

Review - Bahrain's Uprising

Written by Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

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KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN, JAN 20 2016

Bahrain's Uprising

Edited by Ala'a Shehabi and Marc Owen Jones

London: Zed Books, 2015.

Five years have passed since the uprising at the Pearl Roundabout threatened briefly to bring the whirlwind of Arab Spring upheaval to the placid shores of the Arabian Gulf. The initial revolutionary fervor that proved so contagious for a few heady months in 2011 has given way to the reassertion of authoritarianism in Egypt, persistent conflict in Libya and Yemen, and all-out war and the rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria. In Bahrain, the uprising that began on 14 February 2011 has been contained but not resolved. The immediate period of danger to the position of the ruling Al-Khalifa family has long since passed but there is little prospect of any imminent settlement to deep-rooted political and socioeconomic divides. Positions on all sides have hardened as significant elements of the Shia Islamist opposition have militarized while the government faces a challenge from among its core constituency of support in the form of radicalized Sunnis who, in some cases, sympathize openly with ISIL.

Bahrain's Uprising transports readers back to the tumultuous, even giddy, period when, for a few weeks at least, anything seemed possible. Edited by Ala'a Shehabi, the daughter of a prominent figure in the Bahraini opposition in exile in the United Kingdom, and Marc Owen Jones, who grew up as an expatriate in Bahrain, the volume is unabashedly activist both in tone and in content and is an outgrowth of the Bahrain Watch web initiative established in 2012. The activist tone is reflected in the occasional use of emotive (and inaccurate) references to the Pearl Roundabout 'massacre' (p.192) in February 2011 and the 'Saudi invasion' of Bahrain in March. Despite these lapses of editorial judgement, most of the authors manage to make important contributions to the study of how and why Bahrain's uprising took the form that it did. Tony Mitchell, in particular, offers an evocative eyewitness account of the uprising, seen from the perspective of a well-meaning yet perhaps politically naïve expatriate English-language tutor – in the sense that Mitchell's use of social media to document the events at the Pearl Roundabout would be unthinkable today in the age of mass surveillance of all forms of internet usage and activity in all Gulf States.

There are three parts to *Bahrain's Uprising*. Following a prelude by the renowned Bahraini sociologist Abdulhadi Khalaf – who himself was stripped of his citizenship by the regime in November 2012 – and a comprehensive and wide-ranging co-editor's introduction by Shehabi and Jones, the book opens with three chapters that purport to represent the 'voices of the condemned.' In addition to Mitchell's aforementioned contribution, this section reproduces a speech made by the jailed political leader of the liberal Waad society, Ibrahim Sharif, to the Supreme Court of Appeal and a short personal account of a period of interrogation at the hands of State Security by 'Ali al Jallawi. Al Jallawi expertly uses the analogy of a caged seagull (p.66) to refer to his plight, and that of many other political detainees, although the editors could have made it clearer that his account refers to the author's imprisonment in the 1990s rather than in 2011. This notwithstanding, the opening section to *Bahrain's Uprising* does an excellent job of giving voice to those at the frontline of the calls for dignity and equality that formed the backbone of the unrest.

Part II of the book examines how the movement, space, and self-representation of dissent has been (re-) configured in Bahrain since the start of the uprising which is, in many ways, merely the continuation of a recurring, even cyclical, pattern of political contestation dating back to the 1920s. As the co-editors note in their Introduction, debate has

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raged over what to call the events of 2011, with members of the opposition referring variously to *Thawrat al-Lu'lu* (the Pearl Revolution) and *Thawrat arb-ata'sher febrayir* (the 14 February Revolution) and government loyalists using the terms *al-ahdath* (the Events) or *al-azma* (the Crisis) instead. This inability even to agree on basic terminology continues, five years on, to illustrate the polarization of Bahraini politics and society that has resulted in no small measure to the radicalization of extremist elements on all sides of the loyalist-opposition spectrum.

The three chapters in this second section each focus on a different aspect of the outbreak of mass dissent that cumulatively made up the Pearl uprising. In their chapter on how new forms of activism have transformed social movements in Bahrain, Shehabi and Luke Bhatia examine the use of human rights discourse as an advocacy tool not only by the opposition but also in 'the ways in which the regime itself attempted to co-opt the human rights discourse as a survival strategy' (p.95). Amal Khalaf's essay on the 'many afterlives' of the Pearl Roundabout monument – which was demolished in March 2011 – illustrates how 'the production, dissemination, and consumption of images' of the roundabout have assumed mythical symbolism as 'The monument, once used as part of the state's image economy, has been turned into a memorial for an uprising against the very state that created it' (p.145). John Horne's contribution blends critical theory with activist passion to analyze how the 'spectacle of the Arab Spring' was punctuated, often through the use of public relations companies based in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The final section of *Bahrain's Uprising* contains two chapters by Owen Jones and one by Zoe Holman that look at the different patterns of the suppression of dissent and modes of repression, in part through the 'colonial legacy' of British protection. Holman sets the British connection in historical and contemporary context in her analysis of the factors that have shaped – and continue to shape – British policy toward Bahrain. However, Holman notes, the relationship goes both ways as London has become a destination of choice for several generations of Bahraini exiles, much to the chagrin, one suspects, of both governments. Owen Jones rounds out the volume with two chapters on the nature of policing in Bahrain and the use of social media, surveillance, and cyber-politics that add considerably to our understanding of the tools and mechanics of repression. While *Bahrain's Uprising* arguably would have benefited from a more rigorous balancing of oppositionist and loyalist perspectives, the book succeeds nevertheless in reconstructing an evocative and comprehensive account of what is, in large measure, the forgotten flashpoint of the Arab Spring.

About the author:

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (@Dr_Ulrichsen) is Fellow for the Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy and an Associate Fellow with the Middle East and North Africa Program at Chatham House in London. His research focuses on the history, politics, and international relations of the Middle East with particular emphasis on the Gulf. His recent publications include *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (2014), *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (2015), and *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics and Policymaking* (2016).