

Challenges for National Dialogue in the Post-Arab Spring Era: The Case of Bahrain

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Abstract:

The “Pearl Spring”, the mass protest movement which occurred in Bahrain in 2011, gathered a lot of attention amid the wave of the Arab Spring. However, this protest movement was repressed and the monarchy held onto its rule. What has happened to the country since then? The existing literature has shown that Bahraini politics after the 2011 uprising have been characterized by strengthened authoritarian rule and deepening social divisions. Against this background, this article examines formal and informal, royal-led and society-led attempts for national reconciliation. Though sincere efforts to bridge these social divisions have been made, their success has been limited. This article illustrates that a lack of mutual trust or consensus on the form of governance has led to this limited success. Furthermore, examination of the situation of youth societies also reveals the influence of the rules of the game exerted on the civilian society. To overcome such a dilemma, there was a call for national consensus on the Bahraini constitution, but divisions among the society as a whole, as well as among the ruling family and the opposition, have cast a shadow over national reconciliation.

Keywords: *Bahrain; Civil Society; Youth Movements; post-Arab Spring*

1. Introduction

What is the situation in Bahrain after the Pearl Uprising, a mass protest movement against the ruling regime in 2011 in Bahrain? The protest movement emerged during the course of the Arab Spring, a series of popular protest movements that arose in the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. It started from Tunisia and spread out all over the region. The Pearl Uprising in Bahrain was one of the largest in scale among the Arab Spring movements in the Middle East: it is reported that more than 150,000 people attended a mass rally held on February 22, 2011 (BICI 2011: 88). Considering the total population in Bahrain, which was estimated to be approximately 1,200,000 people in 2011 (Gulf Labor Markets and Migration Database), almost half of them being Bahraini nationals, the number of people involved should make us realize how massive the rally was.

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In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, the small country attracted considerable attention with anticipation for a change in the status quo in the existing regimes (Lulu 2011). However, as was the case in most of the countries in the MENA, the protest movement in Bahrain could not make fundamental changes to the status quo. Rather, it was destroyed by the brutal repression of the ruling regime. Peninsula Shield Force (Dir' al-Jazīra), which was organized by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), composed mainly of 1,200 troops from Saudi Arabia and 800 from the UAE, was sent to Bahrain to clear the protesters on March 14, 2011 (Bronner 2011). Lynch describes the crackdown of protesters by the Peninsula Shield Force as “one of the most comprehensive, brutal, and oppressive of any in the region” (Lynch 2012: 111).

After the large protest rallies ended, the ruling regime increased its oppressive measures. It imposed harsh repressions on the civil society and took excessive discriminatory measures against the opposition. Under the State of National Safety declared on March 15, 2011, a number of court convictions without proper legal process and the torture of detainees is reported (BICI 2011: 416-417). Oppressive measures have targeted the society as a whole, including firing workers from their jobs for their suspected participation in protests, and the destruction of Shiite mosques by security forces (Fakhro 2013).

Thus, the ruling regime managed to overcome the challenge from the people, and to destroy anticipation for change with their heavy hand. Except for Tunisia, where autocratic rule by President Ben Ali has turned into and managed to preserve democratic polity until now, popular uprisings in the MENA were muted and ended without fundamental changes to the ruling regimes. In particular, the situation applies to the monarchies. All the monarchies in the MENA maintained their authoritarian rule, while Bahrain is the sole example that experienced massive oppositional movements.

How has the crackdown on the popular uprising in Bahrain affected its society? The situation after the Arab Spring in Bahrain is characterized by a deepening of social divisions. As is referred to in the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI: al-Lajna al-Baḥraynīya al-Mustaqilla li-Taqaṣṣī al-Ḥaqā'iq), during the course of the events in February and March 2011, it was documented that sectarian clashes, attacks on expatriates, and violent clashes between students occurred in a number of areas in the country (BICI 2011: 416).

At the same time as this deepening of social divisions, several attempts for social reconciliation were made after the crackdown on the popular movements, both from the government and from the civil society, and both formally and informally. This article focuses on the reconciliatory attempts and examines the reason for the persistence of extraordinary social divisions in Bahrain. In particular, this article examines the National Dialogue (Ḥiwār al-Tawāfuq al-Waṭani) initiated by the government and the activities of one particular type of civil societal organization: youth societies (al-Jam'īya al-Shabābīya). This non-political type of civil societal organization has been increasingly committed to the serious challenges that Bahraini society has faced since the uprising. In the context of reconciliatory measures, some studies examine the governmental dialogues, but references to the youth activities are limited. Comparing the reconciliatory attempts of both sides, this article contributes to deepen our understanding of the situation in Bahrain.

The importance of focusing on youth activities is twofold. First, the youth constitutes a significant component of the country. The population of under twenty five years old amounts to 34.7% (World Factbook 2017). Though the ratio is lower than other MENA countries, their presence and their discontent with the politics of their country must have been a strong promoter of the uprising in 2011, as was the case for other MENA countries. At the same time though, it is too naïve to think that extremist groups are the sole representatives of the youth. An attempt to examine more moderate

activities would be an important step towards grasping the whole picture of the activities of the youth in Bahrain, which would enable us to put extremist groups in a clearer perspective.

Second, focusing on the civil society would provide another perspective on the contemporary politics of Bahrain. The civil society in Bahrain has a rich historical legacy and a number of studies have been made on it, but only a limited number of studies have been made on the subject since the uprising in 2011. Most of these studies have focused on the repressive measures, adept ruling strategies, or the strength of the coercive apparatus of the ruling regime. Then how do the ruled respond to these governmental strategies? How do they attempt to influence these strategies? Focusing on the civil society enables us to examine these questions.

The study of Bahrain would also be an important basis for examining the current social situations in MENA, especially in the monarchies in the Gulf. Strengthened authoritarian control over the society and deepened social division is commonly seen in the MENA countries. These regimes have taken similar courses: they experienced large public demonstrations in 2011, managed to surmount the challenges, and in turn, strengthened their authoritarian power, making use of social dividing lines. What is remarkable about the Gulf monarchy is the pivotal roles that the monarch and the royal family play in determining the direction of the social situations. An examination of the interplay between the royal circle and the civil society is required for comprehensive understanding of the current social situation in the region, and due to the historically-created pluralistic culture and social movements, the case of Bahrain demonstrates one of the most serious conflicts between them in the region. Considering the recent upsurge of social divisions in the region as a whole, as well as in the Gulf monarchies, the case of Bahrain would be a good prior example.

2. Literature Review

Bahraini society has long been struggling for wider political participation against the Al-Khalifa family's authoritarian rule. Bahrain is a country where "the first and most powerful labor movement arose in the Gulf" (Louër 2008: 35). Workers of the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) organized its first general strike in 1938, and the development of the labor movements culminated in the creation of a political organization, the National Union Committee (Hay'a al-Ittiḥād al-Waṭani), in 1954, which led the wave of strikes in 1954-56. In the context of intercommunal disturbance, the committee called for "national unity," and "demanded a constitution, an elected legislative assembly, a modern penal code, a constitutional court and legalization of labor unions." (Khalaf 1985). Accordingly, the committee generated a trade union, the Bahrain Labor Federation in October 1955 (Louër 2008: 35). Finally, The movement was cracked down upon and its activities were banned in 1956 amidst the peaking of support for Egyptian President Nasser, who was a formidable foe of the conservative monarchies at the time (Kerr 1971), but the story of the labor movement in Bahrain which began in the relatively early period of state building illustrates the strength of Bahrain's civil society, compared to other Gulf states¹.

After the country's independence from the United Kingdom in 1971, the ruling regime

1 Aside from Bahrain, Kuwait also has a relatively autonomous civil society. The history of the conflicts and negotiations between the ruling family and merchants created the space of civil society. The longer history of parliamentary life in Kuwait, which began in 1962, illustrates its distinctive nature. Considering the different paths that Bahrain and Kuwait took in the event of Arab Spring, comparative studies between these two countries would contribute to developing the argument of this study. For more detail on the history of politics and civil society in Kuwait, see (Crystal 1995, Tétreault 2000).

established a constitution in 1973. Based on the constitution, a parliamentary election was held in the same year. The parliament became a forum for public debate, but this was finally dissolved by the then ruler (Amir), ‘Īsā ibn Salmān al-Khalīfa in 1975. Though political activities were limited and tightly controlled by the ruling regime, demands for greater political participation continuously evolved into public rallies. After the accession of power from ‘Īsā ibn Salmān al-Khalīfa to Ḥamad ibn ‘Īsā al-Khalīfa in 1999, the new Amir started political reforms to widen citizens’ political rights and reopened the parliament. Since these political reforms were limited in order to maintain the strong authoritarian power of the ruling regime, voices for greater political participation still remained.

The Pearl Uprising and its crackdown in 2011 exacerbated the citizens’ political situation by putting them under strong repression by the regime². In this context, the process of dissent and resistance to the authoritarian regime and the issues of political participation³ have gathered much academic attention as well as political competition for citizens’ political participation in the past (Neumann 2013, Shehabi and Jones ed. 2015, Valeri 2015, Zunes 2013).

Indeed, it is important to understand “the rules of the game by which both opposition and incumbent elites should play” (Lust-Okar 2005: 169), which determines the varieties of means that the authoritarian regime takes to maintain its power. The authoritarian regime creates formal rules to exclude political oppositions systematically, which prevents massive and coherent public dissents against the authoritarian regime in an effective manner. Thus the rules of the game dictate the direction that authoritarian regime takes in relation to the oppositional forces. However, it does not fully explain how people act under the rules of the game. The rules of the game inform us of the overall direction that the country under study takes, but it falls short of addressing the varieties of reactions from the society to overcome the dominance of the rule of the authoritarian regime. What need to be discussed are the actions in the sphere of civil society under the “formal” framework of politics between the ruling regime and the opposition.

In addition to the authoritarian rule, the Sunni-Shiite division has also gathered academic attention. Bahrain’s ruling family, the Khalifa family, which has ruled the country since the 18th century, are Sunni Muslims. On the other hand, the majority of the population in Bahrain is Shiite: it is estimated that 65 to 75 per cent of the population in Bahrain are Shiite Muslims (Pew Research Center 2009). Under such a circumstance, it is argued that the ruling regime favors the Sunni population due to the Sunni tribal derivation of the royal family⁴, which has sometimes led to a conflict between the ruling Sunni regime and ruled Shiite population (Al-Mdaires 2002, Bahry 2000). In addition, the ruling Sunni regime is pursuing “a strategy of naturalization of Sunnis” (Matthiesen 2013: 35), which is an attempt to increase the proportion of Sunnis in Bahrain through giving Bahraini nationality to Sunni foreigners⁵. This particularly applies to the situation after the Pearl Uprising. With a regional upsurge of sectarian tensions, politics regarding sectarian conflict in Bahrain has been gathering much more attention in recent years (Al-Rawi 2015, Gengler 2013a, Kasbarian and Mabon 2016, Louër 2013, Matthiesen 2013, Moore-Gilbert 2016, Wehrey 2014).

2 The strong repression itself gathered international attention and became a subject of examination (BICI 2011, Amnesty 2012).

3 Lulu (2011) argues that the Pearl Uprising should be understood as a movement for civil rights and liberties.

4 A Bahraini Citizen (1985) points out that “[t]he closer one’s relationship to the emir, the more property one controls. There’s a lot of discontent among the Shi’a who live in those areas.”

5 The story of “naturalization” came to light through the publication of a report by Dr. Salah al-Bandar (so-called “Al Bandar report”) in September 2006. See (Bahrain Center for Human Rights 2006).

The literature claims that the sectarian conflicts in Bahrain have been somewhat created and preserved by the ruling regime. This set of literature also focuses on the rules of the game. What is happening in the sphere of civil society under the influence of the Sunni-Shiite division, in addition to authoritarian rule? Discussion on the civil society is quite limited. Some studies examine the radicalized opposition of youth groups, which call for overthrowing the current regime by means of violence, and these studies describe the conflict between the ruling regime and radicalized groups⁶. The emergence of radicalized youth movements is a significant consequence of the current ruling system in Bahrain, but what effect does the current ruling system exert on Bahraini civil society as a whole? To cope with this question, we need to consider non-radical movements as well⁷. Non-radical, moderate movements do not approve of resorting to violence in changing the status quo. They pursue non-violent means to reform the current situation, such as holding talks between the ruling regime and the opposition groups, as well as proposing reforms under the current regime. While the characteristics of these moderate groups mean they are subordinate to the ruling regime to a certain degree, when considering the national dialogue within the divided country, they are one of the important key actors that determine the success of the dialogue.

This focus on the civil society in Bahrain would contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary Bahraini society. In addition, the insight of this case study would contribute to the study of civil society as a whole. As one scholar points out, civil society in the MENA countries cannot be captured properly by casting traditional roles on it, that is, the roles of “an important counterbalance to the state and a stumbling block for tyranny by functioning as an intermediate realm between the state/ political, economic/business, and private/family spheres” (Härdig 2015: 1132-1133). The lines between political and civil spheres are blurred and their rules and functions are still under debate. The case study of this article would also contribute to the discussion.

3. Social Division and Regime-led National Dialogue in Bahrain after the Pearl Uprising

Table 1 Timeline of Events in Bahrain after the Arab Spring

Date	Event
March 12, 2011	Conclusion of the MoU between Crown Prince Salmān and the oppositions
June 29, 2011	The king directed the creation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI)
July 2011	Beginning of the first National Dialogue (completed in February 2013)
November 23, 2011	BICI published a report examining the governmental measures toward the uprising in 2011
May 3, 2012	The king announced a constitutional amendment

6 In particular, the February 14 Youth Coalition (I’tilāf Shabāb Thawra 14 Fibrāyir) has been a main focus of studies on Bahraini youth movements. This radical youth movement sets as its primary goal overthrowing the ruling Khalifa regime (Diwan 2014: 6; Jones 2012).

7 There are several exceptions to the trend. Alsayed (2014) examines the overall trend of youth activism in the Persian Gulf. al-Hasan (2015) examines a moderate youth movement in Bahrain, Gathering of National Unity. As I demonstrate in the following, this movement is a sort of exclusively Sunni social movement. We need to move from here to more a comprehensive review of the contemporary youth movements in Bahrain. Lastly, Kinnimont and Sirri (2014) examines the situation of civil society in Bahrain as a whole after the Pearl Uprising. This study is quite informative on the overall situation of Bahrain’s civil society, but its aim is mainly fact finding and policy recommendation, which does not directly address the issue here.

February 10, 2013	Beginning of the second National Dialogue (suspended in January 2014)
July 17, 2016	Outlawing and dissolution of the Al-Wifaq (main Shiite opposition group)
May 31, 2017	Outlawing and dissolution of the WAAD (main secular opposition group)
June 4, 2017	Shut down of the Al-Wasat daily (independent newspaper)

The beginning of the attempts for reconciliation was a royal initiative. The country was divided between the ruling regime's supporters including the security apparatus and the opposition groups during the course of the popular uprising in the beginning three months of 2011. The crackdown on the protest movements by force, which inevitably inflicted heavy casualties on the protest participants provoked harsh criticism both from the society and the international community. To address the situation, King⁸ Hamad directed the establishment of BICI on June 29, 2011. The commission was composed of five members led by Dr. Sharīf Basyūnī, an expert on international law, and it aimed at the examination of the governmental measures toward the popular uprising in 2011. In the end, it published a report exceeding 500 pages on November 23, 2011, including recommendations to the government. The Bahrain government claims that they implemented the majority of the recommendations the report proposed, but some outside assessments asserted that this should not be taken at face value (Katzman 2018: 6). For example, Zunes points out that the king refused to acknowledge the report's findings, refrained from blaming the security forces for the massive repression and instead, he blamed Iran for the unrest (Zunes 2013: 156). The consequence of the report suggests the regime's limited intentions for social reconciliation: the establishment of the BICI itself was the goal of the regime, which gave the regime some degree of international reputation, and transforming its way of rule was not. What the ruling regime pursued in the reconciliatory measure was restoring social order under re-approval of the rule by the monarchy. After all, the royal initiative was no more than a strategy for maintaining its repressive authoritarian rule.

The second royal initiative was the National Dialogue (Ḥiwār al-Tawāfuq al-Waṭanī), whose first attempt was started in July 2011. The regime purported the purpose of the dialogue to be "bringing together the various segments of the Bahraini society" and ultimately, achieving "the best interests of the nation, and to protect the future of Bahrain and its people" (Council of Representatives, Kingdom of Bahrain 2013: 1). It gathered more than 300 participants under the chairmanship of Khalīfa ibn Aḥmad Al-Zahrānī (speaker of the lower house). The participants were 70 members of the public, 40 senators, 5 representatives of the newspapers, 8 representatives of the trade unions, 31 people from professional syndicates, and 35 people from 19 political societies (Fakhro 2013: 4).

However, the royal-initiated attempts for social reconciliation have failed. One of the main Shiite opposition groups, al-Wifaq National Islamic Society (Jama'īya al-Wifāq al-Waṭanī al-Islāmīya: hereafter, al-Wifaq)⁹ withdrew from the Dialogue on July 17, 2011. The society complained that the opposition was underrepresented in the Dialogue in terms of seats and time allocation (Al Jazeera 2011). In the end, the King announced a constitutional amendment on May 3, 2012 in line with the

8 According to the constitutional amendment in 2002, the title of the Bahraini monarch changed from Amir to King.

9 Al-Wifaq boycotted the 2002 parliamentary election, but participated in the 2006 parliamentary election and obtained 17 seats. In the 2010 parliamentary election, it obtained 18 seats, which amounts to 45% of the total 40 seats. However, all of the deputies resigned from the parliament in February 2011 in opposition to governmental repression of the protest movements (Katzman 2018: 4-5). The society boycotted the subsequent by-election, and the 2014 parliamentary elections (Naar 2014). The government dissolved the society on July 17, 2016. Its funds were frozen and transferred to the government (BBC News 2016).

achievements of the Dialogue as well as the BICI report. The amendment gave more power to the elected legislature, but it was far short of the demands of the opposition (Al Jazeera 2012, Bakri 2012).

The end result of the first National Dialogue also illustrates the limitation of the royal-led initiatives for reconciliation, as well as the different expectations of the “dialogue” between the regime and the society. Both had an interest in holding the National Dialogue, which led to the participation of the representatives of both sides. However, what they expected from the dialogue was different. For the ruling regime, holding the National Dialogue itself brings the regime a benefit. The regime could adopt the face of a promoter for national reconciliation, which was directed to the society as well as the international community. On the other hand, for the society, especially for the opposition movements, their interests lay in the possibility of actually realizing the reforms that they had demanded during the course of the uprising. From the perspective of the society, representation of each of the camps in the National Dialogue was crucial. It effectively determined the possibility of the satisfaction of their demands. The difference in their stances regulated the consequence of the National Dialogue, which the ruling regime won due to their supremacy in the power relations vis-à-vis the society, under the stronghold of the ruling power by the ruling family.

Therefore the second round of the National Dialogue also could not satisfy the society, under the condition of the remaining gap between the regime and the society in terms of power relations. The King introduced a second round of the National Dialogue, starting from February 10, 2013. The Dialogue was chaired by Khālīd ibn ‘Alī Āl Khalīfa (Minister of the Justice and Islamic Affairs, a royal family member). The participants were 8 oppositional leaders including al-Wifaq and its associated leaders, 8 pro-governmental leaders, 5 parliamentarians, and 3 ministers including the Minister of Electricity and Works, the Minister of Education, and the Minister of Justice (Fakhro 2013: 5; Moritz 2015: 5). The Dialogue of this round could not discuss any issues other than the mechanism of the Dialogue itself. The opposition withdrew from the Dialogue again: they protested at the arrest of a prominent Shiite al-Wifaq affiliated figure, Khalīl al-Marzūq (Toumi 2014). He was arrested on September 17, 2013, on charges of inciting terrorism. Finally the government officially suspended the Dialogue on January 8, 2014 (Law 2014; Moritz 2015: 5).

As a result of the social unrest, repressive measures, and the failure of reconciliation, social division in Bahrain is deepening, and repressive measures are being strengthened to resolve the division by force, but this is leading to the radicalization of the opposition, especially that of the youth (Ulrichsen 2013). Furthermore, moderate oppositional political societies such as al-Wifaq and The National Democratic Action Society (Jama‘īya al-‘Amal al-Waṭanī al-Dīmuqrāṭī: hereafter, WAAD)¹⁰, were outlawed, and the last independent daily newspaper, Al-Wasat daily, was shut down on June 4, 2017, which made the country devoid of an independent daily newspaper (Human Rights Watch 2017).

In line with the “official” talk, Crown Prince Salmān¹¹ had unofficially sought dialogue with the opposition. He previously attempted to hold a talk with the opposition at the height of the initial protests in February to March 2011 (Ulrichsen and Fakhro 2012). The discussion resulted in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on March 12, 2011, which called for amending the Constitution

10 WAAD was one of the main secular opposition groups in Bahrain, but its dissolution was ordered on May 31, 2017, due to the government’s accusation of supporting terrorism (Aboudi 2017).

11 Crown Prince Salmān ibn Ḥamad ibn ‘Īsā Āl Khalīfa was born on October 21, 1969. He is a son of King Hamad and has been crown prince since March 9, 1999.

with a popular referendum for its approval. However, the reaction toward the MoU varied among opposition groups, which led them to take a more aggressive stance toward the ruling regime, finally resulting in the end of negotiations between the government and the opposition (BICI 2011: 168-169).

The crown prince's call for dialogue was clearly expressed in his opening speech at the Manama Dialogue¹² in November 2012. In the latter part of the speech, which was mainly aimed at Bahraini society, he stated that "the majority of the people of Bahrain want a solution that puts the events of the last year firmly in the past, and I believe, dialogue is the only way forward." In addition, he said, "I am not a prince of Sunni Bahrain, and not a prince of Shi'a Bahrain. I am a prince of the Kingdom of Bahrain, and this all means a great deal to me personally" (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2012). These statements demonstrate the crown prince's reformative and reconciliatory stance.

In addition to the attempt to initiate talks in the beginning of the uprising, the crown prince also made an unofficial attempt at reconciliation in 2013. Just after the arrest of 'Alī Salmān, another prominent Shiite figure and the leader of the al-Wifaq, on December 28, 2013, the crown prince gathered "senior leaders from across the political spectrum" (Gengler 2014) to his personal diwan to discuss national reconciliation (Moritz 2015: 4-5). Furthermore, just after the official statement for halting the second round of national dialogue, the crown prince met 'Alī Salmān (El Gamal 2014).

Then why did such official and unofficial attempts fail? Here we can see the lack of consensus between the ruling regime and the opposition. In other words, they didn't share mutual trust but rather had mutual suspicion and mistrust. For the part of the ruling regime, it could not predict how far the opposition would demand it to delegate its power to them. This can be seen in the crown prince's announcement after the opposition's reaction to the MoU that the second round of national dialogue faced difficulty in discussing even the mechanism or procedure of the dialogue itself. In addition, the variety of stances toward the ruling regime among opposition groups strengthened the regime's suspicion of them. Political societies aimed at making dialogue with the government, while some youth movements resorted to violence in the street.¹³

Despite the attempts at dialogue or reconciliation, the ruling regime has placed many repressive measures on them since the uprising. This had the effect of encouraging the emergence of radical movements. To a certain extent, the overly repressive attitude of the ruling regime is a result of conflict within the royal family (Henderson 2014, Moritz 2015). As is shown in the attempts at dialogue, while the King and the crown prince supported reconciliation, the long-reigning Prime Minister, Khalīfa ibn Salmān supported repression of the opposition¹⁴. Furthermore, there exist some hardliners in the ruling family: the Khawālids. They are descendants of Khālid ibn 'Alī Āl Khalīfa, who was a governor of Rifā' and ruler of estates in Sitra and Nabīh Šālīḥ (1869-1925) and a brother of the eighth ruler, 'Īsā. Khālid ibn 'Alī, who was known for his brutal suppression of the Shiites (Gengler 2013b: 60). Since then the Khawālids¹⁵ have cast antagonistic eyes on the Shiite population in Bahrain, which has led to opposition to the current attempts for reconciliation (Husayn 2015: 35).

12 Manama Dialogue has been held at Manama annually since 2014, under the patronage of International Institute for Strategic Studies, established in the UK in 1958. See the latest homepage of Manama Dialogue 2018 (International Institute for Strategic Studies).

13 Kerr (2013) describes the radicalized youth's thoughts, activities and struggles against the government.

14 Moritz (2015: 4) describes the prime minister's stance as "repressive responses associated with a conservative pragmatist."

15 Current members of Khawālids include Khalīfa ibn Aḥmad (Minister of Defense and army commander), Khālid ibn Aḥmad (Royal Court Minister), and Aḥmad ibn 'Aṭīyat Allāh, who is their nephew (Husayn 2015: 35).

Consequently the King is stuck with the internal division, and prevented from implementing reforms.

Under such circumstances, how are normal, non-radical civil societal movements working? To answer this question, the key is to pay special attention to youth movements¹⁶. As is explained in the next section, several youth movements attempt to perform such a role under the name of “youth society”, a category of state-registered NGOs. To accomplish the aim, the author conducted interviews with members of the moderate youth movements as well as members of other types of civil societies, political societies and activists. In addition, the author gathered documents from several youth societies and governmental institutions as well as journalistic reports. Based on the data, the next section examines the youth movements’ attempts to overcome social division within the country, and the limitations on their activities in the current situation in Bahrain.

4. Moderate Youth Movements Under the Authoritarian Rule in Bahrain

This section examines the reconciliatory measures taken by the youth movements in Bahrain. Radical movements call for overthrowing the ruling regime through violent means, but within the realm of the youth movements, there also exist moderate movements that do not resort to violence, but pursue national dialogue. This article examines the latter type of movements, with case studies of three kinds of movements within it: a registered society established as a branch of a political society, a registered society independent of any political society, and a non-registered society.

Before moving to the case studies, a brief overview of the youth movements in Bahrain would be helpful. In Bahrain, all organizations that wish to operate as a youth societies are required to register with the government. Specifically, the Youth Society (al-Jam‘īya al-Shabābīya) is included in a category of NGOs (al-Munazzamāt al-Ahlīya), and based on the 1989 NGO law¹⁷. As one of the NGOs, the Youth Society is put under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Development. This is in sharp contrast to political societies and trade unions: the former are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, and the latter are under the Ministry of Labor.

Registration of youth societies began in the 2000s, and the number of registered societies has increased since then. In the period between 2000 and 2004, the number of established youth societies was nine, and in the period between 2005 and 2009, the number increased to thirteen (Markaz al-Waṭanī li-Da‘am al-Munazzamāt al-Ahlīya 2009: 32). Despite the repressive circumstances after the Arab Spring, some new comers have emerged such as Alkhālidīya Youth Society (registered in 2012), Youth Pioneer Society (registered in 2012), Youth Professional Society (registered in 2014), and Fazāt Shabāb Society (registered in 2016), to name a few.

With regard to their organization, orientation, and legal status, youth societies in Bahrain are

16 There exist several civil societies that seek national reconciliation outside the category of youth societies. ‘Bahrain Unite Us (Baḥrayn Waṭan Yujammi‘-nā)’ initiative is a prominent example of this: a civil societal movement that aims at relaxing sectarian conflict through workshops or other forms of civil participatory activities (Rafique 2012). A member of the movement mentioned that the initiative also provides support for youth societies in terms of budget, experience, and status (author’s interview at Manama on October 17, 2016). Other than the initiative, ‘the National Encounter (al-Liqā’ al-Waṭanī)’ is also a prominent movement. It is an intra-sectarian group held through the al-Oruba club (Moritz 2015: 6).

17 Officially, the name of the law is “Law of Associations, Social and Cultural Clubs, Special Committees Working in the Field of Youth and Sports, and Private Foundations.” The law was formulated by the Decree Law No. 21 of 1989.

classified into three types of societies. The first is a registered society established as a branch of a political society. With the connection to the political society, this type of youth society benefits in two ways. Firstly, it is financially sound, because the political society constitutes a stable source of funding. In return, the youth society provides new members to the umbrella political society. Thus a political-society-affiliated youth society functions as an apparatus for recruiting youth members to the political society. Members in the youth branch are eligible for promotion to the political society. Such a system of recruitment also benefits the youth society, as well as the political society. The widespread recognition of this type of the youth society as an entrance into the political society helps the youth society to attract the right kind of members. However, having an association with the political society also has disadvantages. Under the authoritarian rule, which in general attempts to maintain control over political groups to prevent the upsurge of a dissident movement, the relationship between the regime and the political society tends to be tense. Because the ruling regime dominates “the rule of the game,” the activities of any political society could easily be put under the threat of government-led repressions. The vulnerable status vis-à-vis the government also applies to the youth society affiliated to the political society. The activities of this type of the youth society are easily influenced by the political situation, whether their own activities are related to the political issues or not. Strong affiliation with the political society does not always support the work of the youth society.

The second is a registered society that has no connection to political societies¹⁸. Some societies have political orientations behind their non-political status as a youth society, but others are purely non-politically-oriented. According to such characteristics, the opposite characteristics of the first type of youth society are seen in this second type. The lack of affiliation to the political society relatively frees the society from severe conflict with the government. While this type of youth society is also influenced by the political situation, it would not be directly repressed by the government at the time of an attack against political societies. Having some distance from the political society affects the relationship with the general public, as well as with the government. In Bahrain, association with politics sometimes alerts people to take precautions against the activities of a youth society¹⁹. The institutional political neutrality of a society helps the society win cooperation from the citizens. However, this does not always translated into sufficient support in terms of finance and human resources. In fact, due to the competition with other type of societies, notably charity societies, obtaining stable financial sources is a tough challenge for a youth society²⁰. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient entry of new members to a society sometimes leads to a failure to find heirs who will keep the society going²¹.

The third is a society that chooses to work outside the category of an NGO. In contrast to former two types of youth societies, the unregistered status of this type gives it freedom of activity beyond the framework of the NGO law. For example, the law prohibits societies to “include any matter that affects the principles of Islam, or the nation’s unity, or to arouse factionalism and sectarianism,”²² and also it restricts the area of activities of the “associations carrying on youth and sports activities” to

18 According to an interviewee, some societies have broad linkage with other civil organizations, such as charity organizations (Author’s interview with a member of the Bahrain Youth Center on October 21, 2016).

19 Author’s interview with a member of Al Fateh Youth Coalition on October 25, 2016.

20 Author’s interview with a member of the Youth Pioneer Society on October 23, 2016.

21 Author’s interview with a member of the Bahrain Youth Center on October 21, 2016.

22 Article 1 of the amendment decree law 2002 of the 1989 NGO law.

those activities that aim at “realizing youth welfare through the provision of national sports services as well as the related social, spiritual, health and recreational services without any material gains realized by the members.”²³ Being free from such limitations, as well as administrative burdens for registration, the unregistered youth society could exercise autonomous and agile management. However, it also means that the society may be in danger from government-led repression at any time. Because of its unregistered status, the government is always able to take repressive measures against such a society. The trial of a human rights activist, Muḥammad Al-Masqaṭī is a typical example of this. Al-Masqaṭī is a founder of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, but was found guilty for establishing and operating the society without registering it with the ministry²⁴.

Based on the general understanding of these three types of youth societies, this study examines the activities of three societies in detail: firstly, the Bahrain Youth Center (Markaz al-Baḥrayn al-Shabābī), which is a society established as a branch of a political society²⁵, secondly, the Youth Pioneer Society (Jam‘īya al-Riyāda al-Shabābīya), which is a registered society that has no connection to political societies, and finally, the Al Fateh Youth Coalition (I‘tilāf Shabāb al-Fātiḥ), which is located outside the category of an NGO. Therefore these three cases fit right into the abovementioned categories. In addition, all of these societies have experiences in national reconciliatory activities despite the differences in their organizational forms. These cases illustrate the different strategies and activities of each of the types of societies, and the resultant challenges they face in pursuing social reconciliation. With reference to the relationship with the regime, the case studies identify the cause of the persistence of extraordinary social divisions in Bahrain.

Bahrain Youth Center: this society was established as a youth wing of al-Wifaq in January 2002 (Al-Wasaṭ 2004). Alongside al-Wifaq, this society has taken moderate stances toward social divisions and the regime. Though they are from the Shiite-led opposition, they call for dialogue and democratic reform within the monarchy. During the period of al-Wifaq’s parliamentary participation, especially in the period from 2006 to 2010, the society enjoyed relative freedom of activity, which is seen in the society’s holding of a large media event in February 2006 (Al-Wasaṭ 2006). This illustrates the advantage of the political society-affiliated organizations: having access to a considerable amount of funds, facilities and human resources to hold a large event due to the generous support from the affiliated political society. However, their connection to a political society could in turn sometimes be a disadvantage to them, as they are prone to governmental discriminatory measures. For example, the Arab Youth Leadership Forum (Multaqā al-Qiyādāt al-‘Arabīya al-Shābba) held in Manama in October 2008 gathered young Bahrainis as well as international experts and specialists, but the youth of political societies was excluded from the forum (Maḥfūz 2008). The disadvantage became clear in the period after the uprising: the severe repression of the political society influenced the affiliated youth society. When the parent political organization, al-Wifaq was outlawed by a court order on July 17, 2016, in order to “safeguard the security of the kingdom” (BBC News 2016), the move directly

23 Article 2 of the 1989 NGO law.

24 The Lower Criminal Court issued a ruling to fine him BD 500 for working in an unlicensed association (Bahrain Center for Human Rights 2010).

25 Bahrain Democratic Youth Society (Jama‘īya al-Shabāb al-Dīmuqrāṭī al-Baḥraynī) is also a typical example of a society as a youth wing of a political society. The society is a youth wing of WAAD, a secular oppositional political society. It had been the largest youth society after the dissolution of al-Wifaq on July 17, 2016 (author’s interview to a source close to the society at Manama on October 24, 2016). However, after the dissolution of WAAD on May 31, 2017, Bahrain Democratic Youth Society would also suffer a serious blow.

affected the Bahrain Youth Center as well. Like al-Wifaq, the youth society had their fund frozen and their offices were closed as well. The behavior of society members was put under tight constraint: in addition to political activities, they were practically shut out from the door of public employment, and they were restricted from leaving or returning to their country²⁶. Bahrain Youth Society actively operated in the latter half of 2000s in the context of al-Wifaq's rise in the parliament, but the straining relationship between the ruling regime and the base political society after the Arab Spring put severe limitations on the activities of the affiliated youth society. This illustrates the vulnerability of this type of youth society under the authoritarian rule.

Youth Pioneer Party: this society was established by “a group of youths who met on Twitter with the aim of improving the quality of life for all Bahraini youth” in August 2012. Their stated aim is “to increase knowledge and awareness of issues affecting young people, to increase opportunities for them and to promote trust and co-operation between young people from different backgrounds” (Youth Pioneer Society, n.d.). Due to the fact that the founders gathered through Twitter, its membership is characterized by a “diversity of members' backgrounds”²⁷. They aim at empowering the youth of Bahrain. This is another characteristic of a society. Their main activities are thus four projects²⁸: “generation” (ajyāl), “endeavor” (ṭumūḥ), “parliamentary youth” (al-Shabāb al-Barlamānī), and “chance” (furṣa). The “generation” program provides a forum for critical mannered discussion for young people. The “endeavor” program assists secondary school children in choosing careers or university majors. The “parliamentary youth” program provides a selected team of young people with deputies, and provides opportunities for round-table discussions with visiting foreign civil societal organizations and NGOs, as well as chances for learning negotiating skills, decision making, and ways of expressing their views. The group held an open forum to discuss policy recommendations, which was submitted to the governmental department. Finally, the “chance” program aims at cultivating entrepreneurship among young people. The society provides them with information on how to start a business, professional training, and instruction for presentation skills for earning funds. In addition, it also helps selected participants to meet a sponsor for their venture business.

While the radical February 14 Youth Coalition gathers attention as an SNS-based youth group, the emergence of the Youth Pioneer Group indicates the broader possibility of SNS-based groups. On the other hand, there is also a serious problem for their activities: a lack of resources. Because the society is not affiliated with political societies or charity societies, their financial base is fragile. The difficulty of establishing a financial base for NGO activities in Bahrain is twofold²⁹: it is hard to expect tax breaks for donations due to the lack of a tax system. In addition, in the mindset of Bahraini people, donations are generally given to charitable societies, and as a result it is difficult for them to gain attention from donors. Furthermore, because the society is volunteer-based and managed by young people, securing human resources for managing the society would be a potential difficulty for them. At this moment, the Youth Pioneer Society has succeeded in securing its financial sources, but it seems not to be the case for other societies. One interviewee said that most of the youth societies are inactive due to the lack of resources.³⁰ Keeping distance from political societies and stable management of the

26 Author's interview with a member of the society on October 21, 2016.

27 Author's interview with a member of the society on October 23, 2016.

28 Description of the activities of the Youth Pioneer Society is based on the society's homepage (Youth Pioneer Society) and the author's interview with a member of the society on October 23, 2016.

29 Author's interview with a member of the society on October 23, 2016.

30 Author's interview with a member of the Bahrain Youth Center on October 21, 2016.

society seems not an easy path to follow.

Al Fateh Youth Coalition: this society is a Sunni-based and unofficial (non-registered) youth group established in 2013. It was formerly a group within the Gathering of National Unity (Tajammu‘ al-Waḥda al-Waṭaniya), a Sunni-based organization established under ‘Abd al-Latīf al-Maḥmūd in March 2011. The group is sometimes mistakenly regarded as pro-regime, and counter-revolutionary, but it proposes a vision of autonomous reform, demanding increased legislative power and the reflection of a full voice for Sunnis in the negotiations among political forces (Louër 2012). However, during the course of organizational activities, some youth members got dissatisfied with the leadership³¹, which led them to create an independent organization, Al Fateh Youth Coalition. The youth society’s main argument is the call for making unity under one nation, not under each of the sects, stating that “Bahrain is formed of a triangle made up of the political system led by Al Khalifa family, the Sunni component and the Shi’aat [Shiite] component” (Al Fateh Youth Coalition 2013). To accomplish this, the society holds internal workshops and public seminars to provide opportunities for learning about the history of inter-sectarian collaboration in Bahrain and other important historical issues in the Arab world³². The advantage of this organization is that they are not bothered by the rules set by the ministry because of their non-registered status: their activities can go beyond the limitations of youth societies, such as political activities or radical, proactive activities³³. In addition, they are relatively free from stereotypical ideas or criticism of political societies in Bahrain that may be a barrier to the general public.³⁴ On the other hand, as is clear from its non-registered status, the society is always in danger of state repression for being unlicensed. In addition, it is also has difficulty in securing resources: it is not eligible for a governmental subsidy, or other forms of governmental support³⁵.

Summing up the situation of these three organizations, current youth societies in Bahrain are in a dilemma: having a connection with other established groups enables youth societies to have stable budgetary and manpower resources. Though limited, registration with the government would provide some resources to these societies. However, such a relationship makes youth societies vulnerable to governmental repression. The fate of the Bahrain Youth Center, a society affiliated with a political society, illustrates this. On the other hand, keeping independence from other established groups frees youth societies from the influence of governmental repression on those groups. However, a consequence of independence is the difficulty of acquiring resources.

Strengthened governmental control over the youth societies has created a dilemma. As is the case with political societies, youth societies are far from being immune to governmental control, though the supervisory ministers are different. The range of their activities is restricted by ministerial rule, and kept under control. It is not easy for a youth society to show its presence within its restricted area of activity. The overall political situation in Bahrain, strong governmental repression, and the deepening divisions in society, rule over the situation of youth societies. Youth societies would ideally function as

31 A member of the Al Fateh Youth Coalition argues that the original organization gradually became pro-governmental and sectarian, disconnecting from its initial ideals of demanding independent voices and reforms (author’s interview with a member of the society on October 25, 2016).

32 Author’s interview with a member of the society on October 25, 2016.

33 The February 14 Youth Coalition is also a non-registered movement.

34 Author’s interview with a member of the society on October 25, 2016.

35 Author’s interview with a member of the society on October 25, 2016.

a bridge between social divisions, but the real circumstances surrounding them makes this difficult.

5. Conclusion

Bahraini politics after the 2011 uprising has been characterized by a strengthened authoritarian rule and deepening social divisions. Under such circumstances, what are the prospects for national reconciliation in the country? This article has focused on the royal initiative for national reconciliation and the difficulties Bahraini civil society faces to function as a bridge across social divisions. In particular, this article has paid close attention to the two rounds of National Dialogue, Crown Prince Salman's arbitral measures, and three youth societies: Bahrain Youth Center, the Youth Pioneer Society, and Al Fateh Youth Coalition.

By examining negotiations among political forces in the National Dialogue and Crown Prince Salman's informal arbitration, this article pointed out that the ruling regime and the opposition are in a situation of mutual suspicion and mistrust. Moreover, both sides have experienced internal conflicts, which have further deepened the division.

Based on these findings, this article then examined the situation of a type of civil society, the youth society, and its reconciliatory activities. The youth society is a category of state-registered NGOs in Bahrain, but on a closer look, there are three types of movements among them: political society affiliated movements, independent state-registered movements, and non-registered movements. Each type of society has its pros and cons, but generally, they are in a dilemma: affiliation to other established societies or the government provides a source for sustaining their activities, but it also restricts them and makes them vulnerable to state repression.

Thus this article has illustrated the harmful influences of mistrust and a lack of consensus on the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, and among social identities. Sincere attempts for national reconciliation have been made, both from the rulers and the ruled, across social divisions, but they have been still hampered by the depth of these divisions.

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