

From Blog to Street: The Bahraini Public Sphere in Transition

When Bahrain Online founder Ali Abdulemam and his partners were arrested in February 2005 for hosting a critical United Nations human-rights report about Bahrain, fittingly enough the first to respond were colleagues in the Bahraini blogosphere. Before the government could announce his arrest, a consortium of bloggers established the Free Ali web page and set in motion Bahrain's first blogging-led mass protests. As the efforts gathered pace, the Shi'a-run *Al Wasat* and other liberal papers were swept up in the blogger tide and denounced the arrests, garnering further international attention by adding their support to the protests in the streets of Manama. "Moblogs" pairing a protester on the street carrying a mobile phone with a blogger on a computer offered continuous updates that proved pivotal in mobilizing demonstrators and evading the police. In turn, the photographs spread around the world as other Arab, European, and American bloggers linked or copied the images on their own blogs. The demonstrations initiated by Bahraini bloggers reached the attention of viewers across the Middle East when Al Jazeera became involved and broadcast the protests live. As international pressure grew, the web-led movement succeeded where other movements have failed, achieving the release of the Bahrain Online founder after fifteen days.

As the 2005 Free Ali Campaign dramatically shows, the development of blogging in Bahrain has enabled the emergence of a “citizens’ media” with the very real capability to mobilize dissent. Facing a minority Sunni monarchy, the Shi’a majority, traditionally excluded from public discourse and public advancement, has forged its own platform from which to speak. With almost a quarter of Bahrainis regularly accessing the Internet,¹ activists have developed sophisticated online forums and individual blogs which have very quickly become the locus of movements for democratic change. In Bahrain blogging has magnified the emergence of the “new Arab public”² brought about by the advent of satellite television. Blogging has not only provided a means for mobilizing citizen action, but also for widening the kinds of public debate that can take place. In this article, I argue that blogs can be vehicles of social change and that the rapid diversification of Bahraini blogs is expanding the arenas of public debate in Bahrain, leading to more rigorous and broader political landscape.

Bahrain Online and Opposition Movements

Ali Abdulemam’s Bahrain Online is notable as the main online forum through which opposition parties contesting the lack of democracy in the country have organized themselves. Indeed, it is not just secular democratic parties that have used Bahrain Online—the largest network of uncensored digital forums in the country—but religious Shi’a parties as well. Of the hundreds of forums that make up Bahrain Online, the longest running and most popular is the *National Forum* which is comprised of thousands

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ba.html>

² X-xiv, Lynch, Marc, *Voices of the New Arab Public*. Columbia University Press, 2006

of threads and hundreds of posters discussing Bahraini politics.³ The site and its forums often include a fair amount of gossip and libel against the royal family, as well as serious discussion. All the forums are moderated by Ali Abdulemam and his friends, who allow discourse that would be unacceptable in other Bahraini media. For example, in one post a contributor criticized King Hamad's plan to bring religiously-acceptable Formula One racing to Bahrain by juxtaposing a photo of the winner being sprayed with carbonated rose water next to an image of a garbage bag full of beer cans supposedly from the race track. In doing so, it insinuated that the King's promise of a Bahrain Grand Prix in keeping with the tenets of Islam was a hollow one—that indeed, despite the substitution of rose water for champagne, alcohol would nonetheless abound. In response to this mockery of the King's plan, the forum's owner said he “saw nothing wrong” with the post, and Ali continued to allow controversial material to be posted.⁴ This included jibes that mocked the idea of celebrating National Day, December 16th—the day when a Sunni Emir ascended to rule over a Shi'a majority.⁵ Such a heady mixture of anti-monarchism, invective against the Royal Family, and Shi'a nationalism could never have been expressed before.

Bahrain Online's political role grew from its inception in the late nineties in concert with the growth in Bahrain's Internet infrastructure and the cementing of oppositional voices through satellite television. Although always a critic of the authoritarian tendencies within the government, Ali Abdulemam did not found the site as a vehicle for opposition but as a space for Bahrainis of all political persuasions to

³ Andrew Higgins “After High Hopes, Democracy Project in Bahrain Falters” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11 2005.

⁴ Andrew Higgins “After High Hopes, Democracy Project in Bahrain Falters” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11 2005.

⁵ Neil MacFarquhar, “In Tiny Arab State, web Takes on Ruling Elite” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2006.

comment openly on political developments. He was initially inspired to found the site when the death of a young man in police custody in July 1998 sparked demonstration and riots.⁶ However, with political and technological developments, the site shifted to more open opposition. First, Internet access was transformed when the Bahrain Telecommunications Company (Batelco) expanded its network of high-speed cables throughout the country beginning in 2001. Even the smallest villages were included through “thief-nets,” in which high-speed Internet connections provided by Batelco were sold and resold by third parties. At the same time, Al Jazeera featured opposition leaders from Bahrain on its news-magazine programmes and call-in shows. These developments, combined with the emergence of political campaigning which used Bahrain Online as a means to organize and advertise, gave the opposition a nationwide appeal and reach that it had not previously enjoyed. This pushed Bahrain Online down an increasingly overt path in national politics. Abdulemam shifted to a position of advocacy during the electoral campaign, throwing the site’s resources behind the opposition. He organized ‘flash’ protests assembled via email and text messages and turned parts of the forums over to opposition parties. It was through this dialogue that the opposition eventually chose to boycott the national elections.

The reach that the Bahrain Online offered allowed the opposition parties to assemble protests, sit downs, and strikes in the lead up to the 2002 election, the first since 1976. The protests focused on both local issues (housing, jobs, education) and universal issues (the rejection of the King’s Constitution being chief among them). Though the

⁶ Human Rights Watch World Report 1999: Bahrain, Human Rights Development at <http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/mideast/Bahrain.html>

protests reached diverse groups of society, the opposition parties decided that it was better to denounce the election by boycott than giving a fig-leaf to a royal dictatorship. Bahrain Online ended the election cycle not only as a locus for reformers and dissidents, but also as an instigator of demonstrations and protests in its own right—whenever Abdulemam informed his readers of an arrest the King would find himself confronting demonstrators. Bahrain Online’s refusal to obey a law obligating the traditional media “not to directly or indirectly defame the King” won it great popularity with the Bahraini public and gained it the credibility to regularly mobilize its readership. The following year, when the U.S. moved to recognize Bahrain as a major non-NATO ally in the build-up to the Iraq War, and in the context of negotiations to establish a bilateral free trade agreement with the U.S., expectations for reform in Bahrain rose again. It was at this point that Abdulemam became comfortable enough to dissolve his *nome de blog* and use his real name online. This was unprecedented in the digital realm—at the time, the forums and blogs within Bahrain operated entirely under pseudonyms in order to evade the security services. Anonymity was crucial for skirting state control; to reveal a blogger’s real name would mean effectively giving oneself up to the security services. The opportunity to name a single person responsible for the national unification of the patchwork of opposition parties, as well as for the generally scandalous and disrespectful tone of Bahrain Online’s forums toward the monarchy, led the King and the Ministry of Justice to prepare a suit against Abdulemam in the hopes of strangling the opposition and preventing it from further organizing.

But while political participation and debate were widening online, the real-world political sphere seemed to head in the opposite direction. The Emir, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, had named himself King of Bahrain in February 2002, leading what he described as a “constitutional monarchy.”⁷ Despite the ambitious rhetoric of his liberal reform program—which included universal suffrage and a bicameral parliament—the King retained the ability to appoint the upper house, the Shura Council, and the Prime Minister. The King’s Constitution was more a fig-leaf than real reform, as it left almost all power in the hands of the Al Khalifas and the King. The royal family retained control of 10 of 21 ministries, command of the military, the National University, and the embassy to Washington.⁸ In addition, the opposition’s move to boycott the November 2002 elections gave the King a pliant, reactionary Majlis, the lower house of Parliament, dominated by Al Menbar (the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood) and Al Asala (the Salafis). This bloc actively sought to crush the Bahrain Online-inspired reform movement. To achieve that end, it supported a program selectively granting citizenship to Sunni migrant workers who had little sympathy for free speech or any Shi’a-dominated civil society, and it pushed for the creation of an Islamic Vice and Virtue Committee. These steps were seen by some commentators as the end of the road for the opposition movement.⁹

This prediction seemed to be confirmed by Abdulemam’s arrest. In February 2005, a Shi’a human rights activist posted the sixth and seventh periodic reports on Bahrain to UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to Bahrain Online which criticized the 2002 elections for ethical and discriminatory failures. The report told

⁷ Glaser, Mark. “Online Forums, Bloggers Become Vital Media Outlets in Bahrain.” *USC Annenberg Online Journalism Review* 17 May, 2005. Accessed Sept 5, 2006.

⁸ Andrew Higgins “After High Hopes, Democracy Project in Bahrain Falsters” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11 2005.

⁹ Abd Al Hadi Khalaf, “Political Reforms in Bahrain: End of the Road?” *Middle East International* February 2004.

reformers much of what they already knew, but what had gone unreported to the general public in the nation's mainstream media. The posting of the UN report, which painted a grim picture of democracy in Bahrain, was the last straw for the government. In swift response, it raided Abdulemam's house and arrested two friends who had helped work on the site—Mohammed Al Mousawi and Hussain Yousif—after which Abdulemam turned himself in. But the government had surely committed a very serious own-goal. The popular response which followed, initiated by bloggers and culminating in protests and international attention, forced the government to back down. It released the Bahrain Online trio after fifteen days, and only ordered that they should not leave the country until they stand trial in an attempt to preserve the government's moral high-ground.¹⁰

The national blogosphere reacted by creating www.bahrainblogs.com, an aggregate of Bahraini blogs at home and abroad. United by fear of government action against them, Bahraini bloggers of every stripe joined this "real" community that included both Sunnis and Shi'a. By tracking new posts from scores of Bahraini blogs and posting teasers of them on its main page, the site gave the Bahraini blogosphere an unprecedented interconnectivity. It encouraged Bahraini bloggers to socialize with each other, online and off and enabled the loosely assembled Bahraini blogging community to coalesce in order to protect itself. An additional consequence of this burgeoning community was that members were aware of an increasingly wide range of information and participated in a greater variety of discussions.

¹⁰ Andrew Higgins "After High Hopes, Democracy Project in Bahrain Falts" *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11 2005; Neil MacFarquhar, "In Tiny Arab State, web Takes on Ruling Elite" *The New York Times*, January 15, 2006.

A month after this successful demonstration of blog's organizational ability, the Shi'a Al Wifaq party reached out through blogs to launch their own general protest on 26 March 2005.¹¹ The relationships that had developed between various bloggers and Al Wifaq during the elections were expanding in breadth and depth; blogs served as opposition party organs that could credibly call people into the street. The aim of this protest was to overturn or amend the King's constitution without the required supermajority of the Majlis and the Shura, in order to give the Shi'a some rights and dignities regarding education and housing. The result was a demonstration that numbered 80,000 people in Sitra demanding a new constitution. Though the demonstration was peaceful, it had been forbidden by the Ministry of Information, which initially suggested that it would arrest and prosecute the leaders of the illegal demonstration, only to back down a week later. Again, blogging could mobilize very public demonstrations of dissent towards the establishment.

The revival of the opposition parties is a consequence of the paradox facing the Al Khalifas, one that is facing other regimes throughout the Persian Gulf. In order to maintain their place as a banking and communications hub and to enrich themselves, the Al Khalifas need two things. First, they need to develop and maintain a large, well-educated elite in two different areas, computer sciences and business—the former to keep the national network running, the latter to help draw more companies to Bahrain. Second, the Al Khalifas need to ensure that high-speed Internet connections are widely-available both to keep existing businesses and to gain new businesses. Yet, these preoccupations

¹¹ <http://chanadbahraini.blogspot.com/2005/03/sitra-protest-update.html>
<http://xtramsn.co.nz/news/0,,11965-4230769,00.html>

have drawbacks for the Al Khalifas. On the one hand, the expansion of education has given rise to blogs, and on the other hand, the availability of high-speed Internet across Bahrain has widened access to blogs. These factors have therefore strengthened the dissent that undermines the Al Khalifas regime.

But the regime has ways of fighting back. Bloggers have noted that Batelco is becoming more effective in blocking Bahraini websites to Bahraini users,¹² as well as obliterating access to proxy servers outside the country that allow users to bypass censored material. Nevertheless, the Al Khalifas are struggling to reclaim control of the traditional media narrative while failing to successfully confront the ever-changing digital frontier. After the protests that freed Abdulemam and the Sitra demonstration, the Prime Minister hoped to regain control of the Internet by forcing all Bahraini web masters, foreign or domestic, to register with the Ministry of Information within six months of April 25, 2005 or face legal action.¹³ This reaction came too late. Prominent blogs, such as Mahmood's Den—a Shi'a hub—responded by posting the 19th Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to their headers in protest. Most bloggers initially rejected the Ministry of Information's suggestion that registration was for their own good. On the eve of registration, many bloggers pre-empted the government by revealing themselves to the world of their own accord—as journalists, university students, Shi'a, Sunni, devout, atheist. This dramatic move gave the fullest picture yet of a blogosphere in which Bahrainis of every walk of life could participate.

¹² <http://chanad.weblogs.us/?p=478#more-478>

¹³ <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/Story.asp?Article=110287&Sn=BNEW&IssueID=28036>

Developments since 2005: the emergence of a new diversity

The large and rapidly diversifying Bahraini blogosphere is opening up fields of discussion and debate that could never have occurred in Bahrain's traditional media. While traditional media in Bahrain are controlled through a royal monopoly, the now-registered blogs remain relatively free. As a consequence of the historic roots of Bahraini blogging, vociferous opinion journalism has developed, taking the lead in confronting issues critically in a way that the timid printed media cannot. Because of this, Internet users have access to a much greater diversity of issues than those who rely on traditional media.

The best example of such opinion journalism is Silly Bahraini Girl, a Gulf Daily News journalist who has been openly critical of the government. Commenting on the work-related deaths of sixteen migrants in July 2006, she wrote a post entitled "Ass Wipes" which is laden with heavy sarcasm: "Sixteen Indians were roasted to death in Bahrain. But who cares? They are only Indians. And poor Indians, to be more precise." In the post, she goes on to pour scorn on the state of Bahraini society:

"We were born with a silver spoon in our mouths—and an oil pump up our asses—even those of us with no money. We are a cut above the rest and we employ Third World country people to do our dirty work for us."

She claims that the national economy is only functional because of “a slavery system, which was never abolished, despite ratifying one international treaty after the other,” and she taunts the Prime Minister for having to declare an inspection of labor camps: “I thought two thirds of all labor camps were already inspected and found satisfactory. Satisfactory by whose standards?” She goes on to urge guest workers to strike against their work conditions. Silly Bahraini Girl offers commentary which is more biting and more critical of the government than is allowed in any newspaper, and is widely read and linked to throughout the community as a result.¹⁴

More importantly, bloggers are now turning their online contact into face-to-face interaction. For example, members of Bahrain Blogs now gather the first Thursday of every month at the Cinnabon in the Crown Plaza Hotel. They have also recently extended an open invitation to their readership. Because the island kingdom is small, these monthly bloggers conventions can be attended by any member of the national readership—or indeed by the Bahraini security services.

The creation of a physical community of bloggers who are politically active is particularly apt at this time because it is election season in Bahrain—a season when sectarianism, political corruption, and police violence are expected to increase.¹⁵ The paranoia felt by the Royal Family since the last election was rudely revealed in mid-September of 2006 when a scandal known as “Bandargate” broke. Blogger Salah Al Bandar circulated a report by the Gulf Centre for Democratic Development which alleged

¹⁴ <http://www.technorati.com/search/%22silly%20bahraini%20girl%22%20>

¹⁵ http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/qahwa_sada/2006/10/bahrain_must_be.html

that government officials were moving to rig the election and ferment sectarian strife, resulting in his immediate removal from Bahrain. Though the government then issued a gag order on the contents of the report, the blogosphere responded by spreading the report and establishing a blog devoted to tracking the scandal.¹⁶ But the monarchy has since moved to show how easily it could shatter the tenuous rights of bloggers to speak freely and to assemble in large numbers. On 29 October 2006 the government sent a memo to all ISPs in the country blocking a series of web pages.¹⁷ At the centre of its ire was the hugely popular Mahmood's Den (<http://mahmood.tv>), a Shi'a-reformist blog based in Bahrain that has regularly criticized the government and has played a pivotal role in Bandargate. The response from the rest of Bahrain Blogs community was smooth and swift. Mahmood gained rapid support from his fellow Bahrainis as well as his readers around the globe, who bombarded the Bahraini government and NGO's with petitions to make his blog available again. Mahmood himself gained international publicity for the plight of his blog, and is set to appear in a variety of talk shows. He has also been interviewed by the same papers that rallied to the Bahrain Online trio.¹⁸ The increasingly frantic, reactionary monarchy is confronting an increasingly savvy, globalized resistance.

Conclusion

There are some very real successes to be attributed to bloggers in Bahrain. Bahrain's blogging community has achieved a certain degree of leverage in the country's

¹⁶ <http://bandargate.com/>

¹⁷ <http://www.annaqed.com>, <http://freecoops.net>, <http://arabchurch.com>, <http://www.ladeeni.net>, <http://www.albawaba.com>, <http://kurdtimes.com>, and <http://mahmood.tv>

¹⁸ <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/29/prominent-bahraini-blog-%20blocked>

tightly controlled public sphere and it has offered a previously unknown range of critique and commentary on Bahraini government and society. The relative freedom of Bahraini bloggers is spreading democratic modes of political activism beyond the politically active core, such that political activism becomes a feature of the landscape of the Bahraini blogosphere. However, despite the proliferation of blogging and the growth online of a trans-sectarian reformist identity, it is unlikely blogging will gather enough freight to win a real constitution any time soon. The Bahraini blogosphere may be growing in size, confidence, and leverage, but as long as it remains vulnerable to political control it will be unable to force extensive political reform alone.

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