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Prospects for National Reconciliation in Bahrain: Is it Realistic?

Jessie Moritz

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By Jessie Moritz

Abstract

Since the outbreak of large-scale demonstrations in early 2011, Bahrain has experienced continued domestic unrest. Within this context, King Hamad initiated a series of meetings, known as the National Dialogue, with the proclaimed intention of encouraging open discussion on governance and reform in Bahrain. The failure of state-led dialogue to deliver social peace reflects a broader polarization in Bahraini society, evident in sectarian divisions between and within opposition and loyalist groups. These developments, combined with Bahrain's participation in the anti-Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) coalition, the initiation of Saudi-led airstrikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen, and an opposition boycott of the November 2014 parliamentary elections, present a challenging environment for national reconciliation.

The lead-up to the April 17 to 19 Formula 1 Grand Prix and the April 22 scheduled resumption of Shia cleric Sheikh Ali Salman's trial are critical moments for Bahrain. While state-led dialogue flounders, societal groups have created informal initiatives to encourage open discussion on political, economic, and security reform despite facing strong resistance from government loyalists and elements of the radical opposition. In the absence of a negotiated solution, a growing number of Bahraini youths have expressed frustration with formal opposition and turned to radical street movements.

Executive Summary

- A negotiated solution to Bahrain's unrest remains elusive. The current climate for national reconciliation has been hampered by the polarization of Bahraini society since 2011.
- Bahraini opposition groups remain fragmented and unlikely to collaborate despite joint interests. Although formal political societies such as Shia Islamist al-Wefaq and secular liberal Waad tend to work together, street movements such as al-Haq and the February 14 Coalition eschew the formal societies for their willingness to engage with the government. Their rejection of state-led national reconciliation processes introduces additional difficulties for those searching for effective dialogue partners.

- The Bahraini government must remain responsive to an increasingly vocal Sunni base. A moderate Sunni opposition group, al-Fateh Youth Coalition, appears caught between the major Shia opposition parties, which they consider sectarian, and loyalist Sunni groups. Sunni political activism is a concern for the government, considering the government's participation in the coalition airstrikes in Syria and in combatting ISIL funding.
- Government factionalism and vacillation between repressive and responsive measures to address the crisis have undermined trust in state-led national dialogue. Recent developments, such as the three month suspension of al-Wefaq activities in 2014 and a recent escalation in the practice of revoking Bahrainis' citizenships, represent a swing toward hardline factions in government that are unlikely to offer the concessions needed for reconciliation.
- The al-Wefaq-led boycott of the November 2014 elections demonstrated popular frustration with polarization, while heightened sectarianism across the region highlights the urgent need for reconciliation, especially as the upcoming Formula 1 race and resumption of Shia cleric Sheikh Ali Salman's trial could prove to be flashpoints for renewed violence.
- As state-led dialogue flounders, informal initiatives have emerged within society. These initiatives currently remain small-scale, elite-focused, and have been hindered by conservative groups in government and society, but demonstrate some potential for cross-sectarian reconciliation.

Policy Recommendations for Bahrain

- Finding a solution to the political crisis in Bahrain will empower moderates and weaken radicals on all sides of the political spectrum. It should be a top priority for the Bahraini government, which should be prepared to offer substantive concessions to re-engage the opposition.
- The Bahraini government must overcome internal factionalism to develop a coherent and consistent policy toward the opposition.
- The repeated arrests of senior members of the opposition and human rights community for peaceful expressions of dissent is not conducive to national reconciliation and should immediately cease.
- Al-Wefaq and the major opposition parties risk marginalizing themselves out of formal Bahraini politics. The postelection climate is a critical time to demonstrate engagement with the Bahraini government, and al-Wefaq should be prepared to engage constructively with its Sunni and secular counterparts.
- Non-governmental initiatives offer a rare opportunity for open dialogue with groups that would not be invited to a formal dialogue process. The government should allow these initiatives to proceed without interference.

Policy Recommendations for the United States

- Bahrain is a major non-NATO ally of the United States and has been cooperating in efforts to stabilize Iraq and Syria. Encouraging domestic reconciliation while simultaneously cooperating on security affairs is not a zero-sum game and should remain among the United States' highest priorities.
- U.S. arms sales to Bahrain that could be used against domestic protesters are currently limited, but the Bahraini Embassy in Washington is pressing Congress to support lifting these restrictions. The United States should consider the implications of changing its policy, and the message this would send to conservative factions in government.
- The United States should continue to strongly support the ability of its embassy staff to conduct meetings with Bahraini citizens and political groups unhindered and without the presence of a government representative.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of large-scale demonstrations in early 2011, Bahrain has experienced continued domestic unrest. Repeated attempts to create a negotiated solution to the uprising have thus far proved unsuccessful, and the state-led formal dialogue process has been suspended since January 8, 2014.

The failure of state-led dialogue reflects a broader polarization in Bahraini society. Though initial demonstrations in 2011 attracted diverse supporters, formal political societies such as al-Wefaq and street movements such as the February 14 Coalition currently draw heavily from the disenfranchised Shia population. The al-Khalifa ruling family, in response, has attempted to shore up traditional sources of support among its Sunni constituents, including domestic incarnations of the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Minbar al-Islami) and Salafi (al-Asalah) political societies, though the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has brought Bahrain's relationship with more radical Islamists under scrutiny. These developments, combined with Saudi-led air strikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen, and an opposition boycott of the November 2014 parliamentary elections, have intensified divisions within Bahraini society.

The lead-up to the April 17 to 19 Formula 1 Grand Prix, an event that has previously excited popular unrest capitalizing on international media attention, is a critical moment for Bahrain. While state-led dialogue flounders, societal groups have created informal initiatives to encourage open discussion on political, economic, and security reform. Yet these groups have also faced strong resistance from government loyalists and from radical opposition: Even visits to private *majalis* (singular *majlis*, informal discussions usually held in private homes) designed to foster cross-sectarian cooperation have come under criticism. Considering the disengagement from formal political societies evident in the November elections and on-going protests over the arrest of Sheikh Ali Salman, al-Wefaq's secretary-general, the current environment for national reconciliation is challenging, at best. As a negotiated solution remains elusive, a growing number of Bahraini youths have expressed frustration with formal opposition and turned to radical street movements.

Fragmented Forums of Debate

A key challenge for a negotiated solution to Bahraini unrest is the fragmentation of government loyalist and opposition groups in the post-2011 era. Bahrain's "opposition" is in reality a fractured collection of street movements, formal political societies, and Sunni, Shia, and secular (usually leftist) groups with differing goals and networks. While some of these groups – such as Shia al-Wefaq and secular leftist Waad – tend to cooperate, there are few active links between coalitions. Predominantly Shia street movements such as al-Haq and the February 14 movement openly reject al-Wefaq and the political societies for their willingness to engage with the government, and cross-sectarian cooperation between Sunni and Shia opposition groups evident in early 2011 was, in the words of a Bahraini reformer, "demolished with the [Pearl] monument."¹ Street movements such as the February 14 movement are directly opposed to state-led national dialogue and unlikely to join formal negotiations.² Compounding poor collaboration between opposition movements has been the arrest or exile of leaders from radical street movements such as al-Haq and al-Wafaa since 2011. Even if they wanted to cooperate, noted a member of al-Wefaq in late 2013, "there's no one left for al-Wefaq to organize with."³

Sunni groups are no less fragmented. Despite making a number of reform demands, the National Unity Gathering (NUG), a Sunni coalition including al-Minbar and al-Asalah, has in practice functioned as a loyalist group, condemning the Shia opposition and conforming to the government narrative of popular unrest as driven by Iran. Feeling the NUG was tied too closely to the government, a group of Sunni youth splintered from the Gathering and formed al-Fateh Youth Coalition (FYC) in 2011; the splinter group's manifesto demands greater legislative control for the elected parliament, term limits for ministers, a more independent judiciary, and greater political and civil rights for Bahraini citizens.⁴ The FYC appears caught between its vehement dislike of the Shia political societies, which it considers sectarian, and its political platform, which bears a great deal of similarity to the demands of al-Wefaq. It also has few natural allies among the traditionally loyalist Sunni populace, yet draws from growing Sunni disenfranchisement from the government, particularly in lower-income Sunni areas in Muharraq, Riffa, and Isa town.

Factionalism within the Bahraini government has also hampered reconciliation. Since 2011, the government has flipped between reconciliation efforts, typically headed by reformist-figure Crown Prince Salman (the CP faction), and repressive responses associated with conservative pragmatist Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa (the PM faction), and hawkish hardliners Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, commander in chief of the Bahrain Defense Force, and his brother Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, royal court minister (the Khawalid faction). Though these dynamics are usually opaque, there have been repeated examples of disagreement that have emerged into public view, such as senior (but anonymous) government figures decrying the rise of the Khawalid faction to the Wall Street Journal in early 2013, and Salman's response to the government's indictment of Sheikh Ali Salman in late 2013 by receiving the Shia cleric in his personal *diwan* (council) and posting an image

1 Author interview with Bahraini reformer, United Kingdom 2013.

2 Itilaf Shabab Thowra 14 Febriar [Youth Coalition of the 14th February Revolution], "Ham jiddan: Muqefna min jadia Huwar al-tuwafiq al-watani [Important: Our position on the Deceptive National Consensus Dialogue]," on Facebook, July 2, 2011.

3 Author interview with former al-Wefaq member of parliament, United Kingdom 2013.

4 See Itilaf Shabab al-Fateh [al-Fateh Youth Coalition], "al-Mashru al-siyyasi, [The Political Plan]," *alfateh21feb.com*, n.d.

of the meeting on Twitter.⁵

Factionalism in the government has been damaging to the prospects for national reconciliation. Although Crown Prince Salman has driven repeated initiatives to hold national dialogue, his seeming inability to outmaneuver the conservative factions has weakened opposition trust in state-driven reconciliation efforts. When Salman held a frank and open debate on reform in January 2014 as part of an attempt to rally support for a new state-led dialogue, al-Wefaq lauded his efforts but remained unconvinced. “We have been here before; an olive branch from the crown prince rarely means substantive progress,” wrote former al-Wefaq representative, Ali al-Aswad in May 2014.⁶

The National Dialogue and State-Sponsored Reconciliation

Any future state-led national dialogue is likely to resemble previous (unsuccessful) efforts. The first “National Dialogue” started on July 2, 2011, and the government reported 94 percent participation of the societal groups invited to join, just under 300 delegates.⁷ Each group was accorded five seats, regardless of its wider influence in society, and, critically, the entire process was presented as a dialogue between conflicting elements *within* society, not a negotiation between society and the state. After only 15 days of talks, al-Wefaq quit the dialogue, claiming the process was ineffective and deliberately marginalized opposition groups.

Following 18 months of continued unrest, the second state-led “National Consensus Dialogue” started on February 10, 2013, and was attended by eight representatives from opposition groups allied with al-Wefaq, eight representatives from loyalist groups, an additional five from the National Assembly (most opposition members resigned from this body in 2011), and three government ministers. This process, too, stalled. The remaining opposition representatives withdrew in September 2013, partially in protest at the arrest of Khalil al-Marzooq, one of their delegates to the dialogue, and the government officially suspended the talks on January 8, 2014.

Attempts throughout 2014 by the crown prince and the royal court minister to meet directly with opposition figures and restart talks led to hopeful speculation in January and September, but were ultimately unsuccessful. In September, Salman announced a five-point framework to structure further dialogue including: the redefinition of electoral districts; the ability of parliament to question ministers and to amend, reject, and approve the government’s annual plan; and judicial and security reform.⁸ These proposed topics corresponded closely with the Shia and secular opposition’s stated demands, thus the failure of this initiative is not a rejection of the topics themselves but rather a reflection of a deeply held suspicion by the opposition that the dialogue has been used as a deliberately ineffective process to project an image of responsiveness in the absence of real political liberalization. Government efforts to bring parties back to the table tend to intensify before potential flashpoints for popular unrest such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix race in 2013 and the November 2014 elections. Former U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain Thomas Krajeski hinted in January 2015 that a behind-the-scenes reinvigoration of the dialogue process was underway. However, the fact that a new dialogue process

⁵ Charles Levinson, “A Palace Rift in Persian Gulf Bedevils Key U.S. Navy Base,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2013; Justin Gengler, “Bahrain’s Crown Prince makes his move,” *Foreign Policy*, January 20, 2014.

⁶ Ali Alaswad, “Deconstructing Dialogue in Bahrain,” ali-alaswad.com, May 16, 2014.

⁷ Bahrain News Agency, “National Dialogue spokesman: participation rates estimated at 94%, rate of received views touches 81%,” June 26, 2011.

⁸ Gulf Daily News, “Moving forward together,” March 30, 2015.

has *not* been announced in 2015, particularly in the lead-up to the resumption of Sheikh Ali Salman's trial and the Grand Prix, is worrying and reflects the current polarization of Bahraini society.⁹

Four More Years (of Unrest): The November 2014 Elections

The November 2014 elections were a critical moment in Bahraini politics. With no substantive reform they could claim as a result of their abstention from parliament since 2011, al-Wefaq and its allies had little to justify participating in the elections. Boycotting elections may be a long-term strategic error – in that it has allowed the government to portray al-Wefaq as a rejectionist group opposed to democratic participation – yet the move also undermined, to some extent, the legitimacy of the elections. The absence of independent statistical data is important here: If, as the state contends, over 50 percent of registered voters participated, al-Wefaq's boycott appears ineffective and weakens its position. However, al-Wefaq maintains participation rates closer to 30 percent and alleges the government biased loyalist voters to outlying polling stations, claiming that it retains the 67 percent popular support achieved in the 2010 elections.¹⁰

In reality, al-Wefaq might have evaded an undesirable outcome by boycotting the November elections: While Sheikh Ali Salman's arrest likely endeared him to younger supporters torn between al-Wefaq and the street movements, formal political societies fared poorly in the elections. Al-Asalah and al-Minbar were left with only three seats between them, controversial "independent" Islamists such as Jassim al-Saeedi lost their seats, and the Sunni national grouping, al-Fateh Coalition, was unable to win a single electoral district. The elections highlighted disengagement from formal societies and burgeoning support for younger, moderate independents but have also resulted in a parliament in which *none* of the current members have participated in the National Dialogue process.

The results introduce additional difficulties for those searching for effective dialogue partners. Al-Wefaq, the main opposition party willing to engage with the government, has already suffered strong criticism from its Shia base for participating in previous dialogue processes and is unlikely to return to the table without significant concessions. Simultaneously, loyalist groups are more resistant to approve such concessions, particularly as sectarian tensions across the region rise as a result of ISIL actions in Iraq and the Saudi intervention in Yemen. Organized groups advocating reform via engagement with the government, then, have weakened in terms of formal political representation in the postelection period, even as the election results reflected popular frustration with the entrenched political and economic crisis.

Societal and Informal Reconciliation Initiatives

In the absence of state-led national dialogue, societal efforts to build reconciliation have become increasingly important, especially as these now form the sole pathway for participants in previous dialogue processes to meet and discuss reform. Prominent examples include Huda al-Mahmood, the Sunni president of Bahrain's Sociologist Society who drove the "Bahrain Unites Us" initiative attempting to reduce sectarian tensions, and Ali Fakhro, former minister of health and education, who headed al-Liqa al-Watani (the National Encounter), a cross-sectarian group held through the al-Oruba club. As Abdulnabi Alekry, a senior member of Waad, explained in January 2014: "There are about 350

9 Azad Amanat, "An Interview with Thomas Krajewski, U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain," *The Politic*, January 11, 2015.

10 Justin Gengler, "Electoral rules (and threats) cure Bahrain's sectarian parliament," *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2014.

personalities who made visits to Sunni, Shia, to opposition, to loyalists, and they tried to bring them to agree on national programs. There are also other initiatives in regional [areas], like in Hamad Town... in Isa Town.”¹¹

Yet societal initiatives to promote reconciliation are hampered by divisive rhetoric from loyalists and radical street movements that oppose engagement and the concessions necessary to any reconciliation agreement. A moderate Bahraini Shia cleric described his experience attending the majlis of a prominent Sunni Bahraini:

The government wants to build a Berlin Wall between Shias and Sunnis. And I actually attempted to visit some [Sunni] figures in an attempt to destroy the wall. Just imagine: One of them, he told me – this is just a month and a half ago – so I went over to his home and I said: “We have to sit, we have to deal with each other. We cannot allow these sectarian tensions.” And he agreed with me. But before leaving, he requested [of] me, he said: “Please do not visit me again.” I asked him “Why?” He said: “Because the loyalists will see you. And I will be in trouble.”¹²

Cross-sectarian cooperation remains, then, problematic in post-2011 Bahrain. In an environment where merely visiting the home of a member of an opposing faction is condemned, societal reconciliation efforts remain limited even in the private sphere and have not yet demonstrated an ability to elicit widespread support.

A potential exception to this pattern is the emerging Bahrain Debate initiative. It is small-scale and has an academic orientation but also delves directly into contentious questions of political and economic reform, sectarianism, land reclamation, and naturalization. The latest debate, held on March 28 at the al-Oruba club in Juffair, was attended by: former al-Wefaq Member of Parliament Salman al-Salim; head of the Youth Office for Waad, Ahmed Abdulameer; and leader of the FYC, Rashid al-Jassim. The debate was thus a rare opportunity for members of Shia, secular leftist, and Sunni opposition groups to meet and discuss national reconciliation and contemporary political developments.

Particularly notable are Jassim’s comments criticizing al-Wefaq’s portrayal of naturalization, referring to the government’s naturalization of thousands of Sunnis from abroad, allegedly intended to shift the demographic balance in favor of the Sunni ruling family. Al-Wefaq depicts naturalization as a threat to the Shia, he argued, but it is in reality a collective issue that challenges not only Bahraini Shia but also Bahrain-born Sunnis who feel disenfranchised by the government’s focus on naturalized Sunnis.¹³ He captured a key point: Until opposition groups define reform in a collective manner, there is little space for collaboration despite convergent political and economic reform interests. Thus far, there is little indication that this is likely, although the Bahrain Debates are potentially a forum where it could occur. If it did, the challenge then becomes transforming dialogue into action, especially as continued violence from the state and radical opposition has derailed reconciliation efforts in the past.

¹¹ Author interview with Abdulnabi Alekry, Bahrain 2014.

¹² Author interview with Bahraini Shia cleric, Bahrain 2014.

¹³ Bahrain Debate, “Niqash al-Bahrayn: al-majtama fi itar al-iqtisad al-siyasi ¾ [The Bahrain Debate: Society in the context of the political economy ¾],” *YouTube*, March 29, 2015.

Prospects for National Reconciliation

As of April, Bahrain appears to be in a period of heightened tension not only between the government and opposition, but also between groups within the opposition. Popular unrest in the Shia villages of Diraz, Sitra, Bilad al-Qadeem, Jidd Hafs, and many others has continued, especially after the government rearrested Sheikh Ali Salman in December 2014 and announced support for Saudi-led strikes against the Zaydi-Shia Houthi militants in Yemen in March. Recent government arrests, including those of prominent human rights activists Hussain Jawad and Nabeel Rajab, coupled with the January announcement of the revocation of 72 Bahrainis' citizenship, grouping non-violent political activists with ISIL supporters, represent an intensification of hard-line views toward Bahraini opposition.

Given that they will not be able to contest elections for another four years, al-Wefaq and allied societies may be more receptive to other pathways of formal engagement, especially to differentiate themselves from the street movements with which they compete for popular support. Their consistent representation at international conferences and societal reconciliation initiatives indicates their determination to be part of public debate, but their rejection of government overtures also means they perceive no benefit in negotiating publicly with the government without confirmation that it would result in significant and concrete outcomes.

Internal government factionalism is also relevant. Crown Prince Salman has been behind most negotiation efforts but cannot entice opposition groups to the table when it remains unclear whether he has the political weight to convince members of his own family to compromise. For the moment, it appears that power rests in favor of the al-Khawalid and PM factions, and it would take a sustained shift toward the CP faction to encourage societal actors to re-engage with state-led dialogue. Until that time, grassroots initiatives may present a more effective pathway to reconciliation, but only insofar as they are allowed the freedom to operate and can overcome societal tensions to capture popular support. These are significant qualifications and suggest that ultimately the atmosphere to negotiate reconciliation is, for the moment, fragile.

It also remains to be seen how much popular support moderate Sunni opposition groups such as the FYC can command. Public reconciliation initiatives such as the Bahrain Debate offer an opportunity, but not a guarantee, for greater cooperation among societal groups, and it is unclear whether the FYC will be able to engage constructively with the established opposition societies. The FYC also represents increasing Sunni political activism, which remains an important trend even as popular support swings away from the formal societies. The Bahraini government must remain responsive to its traditional Sunni base, which became restive in response to perceived neglect in favor of continued concessions to the protesting Shia and naturalized Sunnis. Bahrain's participation in coalition airstrikes against ISIL in Syria and cooperation in combating terrorist financing have also earned the ire of Bahrain-born ISIL clerics such as Turki al-Binali, and the government is understandably nervous about Sunni radicalization spurred by regional developments.

The recent U.S. announcement of a breakthrough in nuclear negotiations with Iran may present an opportunity for government reformers to shift state rhetoric away from a traditional focus on Iran as the instigator of domestic unrest, in doing so recognizing the domestic political factors that have shaped popular discontent. Official comments on the deal thus far have stuck to cautious neutrality, praising the breakthrough and expressing hope that it will prevent Iran from interfering in Gulf

Cooperation Council affairs. If the deal is successful and rapprochement continues between the West and Iran, Bahrain's government will come under greater pressure to recognize and more effectively address domestic political factors that have driven societal protest.

The alternative, as unrest continues and state-led reconciliation processes stagnate, is that Bahrainis will increasingly turn to more radical forms of protest. As a Bahraini youth affiliated with the February 14 Coalition put it: "At least burning tires shows people that things in Bahrain are not okay. All this talking, it's getting us nowhere."¹⁴

¹⁴ Author interview, Bahrain 2014.

