

Why Bahrainis Must Embrace Dialogue

Written by Ali Fathalla

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ALI FATHALLA, NOV 22 2013

In February 2011, the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had fallen and revolutions were under way in Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain. So to many international observers it appeared obvious that the collapse of Bahraini Monarchy was simply just a matter of time. How could such an antiquated idea like a hereditary monarchy survive when our Arab neighbors were collectively embracing democracy?

However, no one was able to predict the impending series of catastrophes that would soon culminate in the Syrian Civil War and the disaster that is post-revolutionary Egypt. Had the revolution in Bahrain succeeded, it seems likely that we would be suffering from similar circumstances. Fortunately for us, the country has not destabilized; and we have been given the opportunity to reconcile our differences by means of a National Dialogue. Yet many Bahrainis remain highly skeptical of the dialogue's potential to mend our political woes; but we should not lose hope.

In order for democracy to succeed, there are certain sociopolitical principles and preconditions that must first be upheld and maintained – the most important of these principles being a general consensus among the population, something that is lacking in Bahrain, as well as Egypt.

After the removal of President Hosni Mubarak, there was large political rift among the Egyptians. A sizable proportion of Egyptians had chosen to boycott the elections due to what they believed was unfair representation amongst the new presidential candidates. Despite the boycott, those who supported the new candidates voted and the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi won the election.

It became apparent, after the second wave of protests in Egypt, that when a supposedly democratic election lacks the general consensus of the population, the outcomes have the potential to become violent, chaotic and quite undemocratic. And thus, Morsi – Egypt's first democratically elected president in over thirty years – was removed from office and his supporters flooded the streets for yet more protests and boycotts.

Although the political environment in Bahrain is quite different from Egypt, it also suffers from a politically divided populace. The consensus in Bahrain is largely split between two major factions of Bahraini society: government loyalists and government opponents. Note that I have not called them Sunni or Shia, because that would only serve to widen the sectarian rift that threatens Bahrain. Our country can only move forward by developing a political consensus where everybody, regardless of sect, religion or political affiliation, enjoys equal rights, status and respect. Ousting the current government will inevitably result in a backlash from the loyalist community similar to that witnessed in Egypt after Morsi's removal, while continuing to ignore the demands of the opposition will only result in escalations of street violence and terrorism.

This is why it is particularly necessary for the ongoing National Dialogue in Bahrain to involve all major political groups, including the opposition. After the numerous withdrawals by both opposition and loyalist groups, many Bahrainis have become skeptical of the viability of dialogue as a solution to Bahrain's political crisis. However, it is crucial for us to realize that open dialogue is currently our only solution to forging a shared political vision for the future of Bahrain and its entire population.

The international community should also realize this and avoid any unnecessary actions that threaten the stability

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and viability of Bahrain's National Dialogue. While the governments of the United States and Great Britain have stood firmly in support of the Dialogue, asserting that it is imperative to achieving reconciliation in Bahrain, the international media has been primarily concerned with condemning the government, portraying Bahrain as a repressive cesspool of human rights abuse, and denouncing the National Dialogue as a futile initiative.

However, Bahrain is far from the repressive and backward state portrayed by the media and human rights defenders; yet, it is not without its faults. And although Bahrain is a relatively more liberal and tolerant place compared to the other gulf nations, there is much that can be achieved through further reforms.

After two and half years of unrest, most Bahrainis are fed up, either fed up with the continuous unrest or fed up with the slow pace of reforms. Though many Bahrainis seem to have lost hope in the dialogue, we must continue to hold faith in the process, for it is currently our only means of shaping a shared political vision that embodies the security and wellbeing of all Bahrainis. While continued support and solidarity from the international community will also help ensure that Bahrain continues steadily down the path of democratization and becoming a fully representative constitutional monarchy.

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Ali Fathalla is a member of *Citizens for Bahrain*, a group dedicated to providing a moderate perspective of Bahraini current events.