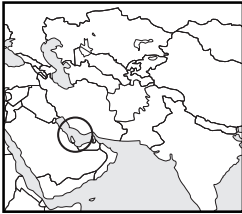


Beginning to open

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The year 2001 witnessed the launching of political reform in Bahrain for the first time in the country's modern history. In the social and economic sector, however, no development plan has yet been established and there is no clear poverty line. The eradication of poverty will require a viable social strategy that includes a social security scheme, a minimum wage and creation of jobs. Unemployment still threatens the political stability of the country.

The year 2001 witnessed the launching of political reform in Bahrain for the first time in the country's modern history. These reforms could be summarised as follows:

- Abolition of the state security law, state security court and the state of emergency in the country.
- Release of all political detainees.
- Return of political exiles.
- Allowing a certain degree of freedom of expression.
- Licensing of two newspapers, one of which belongs to an exiled opposition leader who recently returned to Bahrain.
- Promising the return of the National Assembly by 2004.
- Allowing more civil societies to be established including political societies led by some returned opposition leaders.

The Amir formed two supreme committees. One is in charge of activating the National Charter, which was accepted by 98.4% votes in a referendum; the other is responsible for reviewing the actual laws and regulations, and drafting new ones. About a year has passed now, but the public has not been informed of the accomplishments of these two committees.

In the social and economic sector, the government announced on several occasions its intention to introduce substantive changes aimed at enhancing the standard of living and creating a favourable environment for local and foreign investments in order to create more jobs for nationals. It should be noted here that the unemployment problem was the main cause for the turmoil and the political unrest of the 1990s. Nevertheless, there is no planning body within the government and the country has never had a development plan. Instead, each ministry has its short-term *ad hoc* plan. No doubt this situation impedes the progress of the country and challenges the efforts to make rational use of financial and human resources.

No clear poverty line

It is difficult to know the number of poor people in the country because there is no clear poverty line. In fact the term "poor people" is most often avoided in all official literature. The terms "needy families" and/or "low-income people" are

used instead. In 1998 the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs allocated BHD 3,696,807¹ (about USD 1,393,696) to be distributed among approximately 10,681 needy individuals and families. In addition, the Amir allocated some funds for needy orphans and widows, but the exact amount is not yet known. On the occasion of the National Day that falls on 16 December, he also decided to allocate to needy families 30% of the income of one of the main commercial complexes belonging to the government. No mechanism for the distribution of this money has been announced.

The eradication of poverty will require a viable social strategy that includes a social security scheme, a minimum wage, creation of jobs, and encouraging more people – especially women – to start small businesses. A poverty line should also be established.

Unemployment, the hidden bomb

Some members of the Advisory Council estimated the number of unemployed Bahrainis at 25,000 persons in 2001, while the population census that took place in April of the same year estimated 16,965 unemployed persons.

Unemployment was the main cause of political unrest in the nineties. Since then the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has made some efforts to create jobs in the private sector. Limited success has been realised, and unemployment remains a hidden bomb that threatens the security of the country. In response the government has declared an *ad hoc* plan to create jobs, train youth for vital jobs in the market and provide unemployed people with financial assistance for about six months.

A viable strategy to solve the unemployment issue should include the following points:

- A labour market survey and jobs tracking system.
- A minimum wage policy.
- A training programme that meets labour market requirements.
- A reform of the social security system for both public and private sectors.
- Special attention to female job seekers, who are the majority of unemployed people.

¹ USD 1= BHD 0.377

Social integration

The Amir promised to finalise the problem of stateless nationals (those who did not hold Bahraini passports) by the end of December 2001. More than 8,000 people were naturalised, among them many foreigners engaged in the army and the security forces. Most came from Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Sudan, Pakistan and Baluchistan.

Employment of Shiites in the army and the security forces is still restricted. Moreover, according to unpublished rules, it is prohibited for citizens to own properties or accommodations in certain towns such as Riffaa, where most of the royal family members reside, unless they get permission from the Amiri Court. The Bahrain Human Rights Society considers this situation a violation of human rights and calls for an end to it.

Voting rights for women in 2001

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responsible for women's affairs within the government. The Ministry does not have a national plan to implement the action plans of the Fourth World Conference on Women or the Social Summit. Recently the Advisory Council and the Cabinet of Ministers agreed in principle to sign the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Women suffer from the absence of family civil law. Their rights in marriage, divorce and child custody are frequently violated. Moreover, women do not have the right to benefit from the government housing plan except in the case of divorce or death of a husband and then only with difficulty. In cases where a woman marries a foreigner, her husband and children cannot get Bahraini nationality. Women also suffer from discrimination in employment, salaries and enrolment at the Bahrain University.

Women were given voting rights in 2001, and they are expected to participate in the election of the Municipal Councils and the National Assembly. The highest government position reached by a woman is Assistant Under-Secretary.

In October 2001 the Amir ordered the establishment of the Supreme Council for Women with an aim to draw up a plan of action for women's progress. The Council will be responsible for monitoring women's development in the public and private sectors and proposing changes in laws and regulations. In addition to the Council, a Women's Union will be established early next year.

Social expenditures, health and education

Social expenditures in 2000 reached 26.6% of the total government expenditures. No figures are published concerning the spending of the army and the security forces, but it is believed that they absorb a great portion of the government budget.

Education is not compulsory but it is free up to the secondary level. Thanks to this fact, the rate of enrolment at schools for both girls and boys is almost identical. The educational system needs reform to meet the requirements of the labour market. Curricula should be reviewed to remove negative stereotypes of women, and principles such as human rights and gender equity ought to be introduced. Modern technology must be applied at all levels of education.

University fees dropped significantly. This permitted students from low-income families to continue their higher education. Two new colleges are under construction: one for law and the other a college for girls only. It is expected that the latter will encourage girls from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries in addition to Bahraini girls from conservative families to enrol. On the other hand establishing a college restricted to girls will reinforce social segregation of the sexes and deprive women of some academic specialisations. Women's colleges are normally limited to traditional studies, which, though less needed in the labour market, are believed to be the most suitable for girls. Therefore graduates from women's colleges might be less employable.

The illiteracy rate was 12.3% in 2001. The government was not able to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000 as it had predicted on various occasions. The naturalisation of thousands of illiterate or non-Arabic-speaking foreigners was the main factor behind this failure.

Civil society

Political parties are still prohibited in Bahrain. However, the Amir made it known that he will not oppose formation of political parties if the upcoming National Assembly agrees.

Since coming to power, the Amir has guaranteed democracy and the margin of freedom. All of the opposition political organisations that were operating in exile have established their political societies to prepare for the coming elections, awaiting the day when the government allows them to form political parties. Hundreds of new civil societies have been established: women's societies, charity funds, a transparency society, the Bahrain Human Rights Society and others. The laws regulating the establishment and activities of civil societies are still under revision by a special committee. It is expected that this law will give a degree of freedom of movement to the civil societies and empower them to be effective partners for social development. ■

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