



كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country **Bahrain**

Keywords **Background, Civil society, Bahrain**

Country Background | Nawafel Shehab |

Although the Bahraini civil society is believed to be the most vibrant in the Arabian Gulf region, it appears in several political circumstances to be very fragile due to the absence of effective communication channels between the ruling elites and civil society institutions, and among civil society actors themselves. The bylaws of any civil society organization (CSO) determine its scope of work, and consequently, its ministerial affiliation; civil society associations and labor unions in Bahrain are registered under the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, and political societies under the Ministry of Justice. There are approximately 16 political societies in Bahrain, and 618 CSOs; 21 of which are women associations (MLSD, 2019, p. 166).

GOVERNANCE OF POLITICAL SYSTEM IN BAHRAIN

Bahrain is a hereditary constitutional monarchy ruled by the Al Khalifa family. The king, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, holds executive powers in the kingdom. According to the 2002 constitution of Bahrain, the king appoints members of the cabinet and is the supreme commander of the Defense Forces. The National Assembly of Bahrain is bicameral, consisting of an elected Council of Representatives and an appointed Consultative Council, which have equal powers. Although the elected council has the authority to propose legislations, laws can only be drafted by the government (Bahrain Constitution. art. 32, 33).

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The kingdom has a population of 1.5 million people, of which 35 percent are under the age of 25. Bahrain's GDP per capita is \$51,800, a relatively high figure compared to other countries in the Middle East; however, data regarding wealth distribution in Bahrain remain scarce (Almajdoub, 2018).

Bahrain's economic policies, especially those inspired by Vision 2030, have adopted a neoliberal direction in an attempt to diversify

economic resources. However, oil revenues still constitute around 70 to 80 percent of the national economy (Almajdoub). Moreover, with low oil prices, the country still relies on regional funds from neighboring Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait, which has led to an increase in Bahrain's debt (BCCI, 2017).

Besides the increased public debt and the reliance on regional funds from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Bahrain has recently introduced the value-added tax (VAT) and reduced the fuel and food subsidies (Almajdoub).

THE STATUS OF POLITICAL SOCIETIES IN BAHRAIN

Political rights were formally re-granted to Bahraini citizens following the issuance of the National Action Charter of Bahrain in 2001 (Council of Shura). Many CSOs and political societies were formed during that year, including the Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, Al Asala Islamic Society and the National Democratic Action Society (Waad). The following year, Bahrain witnessed its first parliamentary elections in 30 years, recording a participation rate of 54 percent (Fayyad, 2019). However, some political opposition societies, such as Al Wefaq and Waad, boycotted the elections of 2002 on the grounds that the legislative structure, according to the newly established constitution of 2002, does not reflect the will of the people. The same political societies were motivated to participate in the 2006 electoral cycle, after the issuance of the political societies law of 2005. Influential clerics supported the opposition societies' decision, and that year saw a record turnout (Fairuz & Busafwan, 2018).

In 2010, the Al Wefaq National Islamic Society had a prominent presence in the Council of Representatives, however, Al Wefaq pulled out of the council following the 2011 protests (Alwasatnews, 2011), and boycotted the 2014 elections claiming that the vote would not be fair (Middle East Eye, 2014).

In 2016, the king amended the law of political societies in order to secularize political action in Bahrain, and to prohibit religious figures from political action (Alwasatnews, 2016). Soon after approving these amendments, the Ministry of Justice suspended Al Wefaq, which was accused of being involved in terrorism and violence (Aboudi, 2016). Waad was also suspended one year later on similar charges (BBC, 2017).

Although the Progressive Democratic Tribune, an opposition communist association, won two seats at the Council of Representatives in 2018 (Alayam, 2017), the capacity for political opposition associations to engage in political action was restrained due to their refusal to legitimize the Council of Representatives, and due to the lack of governmental and financial support.

LABOR UNIONS

For the past 64 years, the Bahraini labor movement has demanded a law that protects workers' rights. Following the issuance of the National Action Charter, the king of Bahrain passed the Workers' Trade Union Law in 2002 (Albiladpress, 2011). According to the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU), there are about 57 unions in Bahrain, six of which belong to the government sector (GFBTU).

In 2011, the GFBTU called for strikes as a tool to pressure the government to respond to the demands raised during the February 2011 pro-democracy demonstrations. Estimates indicate that around 85 percent of the Bahraini workforce had joined these strikes. Consequently, activities of the GFBTU have been prohibited during the State of National Safety that was declared by the king in March, 2011; however, a few unions, such as the Bahrain Teachers Association, continued to be an active part of the demonstrations. The strikes ended with hundreds of employees, mainly from the public sector, being dismissed due to their participation (ADHRB, 2017).

The GFBTU has played a great role pressuring the government to reinstate these employees; and it was able, in 2012, to sign an agreement, backed by the International Labour Organization, promising to restore the dismissed workers to their positions (ADHRB, 2017).

NON-INSTITUTION ACTIVISM

Following the February 2011 pro-democracy demonstrations, and the corresponding pro-government demonstrations, two political coalitions emerged, namely the February 14 Youth Coalition, which calls for regime change in Bahrain, and the Al Fateh Youth Coalition, which adopts a rhetoric similar to that of the government. The February 14 Youth Coalition continues to be active especially on social media platforms without publicly disclosing names of its leaders. The Al Fateh Youth Coalition, however, has become gradually less active.

The February 2011 demonstrations have had an impact on the development of non-institutional civil activism; many community-based initiatives were formed, mostly with the aim of bringing together different parties for informal national dialogues. Initiatives, like Tasaol and the Bahrain Debate, have attempted to build bridges between political associations and social organizations of various backgrounds. Although they have a critical mission, such initiatives do not last long due to several reasons, including the fact that their work is often voluntary, and that the space for freedom of expression is limited either for social or political reasons.



NGO-IZATION STATUS

For a process of NGO-ization to take place, civil society has to have greater resources and capacities than that of the state, which is not the case in Bahrain. In spite of a supposedly weak civil society, it has succeeded, in many cases, to deliver certain services that the government failed to provide. For instance, due to the inadequacy of the scholarship distribution program by the Ministry of Education, many outstanding students have resorted to charity organizations for educational financial aids and scholarships to be able to pursue their higher education.

FUNDING ISSUES

Laws regulating political and civil society associations in Bahrain prohibit the sending or receiving of money from foreign entities. In order to receive or send money to foreign entities, NGOs have to obtain permission from the government. Organizations rely on members, non-profit investments, and grants provided by the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Justice (LLOC, 2018).

The distribution of financial support from the government lacks transparency. Civil society associations used to receive a monthly allowance of 1,200 Bahraini Dinar (\$3,180 USD) from the Ministry of Social Development; however, the funding policy has changed in recent years, providing only project-based financial support (MLSD, p. 173). In recent years, governmental financial support for political associations has also been inconsistent in its amounts and frequencies; some political associations received large grants, while many others, mainly those categorized as opposition associations, received none (Albiladpress, 2018).

STATE OF MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

TV channels and radio stations in Bahrain are state-owned. Newspapers, in contrast, are private entities, but mostly follow pro-government editorial policies. Since 2011, Al Wasat, the only independent newspaper in Bahrain, has been shut down three times by the authorities, and it was permanently closed in 2017 (Alwasatnews, 2017). Publications of the opposition political associations, Al Wefaq and Waad, were banned in 2010; their publishing licenses were also revoked by the Information Affairs Authority (Alwasatnews, 2010).

According to Freedom House, six Bahraini journalists are currently in prison, while seven others have had their citizenship stripped for publishing content critical of the government. Due to these conditions, many journalists have established independent online newspapers focusing on Bahraini affairs, such as Bahrain Mirror and Manama Post. However, most of these websites are censored (Freedom House, 2019)

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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid2018-, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf. Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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