

# National Dialogue in Bahrain Causes of Failure in The Past

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# Introduction

This paper attempts to explore the causes of failure in dialogue attempts between the government of Bahrain and the opposition and sheds light on the opposition's view on the shortcomings of the approaches made towards initiating and managing dialogue in Bahrain. Previous dialogue attempts in Bahrain have not been successful in achieving a peaceful reconciliation to the conflict due to the absence of an acceptable level of understanding, coordination and good management. It is surely not an easy task to make dialogue concrete in the absence of a clear process that is agreed upon by all parties involved in the conflict. This paper will present the perception of the opposition on the causes that led to the failure of dialogue attempts in Bahrain with recommendations on how to set the right environment for dialogue and how to ensure that the dialogue process works in a concrete setting after identifying and removing all the barriers and obstacles that prevent tackling core and sensitive areas of disagreement.

## Historical Background 1973-2011



**1973-1975:** Bahrain officially became an independent state in 1971, however the establishment of the first constitution and parliamentary system took place in 1973. Yazan Al Saadi (2011) states that “Bahrain’s first National Assembly contained 44 seats, with 14 appointed by the ruler and 30 subject to popular election. Various political parties sprouted up in Bahrain, ranging from secular, leftist pan-Arab parties to religious parties, and even included a Maoist faction.”<sup>(1)</sup>

A parliamentarian from the 1973 assembly asserts that the first national assembly lacked legislative powers and the royal family was extremely irritated and provoked by the growing power of parliamentary members. He adds that the concepts of accountability and questioning were viewed and seen as an insult by leading members in the royal family.”

The national assembly lasted for two years after and was dissolved by a decree from the Emir of Bahrain; Sheikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa. The main reason behind dissolving the parliament was the refusal of the assembly to pass a State Security Law that grants the government authority to arrest and imprison individuals for a period of three years for crimes related to state security without the need to pass through a legal process.

Mass arrests, deportations and human rights violations followed dissolving the parliament in 1975. No attempt have taken place to initiate dialogue and create a suitable environment for a peaceful reconciliation after the crisis.

<sup>1</sup> Yazan al-Saadi, Muftah, March 3rd, 2011

**1981:** 1981 witnessed an alleged coup attempt, by which the “Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain” has been accused, according to governmental sources. The announced coup was viewed by government officials as an excuse to legitimize the continuity of disabling the constitution and the prevalence of the State Security Law.

**1994-1999:** In 1994 a group of intellectuals and social leaders representing diverse factions of society led a petition to request the Emir of Bahrain; Sheikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa to restore the constitution of Bahrain, lift the state security law, hold national elections, grant women the right to vote and ensure equal citizenship for all.

Fakhro stresses that the nineties witnessed “the longest sustained period of pressure on the Bahraini government culminated in an uprising between 1994 and 1999 that called for political and economic reform against a ruling family determined to maintain the status quo and avoid diluting or distributing its power”<sup>(2)</sup> (Fakhro 1997: 167–68). However, the finding made by Fakhro was before the events that Bahrain witnessed in 2011.



(2) Fakhro, M (1997). Sick, G and Potter, L eds. *The uprising in Bahrain: an assessment. The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion*. London: Routledge, pp. 167–88.

**1999:** Emir Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa passed away and in March 1999, Emir Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa was announced as the new ruler of Bahrain.

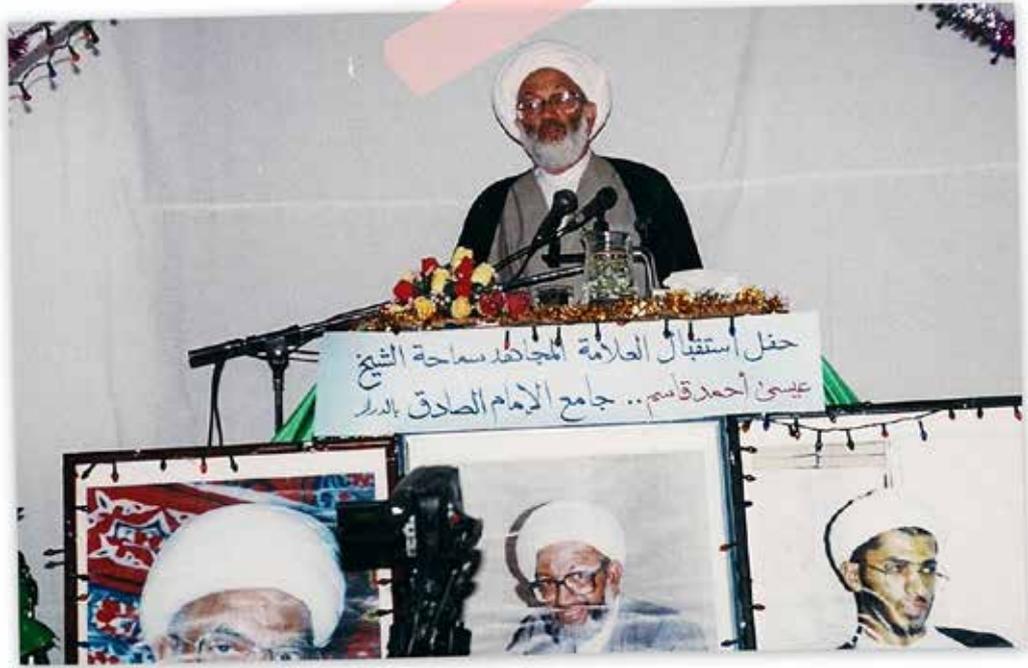
**2001:** Emir Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa intended to begin his reign positively with a new reform package that ensured social and political stability. His reforms included the release of thousands of political prisoners, the removal of the State Security Law and State Security Court, grant Bahraini women their voting rights, reinstatement of the parliament, inviting thousands of exiles who have chosen to leave Bahrain due to the political unrest or have been forcefully deported to come back to Bahrain and a moral assurance of guaranteeing equal citizenship. Hopes of a new era of democracy, equality and respect of human rights swept the entire country. The reforms and changes were presented through the “National Action Charter”<sup>(3)</sup> which received a popular support of 98% in a national referendum.<sup>(4)</sup> ( Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 2011)

Bahrain was renamed as the Kingdom of Bahrain and Emir Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa was proclaimed as the King of Bahrain.

Despite these important developments and reforms, no serious dialogue process was initiated between the opposition and the government. Short meetings were held between government officials and opposition leaders after their release from prison and return from exile. Positive meetings were held between the King and leading political and religious leaderships in the Shia community, however no “efficient and fruitful” dialogue took place to tackle sensitive issues between the government and the opposition.

(3) National Charter February 14, 2001 <http://www.bipd.org/images/methaq/Methaq.pdf>

(4) Bahrain: evolution or revolution? Kristian Coates Ulrichsen | March 2011, Open Democracy <https://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen/bahrain-evolution-or-revolution>



**2002:** The opposition and the Shiite population boycotted the first elections held in Bahrain since 1975 due to claims that the parliamentary system did not represent the peoples will and the polls were not based on the principle of one person-one vote.

Yazan al-Saadi claims that shortly after the establishment of the first parliament after reforms,” a major dispute arose over the Shura Council, the higher body within the country’s bicameral legislative system.”<sup>(5)</sup> He explains that “while the National Assembly’s 40-member lower house was popularly elected, the 40-member Shura Council were directly appointed by the King and possessed veto power over all legislation emanating from the lower house – the King also enjoyed total veto power over all laws passed by the parliament.”<sup>(6)</sup> To many Bahrainis the parliamentary system did not represent the true will of the people and reinforced political and social marginalization to many Bahrainis especially within the Shia community.

No attempts to hold dialogue and negotiations were held in 2002 noting that it was very important and fruitful to ensure that the first parliamentary elections after disabling the constitution for 27 years were supported by all components in society. This would have increased the possibilities of diffusing long tensions between the government and the opposition.

**2006-2010:** Al Wefaq the leading opposition group with a shia majority decided to participate in the elections but only gained 17 seats out of 40 seats although they made up more than 62% of the entire votes.<sup>(7)</sup> (Hassan Al Madhoob, 2010)

(5) Yazan al-Saadi, Muftah, March 3rd, 2011

<https://muftah.org/bahrain-revolt-by-yazan-al-saadi/#.WTH4UIYWcHmS>

(6) Yazan al-Saadi, Muftah, March 3rd, 2011

<https://muftah.org/bahrain-revolt-by-yazan-al-saadi/#.WTH4UIYWcHmS>

(7) Al Wasat , Hassan Al Madhoob, 2010 <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/437755.html>



**2011:** Bahrainis were hugely effected by the dramatic events and calls for democracy in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. Bahraini anonymous activists called for protests calling for democracy on the 14th of February, marking the tenth anniversary of National Action Charter. The calls made by protestors echoed those in Tunisia and Egypt: democracy, major economic and political reforms, and respect of human rights.

The government of Bahrain responded with a huge crackdown that lead to the death of tens, hundreds of arrests and unrest in the kingdom.

## Conclusion

My personnel opinion is that no authentic political or social dialogue took place in Bahrain in between 1973 to 2011 attempting to solve the ongoing crisis between the government of Bahrain and the opposition. Occasional talks took place between politicians and government officials but were short, unstructured and failed to discuss sensitive issues and strategies to ensure a long lasting peace sustainable agreement between all parties.

## Opposition's perspective on failed Dialogue attempts 2011-2014

Elham Fakhro states that “following the lifting of the state of national emergency, King Hamad announced that a national dialogue would take place beginning July 2, 2011 between segments of Bahraini society, to discuss demands for further reform in the country.”<sup>(8)</sup> “300 representatives from Bahrain’s civil society participated in the dialogue including 70 “public figures”, all 40 members of the country’s Shura council, representatives of 5 newspapers and 8 unions, and 31 representatives of professional societies including for example the Pharmacy Owners and Importers Society.”<sup>(9)</sup> Al Wefaq, that received over 60% of the parliamentary votes were only granted 5 seat which resembles 1.6%. This lead to wide public criticism of Al Wefaq and other opposition groups. Two weeks after the start of the dialogue Al Wefaq and other opposition groups announced their withdrawal claiming that they were marginalized and widely underrepresented. The Second Round of Dialogue was a result of the failure of the first round of dialogue in achieving political and social reconciliation. The international community and close Allies of Bahrain like the United States of America placed pressure on both the government of Bahrain and the opposition to resume dialogue.



(8) Elham Fakhro, 2013. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/10/2013101091036321935.html>

(9) Elham Fakhro, 2013. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/10/2013101091036321935.html>

On June 14 2012, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Michael Posner, stated: “the government of Bahrain needs to take action on the full range of BICI recommendations including prosecuting officials responsible for the violations identified in the report, dropping charges against all persons accused of offenses involving political expression. Above all, we call on all parties in Bahrain to help each other move towards a comprehensive political dialogue.”<sup>(10)</sup> King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa announced the second round of dialogue in 2013. The second round was chaired by the Minister of Justice Sheikh Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa and included 3 Ministers, 8 loyalists representing civil societies, 8 loyal parliamentary members and 8 representatives of the opposition parties. Talks continued for seven months and twenty four sessions were held without the actual dialogue beginning since the government and the opposition were stuck after failing to agree on the mechanisms of dialogue. The opposition insisted that any recommendations and outcomes of the dialogue have to put to a popular referendum while the government refused. The Crown Prince, Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa, met Al Wafaq leader in 2014 to discuss proceeding with the National Dialogue. However their attempts failed in pushing dialogue forward. In order to get the oppositions perspective on the reasons that led to the failure of the national dialogue in years 2011-2014, I interviewed two of the participants in the national dialogue initiative that took place in Bahrain.<sup>(11)</sup>



(10) <https://www.humanrights.gov/dyn/assistant-secretary-posner-on-the-implementation-of-the-bahrain-independent-commission-of-inquiry-report.html>

(11) Both of the participants in the interview refused to revile their names due to fears of persecution

When I asked one of the two participants, who is a leading opposition figure, on his perspective, he replied: His Majesty King Hamed Bin Isa Al Khalifa called for the first dialogue after the uprising that started on the 14th of February, 2011. He said: Dialogue began on the second of July 2011 and the opposition welcomed the dialogue call and participated without pre conditions. However, the opposition believed that the dialogue was destined to fail due to the following reasons:

Firstly, the Dialogue was not chaired by an independent figure as requested by the opposition but was chaired by the Parliament Speaker Khalifa Al Dahrani who is a pro governmental figure appointed by the King.

Secondly, out of 300 participants, the Bahraini opposition groups had only 25 seats and the main opposition blog Al Wefaq had 5 seats. Everyone in the dialogue was given one minute to voice his view. It's impossible for the opposition to express their view in political reconciliation in 5-25 minutes. The mentioned source stated that Al Wefaq pulled out from the dialogue after two weeks right after the chairman stated that the outcome of the dialogue would be just recommendations and not binding to the government. He added: King Hamad announced a second round of dialogue in 13 February 2013. The second round was chaired by the Minister of Justice Sheikh Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa and followed an 8-8-8 format. 8 representatives from a coalition of loyalist "national" societies, 8 representatives from both chambers of parliament (one of the chambers was solely appointed by the king), and 8 representatives of opposition political societies. The dialogue also included 3 Ministers from the government, including the Minister of Electricity and Works, the Minister of Education, and the Minister of Justice. Before the commencement of the dialogue, the government stated that the three ministers are not part of the talks, and were solely assisting in organizing the dialogue.

The source of the opposition stated that the opposition groups addressed a letter to the Minister of Justice requesting the inclusion of representatives of the King in the dialogue. In their view the government held responsibility for ongoing arrests, and could not therefore be seen as independent. The Minister of Justice did not grant this concession.

He said that the dialogue lasted for seven months noting the opposition groups insisted that any recommendations agreed to by the parties should be put to a popular referendum, and submitted to parliament for implementation.



He asserted that the reason that led them to insist on a popular referendum was their experience in the first dialogue after the chairman Khalifa Al-Dhahrani dropped the opposition views from the outcomes and did not include them in the recommendations presented to the King.

“Moreover, during the dialogue the government passed a number of laws restricting opposition activities. These included a ban on all protests in the capital city of Manama and the introduction of a new terrorism law that allowed the government to strip the nationality of opposition figures including two former parliamentarians from al-Wefaq, the Minister of Justice also announced that political groups were prohibited from holding meetings with foreign governments, ambassadors or international organizations without official approval.” he explains.

Opposition groups protested the new rules by suspending their participation in the dialogue following the arrest of Khalil Al Marzooq, a leading opposition figure who was charged under the new terrorism law.

The opposition’s source added that the opposition believed the national dialogue was structured in such a way that made it difficult to even agree on an agenda between the various parties.

He also claimed that Al Wefaq welcomed that initiative of the Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa in 2014. Al Wefaq welcomed the meeting with the Crown Prince and said that the meeting had been frank and very transparent and studied ways to have a “serious dialogue that would result in a new political framework that shapes a comprehensive solution”.

“Al Wefaq requested the Crown Prince during the meeting to stop the security approach in order to give a chance for a political approach to succeed.” he said.



He stated that the day following the meeting with the Crown Prince, he outlined an agenda that included discussing reforms in the five following areas:

- 1- **The voting system and distribution of districts**
- 2- **The executive power**
- 3- **The legislative System**
- 4- **The judicial power**
- 5- **The security policy**

The opposition groups welcomed the agenda according to his statement and submitted their positions. However, the governmental team insisted to only discuss reform in the executive power and refused to discuss the rest of the agenda. He claimed that the turn back that led to end the private talks was the announcement of the government of the new districts distribution law in September 2014 without discussing it with the opposition groups.

The source of the opposition asserted that the opposition group found themselves cornered and ended the talks with empty handed since the Bahrain Independent Commission Inquiry recommendations were not implemented, political prisoners were not released and no reforms have been achieved. This led them to take a decision to boycott the 2014 elections because they had nothing to market the participation in the elections to their supporters. According to this source, the opposition groups described the dialogue as an attempt to buy time and practice public relations without real reform.

According to the opposition's source, dialogue failed due to the absence of political will to address core issues since the government lacked courage to bring genuine political reforms. He affirmed that hardliners within the ruling family were against any concession with the opposition. He also believed that Gulf States were not supporting a peaceful reconciliation in Bahrain leading to a more democratic state. He blamed those he described as hardliners within the opposition who resorted to intransigence and rigidity in their positions, claiming that this intransigence has provided potential excuses to the regime to suppress the peaceful movement. He finally stated that in order for dialogue to succeed, the international community needs to support in facilitating negotiations and convincing all parties to agree on a roadmap of inclusivity and power-sharing, centric around equal citizenship and the rule of laws that are compliant with international standards, and governed by independent, inclusive, and impartial constitution institutions backed with modern legislations.

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