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Bahrain, Factor 14 Conflict Resolution

Bahrain: The Food Dilemma

The Middle East is one of the worst regions for food security and hunger. Bahrain is one of the more advanced countries in the region, but it still struggles in food security. One of the key issues with Bahrain is the Sunni-Shia conflict, a movement that started as an issue of democracy that is now one of religion. This struggle is one of the reasons Bahrain struggles with food security.

Most of Bahrain's population is urban, well over eighty-five percent of the population resides in cities. Bahrain is also a very small country, with just under three hundred square miles under its control. The climate in Bahrain is very, very hot, making it difficult to grow crops, coupled with the fact that there is simply nowhere to grow them. Because of its lack of agriculture and its geography as a small island nation, most of Bahrain's food supply comes from the ocean, with fishing being a major industry (countrystudies.us). Many of the main dishes, including Machboos, (a fish and rice dish), are fish based. Hamour, or grouper, and Safi are the main fish.

A typical Bahraini family consists of 4-6 members, but it is also not uncommon to have extended family living in the house as well. Many newly weds live with one of the couple's parents for a few years, though the trend is reversing. (BahrainiWomenInNumbers). Education in Bahrain is above average for the region, with over fifty percent of children in school. Illiteracy rates are very low for children, at about one percent, but spike for those over twenty four, running around ten percent. Health care is free for nationals. The average pay per month is close to 4,000 dollars, and there are unemployment benefits (salaryexplorer.com). So, what exactly is so wrong with Bahrain?

The Bahraini conflict started in early February of 2011. This was around the same time as the Arab Spring event, which inspired the protests. The protests were quelled by troops from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, but many have occurred since. The uprising is still going on with protests, demonstrations, and in extreme cases, bombings and the like.

The protests originated as a call for more democratic freedom, especially for the Shia Muslims, which make up approximately seventy percent of the population. However, after a midnight raid by the government on the protestors, the protestors turned their eyes against the King, Hammad bin Isa Al Khalifa, demanding he step down. In response, his Majesty ordered police crackdown on any and all protests, demonstrations, and similar activities. Estimates have civilian deaths around 90, tortured at around 1,800, and combined layoffs and expulsions from school at over 5,000 (bahrainjdm.org).

To understand the Bahraini uprising, you must understand Bahraini government. Bahrain has a constitutional monarchy, with the King and Prime Minister forming the executive branch, and a bicameral legislature. The legislature consists of one elected group, the Chamber of Deputies, and one group appointed by the King, the Shura Council. The current Prime Minister, Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, is the uncle of the King. He has been Prime Minister since 1971. The King appoints his own cabinet, roughly half of it consisting of members of his own royal family. His Al Khalifa family is of the Sunni branch of Islam (cia.gov).

Most of the government is Sunni, due to the overwhelming power of the royal family. This, naturally, puts Sunnis at an advantageous position, or perhaps it's better to say that it puts Shia Muslims at a disadvantage. Political parties in Bahrain are based almost completely on religion. In the 2010 election, the Shia party, Al Wefaq, did very well, becoming the majority party. However, Shia Muslims still do not have good representation in the government, due to a low number of government officials being elected. The King appoints most officials directly or indirectly.

All of this boiled over with the help of the Arab Spring event in early 2011. Protestors demanded more democratic freedom, especially for Shia Muslims. The protests were put down harshly, but continued onward. Although they were at first formed in order to put a more democratic system into place, and to end the reign of terror caused by things like political activist detainment, torture, and rewriting the constitution, the protests have turned bitterly religious, with a huge Shia-Sunni separation beginning to occur.

Riot police broke up early protests; using rubber bullets, tear gas, and sound bombs which caused many injuries. These methods were employed near immediately, showing the governments intolerance with any force going against them. In March of the same year, the King declared a state of emergency. Tanks and Bahraini troops began to patrol the streets of the capital city, Manama. Roadblocks and helicopters were also used. Military forces stormed the Pearl Roundabout, the home of the protestors, and retook it. (bbc.co.uk) Hundreds of protestors were arrested, and many reports of torture of the arrested got out. The government denied this at first, but with evidence coming forth, was forced to acknowledge some of the torture, pinning the blame on security guards.

Among the other terrors of the government, a crackdown on free speech was employed, with many arrested for social media content. Around the same time, Shia mosques were being destroyed on the basis that they had been built illegally in the first place, despite some being hundreds of years old. Other examples of the Bahraini Uprising include a recent bombing, arresting of children, and a number of decrees by the King. However, that is beside the point. How exactly does this affect food security? Let's find out.

There are a number of ways that food security is associated with the Bahraini Uprising. One of the first ways, one not commonly thought of, are hunger strikes. This is a choice by protestors designed to attract attention to their plight by refusing to eat. A good example is Zainab al-Khawaja. Her father, a human rights activist, and brother-in-laws were arrested and beaten. Zainab chose to go on a hunger strike in order to protest the treatment of her family. Many more have chosen this option, but it must be well documented in order to work. Many more will choose this option, and until the conflict can be resolved and the government can peacefully deal with the protests, it will only get worse.

To acquire food, you have to grow it yourself, or buy it. We've addressed the fact that it's very difficult to grow food in Bahrain, so people buy food. You need money to buy things. To acquire currency, you need to be born into a rich family, win the lottery, or for most normal citizens, have a job of some sort. When you're fired from your job, it's difficult to acquire currency. Since the start of the Bahraini uprising, over 4,500 layoffs have taken place. Many companies have been encouraged by the government to fire employees associated with protests in any way. Many employees stated that they were shown photos of themselves at protests during inquires before they were fired. Over 2,400 employees in the public sector have been fired, and over 2,000 in the private sector.

While many people have been fired from their jobs, others that have been arrested have also lost time at their jobs, or just lost them completely. This has affected their abilities to feed their families, just as the people who have been laid off have also been affected. With their parents in jail, children find themselves with out any support. If they happen to have relatives, they further pressure the budget of relatives. No one wins, and everyone loses. Many families have little or no income, which leaves them no way of buying food and feeding their children and themselves.

The conflict has also displaced many residents. Towns and villages, in addition to the large cities, have been attacked and many building have been destroyed. This leaves many people without a place to live, and with many mosques destroyed, (Aljazeera.com) these are not an option to stay either. This means they must move in with relatives, find new living places, and basically spend more money on things that aren't food. The Bahraini government demolished Pearl Roundabout as well, which was a base for the protestors. Many people were camping there before the army came to demolish the site. They forcibly removed anyone on the roundabout, and then destroyed it. The uprising is causing people to struggling all around, not just food, but also shelter and safety. This movement is coming at a high price.

Another aspect is the suffering of business. Some of this is direct, as many Shia Muslims are boycotting Sunni stores and the like. This puts those stores off the grid for many people. They must buy food elsewhere. Those business owners must also feed their families. If they aren't getting the business they need, they don't have the means to feed their families. Now, simple rules of supply and demand lead us up the chain. Stores get their product from a supplier, they don't make it themselves. That means this also hits the supplier. If a store sells fish, and people boycott the store, the store loses money. If the store can't sell the fish, it stops ordering the fish from the supplier. If the supplier can't sell to the stores, it may lay off some employees. It's a chain reaction. When one part of the chain is hit, every part is affected, like vibration through it. When one loses, everyone loses. Right now, everyone is losing.

In short, the uprising is causing everyone involved harm. The government gets a bad reputation, which it deserves. The protestors receive physical harm and displacement, which they don't deserve. They also get a bad reputation from the extremist organizations using the chaos to stage bombings and the like. Food, shelter, jobs and safety are all scarce. Every aspect of this uprising is concerning, every aspect is harmful, but if democracy goes through, many will argue that it was worth it.

We've now stated the issues with food security in Bahrain. As with anything else, once you identify the problems, the next logical step is to solve it. So how exactly to we solve food security issues stemming from conflict? We have to resolve, or at least dim the conflict. Now everyone with any common sense knows that solving ethnic and religious conflict, and conflict between citizens and government, is no easy task. Let's take a look at a few ideas as to how this might be accomplished.

Step one is to cut back on the violence. We have to get the United Nations involved in the inhumane treatment of protestors and prisoners. If we are able to stop this, then we'll have more people able to work and more people able to work to their full capacity, instead of worrying about loved ones or trying to find out what's happened to them. Also, the protests will be less violent and in reduced frequency, due to them no longer being a backlash. Reducing the violence is the first step to treating the gaping wound in Bahrain.

Step two is making the conflict political. Religious conflict has been the downfall of the uprising, causing a shift in focus among the protestors and a rift between them. The protestors must be reminded of their goal. Speeches by important leaders within the protestors about equal rights and a quest for more freedom might incite the fire in the hearts of protestors that started this 'revolution'. I would not suggest outside influence upon these leaders and their speeches, because the protestors may not trust anyone from outside their movement to influence it. It's important that these leaders focus on working together to achieve this goal. Then and then alone will they be united enough to encourage proper action. If step two is accomplished, then step three is so much more likely.

Step three is to get negotiations going. Hopefully these would be mediated by the United Nations. I would expect no help from the United States, as the current Bahraini government allows a US Navy presence on their island country. Perhaps taking steps towards equal rights from the government would convince the protestors to stop holding demonstrations and allow everyone to get back to a safe, secure, and normal state of life. Even if these negotiations don't immediately get anywhere, the negotiations will be an encouraging sign to the protestors, perhaps leading to less protestors and more workers. The quicker that people get back to work, the more money they have to spend. The more money they have to spend, the more they will spend. The more they spend, the more business make. If we fix the weak link, we can fix the whole chain.

Step four is getting lasting results. Negotiations are a great first step, but they will be useless if they don't accomplish anything, and a state of decay will incur. There must be compromises made by both sides. The Bahraini King will have to give up some of his power, and the protestors may have to give up the ideal of total democracy. Neither side will get exactly what they want. If lasting results are made, then the protests will be much less frequent, and eventually, near non-existent. If this happens, Bahrain can get to a stable state, allowing further economic growth, and a chance to feed its hungry people. As things are, this cannot happen.

The steps to success here are not easily accomplished. The government must back off its hardline tactics. The protestors must concede some points. The international scene must become involved to properly broker a deal, and insure it goes through. Many things have to come together in order for this conflict to be resolved. Every person will play a part. It's a matter of willingness for peace, willingness for change, and willingness for that change to be gradual instead of radical. Perhaps if this is met, all of Bahrain can feed themselves once again.

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