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs allocated more money for assistance to the impoverished families to remedy this situation. The government should enable NGOs to participate in formulating, monitoring and implementing plans to combat poverty. Above all, it should recognize that poverty is a problem.

Increasing unemployment

Contrary to government claims, promotion of employment is not its priority. Unemployment has increased, and was estimated at around 15%. Free visas and an open door for cheap, expatriate labour contributed to unemployment. Policies on the Bahrainisation of jobs and maximum work hours are not enforced in the private sector. There are no specific goals regarding employment and there is no plan to reduce unemployment. Many things could be done to create jobs and reduce unemployment, such as the abolition of the free visa system and open door policy. Bahrainisation of jobs should be obligatory in the public and private sector. Work should be restricted to a maximum of 40 hours and five days a week.

Social integration

There has been no significant change in the government policy toward social integration. The Amir asserted, however, that he does not discriminate among citizens on the basis of religion, sex or ethnic origin. Security force abuses of human rights and dignity were limited and some stateless people were naturalised. The Amir also asserted that economic development should benefit the poor and ensure jobs for the unemployed. It is positive that the government committed itself to such objectives, but in practice, 2000 did not witness the implementation of these promises.

Progress towards gender equity

A breakthrough in 2000 was stipulation of the National Charter that women are entitled to the same political rights as men. Women were represented on the Alshura Council, in the drafting committee of the National Charter, and in debates on the Charter and related issues. The Society of Businesswomen was licensed and well received.

Health, education and social expenditure

Bahrain achieved 84% literacy in 1998 and aims to eradicate illiteracy totally. Primary, intermediate and secondary education is free and universally available. The quality of basic education, which is not in tune with the requirements of the economy, is a problem. The government's presentation of a draft law to the Alshura Council to levy fees on secondary education was an alarm signal, but the Council rejected the law. Poverty forces many impoverished children to leave school to support their families. University education is expensive and remains out of reach for low-income families.

Healthcare is free and available to vulnerable people, but the standard of health services is worrying. Major sources of health problems are pollution, unhealthy food, stress, long, hard work and child labour. NGOs should be licensed and encouraged to deal with such problems.

The government allocates around 20% of the budget for health, education, training and social services. The absolute figures depend on oil revenues, which fluctuate. In this respect, 2000 was good year. Bahrain achieved a surplus in state revenues and trade balance, but this was not reflected significantly in social spending. Expenditures for the military and security sector increased to absorb much of the surplus. The government announced big infrastructure projects, but it will take years before such projects reflect positively on employment and social conditions.

Bahrain is currently undertaking the structural adjustment program. In the absence of active participation of the people in government, and the absence of civil society organisations such as trade unions, parties and consumers associations, safeguards to protect vulnerable and impoverished people are ignored. Restoration of constitutional rule would ensure people's representation in decision-making and guarantee that their interests are included in structural adjustment programs.

Civil society participation

The government did not disseminate information on commitments made at the Copenhagen and Beijing conferences. The commitments have not been translated into defined and targeted goals. In the absence of civil society institutions, there has been no participatory monitoring and follow-up of the government record on social development. The few people who comment on government performance are discouraged and the media is not open to them. The UN specialised agencies and other organisations have supporting several programs on social development, but UN residential agencies have unfortunately done little to monitor and assess implementation.

The government has not co-operated with the few civil society organisations involved in assessments and initiatives on poverty. A positive sign was the establishment of The Bahraini Society of Human Rights in October 2000.

The government has a long way to go in reforming its structure, policies and legislation before a healthy environment for civil society and its institutions is achieved. ■

Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Bahrain,
member of the Arab Network of NGOs for Development (ANNND)
<cdhrb@hotmail.com>