

In Bahrain, Progress Contingent On Concessions

(NAPSA)—Since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, there have been some positive developments in the Middle East. Tunisia held elections, a tentative truce has been declared in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia will allow women to vote.

However, there has been bad news; Egypt's military rulers have incited sectarian violence against Christian Copts, Syria has launched a horrific and systematic slaughter of its own people, and vigilante mobs created roadblocks across the capital of Bahrain.

The tiny Gulf state of Bahrain is ranked number 10 in the world in the Heritage Foundation's 2011 Index of Economic Freedom, one place behind the U.S. and ahead of any other Middle Eastern state. Bahrain is a beacon of religious tolerance—home to the region's first Catholic church and only synagogue.

Bahrain's response to the demonstrations suggests there might be a middle ground between revolution and blank refusal to change.

In an effort to continue reform in their already progressive country, the King and Crown Prince of Bahrain launched a National Dialogue, inviting everyone to voice their views on the future of the country. The Crown Prince also entered into special negotiations with Al Wefaq, Bahrain's leading opposition party, and agreed on seven principles for reform. Sadly, even after drafting an amendment to the constitution allowing these reforms to take place, Wefaq left the bargaining table.

In response, the King set up the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate events earlier in the year.



King Hamad of Bahrain

That Commission, based on the United Nations model, is headed by world-renowned human rights expert Prof. Cherif Bassiouni. Its findings will point the way forward for Bahrain.

Unfortunately, not everyone in Bahrain embraces freedom and democracy. The leading Shia cleric, Ayatollah Isa Qasem, the opposition's spiritual guide, has said "Keep the way of Khomeini until the arrival of the Mahdi," thereby endorsing Ayatollah Khomeini's theological justification of dictatorship and theocratic rule. In his view, elections are legitimate only insofar as they bring Islamic rule.

He called for a boycott of Bahrain's elections in 2002, and earlier this year urged Al Wefaq to reject negotiations with the government. Under instructions, Al Wefaq's MP's resigned, then walked out of the National Dialogue, before boycotting September's by-elections, an act for which they were widely criticized. In a recent turn of events, Wefaq has called for a return to the seven principles first discussed with the Crown Prince.

The lesson learned in Bahrain is that the future is not just in the hands of the government. Progress also depends on the acts of the opposition, which has thus far rejected compromise and dialogue.

