

NOTIONS OF IDENTITY IN THE BAHRAIN UNREST OF 2011

Bahrain's multi-ethnic and diverse society has undergone tremendous challenges since the onslaught of the unrest in February 2011. This essay highlights the many layers of identity in Bahrain's national definition. Fluctuating between religious and ethnic realities, the author questions which identity or narrative should ultimately manifest itself for this island community to co-exist peacefully and respectfully in line with its historical background.

Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa*



* Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa is the Minister of Culture of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Bahrain is commonly referred to as an archipelago of 33 islands in the Arabian Sea; and, although this is a crucial identifying factor, writers often forget to depict the implications of these islands to the identity of its people. As an island nation, Bahrainis are a fluid population of multi-ethnic origin with naturally diverse identities. However, like all Arabs, for whom the notion of collective identity is fundamental, these diverse senses of self can nevertheless co-exist and often interchange throughout the day, according to circumstance and need.

According to the 2010 Housing and Population Census, Bahrainis represent about 46 percent of the total population, with foreign residents comprising the remaining 54 percent. This majority foreign presence, Bahrain's expatriate population, are an international amalgamation ranging from Asian, Arab, European and American residents who have chosen to make Bahrain their home. Historically, Bahrain's foreign populace has been accommodated with land and religious worship facilities granted to the Christian, Hindu and Bahai' communities amongst others.

Although Bahrainis are projected in popular media presentations as a divided society in which a minority Sunni power base rules over a Shiite majority, this has never been statistically proven. Bahrain's population census does not distinguish religious denomination and, as a result, there are no official figures for the sectarian composition of Bahraini society. Interestingly, however, a recent population sampling of 500 Bahraini households by an American researcher found that the Sunni-Shiite split was 57.6 percent-42.4 percent.¹ Most importantly, this simplistic media myth belies the many cultural and ethnic divisions in Bahrain's national identity. Bahrainis have a variety of backgrounds which have been perpetuated in popular imagination with local terms used to describe those of African origin, Iranian Sunni origin, Iranian Shiite origin, Indian origin and Peninsula Arabs.

Shared beliefs, values, practices, and memories are the defining elements of collective identity and, as a result, it is easy for a Bahraini to reflect his/herself in accordance with his/her familial circumstances, greater clan, locality, ethnicity, gender, and, when applicable, nationally. The tragedy of the unrest of 2011 for Bahrain lies in these variances of identity and the understanding of national identity vis-à-vis other senses of self.

Conflict occurred in February and March, in 2011, when sectarian identity became the predominant factor in the self-definition of many Bahrainis. Although economic grievances seemed to be the initial trigger and were claimed to be a source of injustice in the country, extremist elements have run the opposition movement;

¹ "Facts on the Ground: A Reliable Estimate of Bahrain's Sunni-Shi'i Balance, and Evidence of Demographic Engineering," *Religion and Politics in Bahrain*, 5 April 2011, <http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.com/2011/04/facts-on-ground-reliable-estimate-of.html>.

dominated the nature of the unrest; and made state security forces and migrant workers the target of attacks. Economic damage is estimated to be around 800 million Bahraini Dinars (BD), but the political, social, cultural and image damage cannot be measured and far outweighs the economic costs. The state response to the unrest through mass arrests, dismissals, and torture represented a gross violation of human rights. Corrective measures however included the National Dialogue and the establishment of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. Recommendations of both these initiatives are being reviewed, and many of them are also undergoing implementation as well.

It is widely reported that the first demonstrations on 14 February 2011, which took place at the Gulf Cooperation Council at (Pearl) Roundabout, were attended by a wide cross-section of Bahrainis with shared political and economic demands, encouraged by the successful popular movements in Tunisia and Egypt. It is true that there were a combination of political and economic grievances collectively agreed upon by Bahrainis who questioned housing policies,

“The tragedy of the unrest of 2011 for Bahrain lies in [the] variances of identity and the understanding of national identity vis-à-vis other senses of self.”

land reclamation, political naturalization, and public sector wages. However, due to a combination of factors – posed by both state and civil society forces – the movement at Roundabout transformed itself into a largely sectarian grouping, mainly aligned with Al Wefaq National Islamic Society (Al Wefaq). For almost a month thereafter, activists and supporters at the Roundabout were predominantly composed of Bahraini Shiites who convened at daily lectures presided over by a political and religious leadership. No one can question that the patriotism of these groups and the intrinsic belief of their members in the betterment of Bahrain underpinned their activities. Unfortunately though, at the communal level, the movement at the Roundabout identified itself along religious and sectarian lines, thereby, alienating other factions and identities in Bahrain.

While the political discourse changed throughout the month and was prudently channeled by the political leadership of Al Wefaq and their allies, there can be no denying of the composition of these most vocal opposition forces during that period. Even the political art applied in the Roundabout and surrounding areas by these activists was influenced by their religious identity as they displayed pictures of Shiite clerics, used Iranian-influenced art depictions and relayed the messages of their political and social problems – including demands for greater political

empowerment, increased housing and the heightening of public sector wages. Calls to prayer were Shiite and areas were organized in a segregated fashion. Interestingly, village identities were also clearly defined with tents and gatherings placed according to villages and areas, predominantly inhabited by Shiite Bahrainis.

This, in turn, aroused a combination of fear and reactive protest amongst other segments of the population – expatriates, migrant workers, Sunni Bahrainis, members of religious minorities, and the private sector. Thus, in the ebb and flow of that period, another collective was momentarily formed at the Al Fateh mosque in Manama, in which representatives of all these communities came together to protest the movement at the Roundabout and to ensure that another voice was represented in the local political domain. Again, fundamentally patriotic,

this emotional underpinning to what came to be labeled as the ‘Al Fateh Gathering,’ listed a number of political and economic grievances. Borne out of concern, the Al Fateh Gathering had no ideological backbone or collective identity and, as a result, could not continue as either a political or a social force.

“Overseeing many cultural activities on the island, the Ministry of Culture engages in cultural exchanges everyday in the hope that audiences can interact with people holding different perspectives; learn from external experiences; and apply those new experiences and ideas in the most appropriate to their needs and interests.”

Instead, in due course, a Sunni-based political collective was established in the form of the National Unity Assembly and was headed by a Sunni religious leader, further diversifying local identities and the political discourse. Suddenly, collective identity in Bahrain became a source of conflict as people increasingly aligned themselves according to religious and ethnic definitions in addition to locality, thereby, pursuing varying political motivations in line with their groupings.

Consequently, national identity also became the preserve of political goals, with each party defining nationhood according to its own objectives.

Claiming to be the only legitimate opposition force, for Al Wefaq, national identity was an exclusive phenomenon in which naturalised Bahrainis should not play a role. And although the National Unity Assembly rejected political naturalization, the group officially embraced Bahrainis of all origin, condemning the attacks on

Bahraini security forces. The heightened dialogue centered on the definition of Bahrain's national identity wherein extremist elements refused to acknowledge the reality of the island-nation historically as one of pluralism and naturalization.

On the other hand, religious minorities, secular groups and the majority of foreign residents found themselves increasingly marginalized in a political arena which seemed to categorize state and non-state actors as either regime-aligned forces or opposition forces defined according to their confessional constituency. International forces only reinforced these identities and denomination-based political actors as the Bahraini political scene is also influenced by foreign interpretations.

In a multi-ethnic and diverse society like Bahrain, these are dangerous trends. This pluralistic and accommodating social fabric – so fundamental to historic Bahrain – has been torn, and, today, Bahrainis and residents alike have to re-examine their sense of identity and decide on the role religion and ethnicity would play in their future. How should we define Bahrain's national identity? Indeed, can we claim one? What are the reasons for its weaknesses in the past and what really enabled other forms of communal identity to supersede it? Which identity or narrative should ultimately manifest itself for this island community to co-exist peacefully and respectfully?

"[The] pluralistic and accommodating social fabric – so fundamental to historic Bahrain – has been torn, and, today, Bahrainis and residents alike have to re-examine their sense of identity and decide on the role religion and ethnicity would play in their future."

Overseeing many cultural activities on the island, the Ministry of Culture engages in cultural exchanges everyday in the hope that audiences can interact with people holding different perspectives; learn from external experiences; and apply those new experiences and ideas in the most appropriate to their needs and interests.

Nations are imagined communities as underlying their superficial construct are multiple identities. Our role, at the Ministry of Culture, is simply to enable a dialogue which, in presenting different cultural practices throughout the world and within Bahrain itself, should allow us to reflect on our senses of self and the way forward in the aftermath of this tumultuous experience.