

Preserving Arab culture in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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Abstract

This paper aims at assessing the efforts of preserving Arab culture in the Kingdom of Bahrain initiated by the Bahraini Parliament in recent years. With a population of roughly 1 million inhabitants, nearly half of whom are expatriates, Bahrain has been under a constant pressure of immigrant cultures. The lack of integration of residing foreigners added to the effects of country's rapid modernization putting the Bahraini cultural identity at stake. This danger was recognized by the Bahraini Parliament. With the political reform that culminated in the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 2002, the Parliament became the unique though limited form of popular representation. Although no major tensions between expatriate and local population have been yet observed, these could arise in the future if the problem is ignored. The situation in Bahrain is all the more vulnerable since local population is divided between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which led to conflicts in the past. It is no surprising that the first steps in the exercise of democracy addressed the problem of national culture. Although Bahraini authorities have recognized that multiculturalism is an asset, it is an extremely delicate question how to establish a balance between foreign influences needed for a future development of country's economy and local culture. This paper examines the work of the Parliament aimed at preservation of Bahraini identity, its successes and lessons to be drawn from its failures.

The case study of Bahrain is representative of problems faced by other Arabian Gulf countries and answers the question: Is an eradication of national identity a necessary evil of rapidly developing countries of the Gulf region?

Key Words: Bahrain, culture, identity, multiculturalism, expatriates, migration.

1. Bahrain as a case study

The factors that make Bahrain such an interesting case for analysis of the impact of foreign cultures on local population are its location, size and the number of foreigners that make up its population. Bahrain is an

archipelago of 33 islands located in the Persian Gulf. Due to its strategic position in the Gulf, Bahrain has been a crossroads of trading routes between Asia, Europe and Africa since ancient times. Already 5000 years ago, a kingdom called Dilmun thrived in that area, playing a role of a trading link between Indus Valley civilizations and Mesopotamia. This central position of Bahrain brought also risk of foreign invasions. Bahrain passed subsequently through domination of Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Arabs, Portuguese and British. The latter controlled Bahrain until 1971 when Bahrain declared independence. It comes as no surprise that Bahrain has worked as a melting pot of nationalities, languages, cultures and traditions.

These processes would not have been so far-reaching if it was not for the size of the country itself. Bahrain is the smallest Arab state with an estimated size of only 665 square kilometres. Even though the territory of Bahrain is so small, the population is condensed in two main cities in the northern part of the country, leaving most of its land uninhabited and deserted. In case of Bahrain, we have to consider then a very small area where population has been in constant blending over centuries.

In modern times this trend has been continued due to the dynamic economic growth of the kingdom. The discovery of oil in 1932 and natural gas brought prosperity to Bahrain and exacerbated the need of foreign workforce. The Bahraini society barely had enough labour to fit the vast need for growth. This came as a great opportunity for foreigners to provide labour force required by development of modern industry and services¹. Foreigners who are a necessary element of economic growth became a natural part of Bahraini population. Presence of foreign workers in Bahrain has been questioned since 1970s. Their steady influx is considered responsible for low wages and unemployment among the indigenous population. However it is only in the past recent years that Bahrainis started to criticize the cultural influence of foreigners on the kingdom. This rediscovery or reaffirmation so to say of their own identity by local population is not surprising if we analyze the numbers of foreigners who reside in Bahrain.

The data announced by the Central Bank of Bahrain in December 2007 revealed a total number of 1.05 million inhabitants out of which 49% are foreigners. Such a high ratio of expatriates comes as third high in the Gulf region, preceded only by United Arab Emirates and Qatar, both with an estimated 80% of foreign population². It is not only the size of foreign population that is interesting but also its rapid and steady growth. In 2000, foreigners made up 37% of Bahrain's inhabitants³. It is estimated that over 2006 the foreign population nearly doubled, reaching at the end of 2007 a number of 517,368 people⁴. For the purpose of our analysis it is important to see the composition of local and foreign population alike.

Out of the local population, 98% of native Bahrainis are Muslim. Jews and Christians make up the remaining 2%. Shia Muslims are more

numerous and account for more than 70% of Muslims in the kingdom⁵. However at the beginning of the 19th century, the Sunni dynasty of Al Khalifa managed to get control over Bahrain consolidated by a series of treaties with Britain. Until today the split between the Shia and Sunni population gives rise to tensions. The agendas of government, the army and the police are controlled by Sunnis considered more loyal to the ruling Sunni dynasty. In recent years, the government tried to lower the Sunni – Shia ratio and naturalised a number of Sunni citizens, which brought further the accusations of discrimination of the Shia majority⁶. Naturalised citizens are those of foreign descent who acquired Bahraini citizenship. The requirements for naturalisation are governed by the Naturalisation Law. A residence period of 15 years for Arab nationals and 25 years for foreigners is the main requirement; however there are other understated factors, ranging randomly from services paid to the country in police or army force service for instance, and knowledge of Arabic language, adaptation to local culture, Sunni denomination or *wasta* (a network of personal contacts)⁷. Although Shias often claim to be victimized as a whole group in the kingdom, they do not form a homogenous population. Tensions between the Arab Shias, first occupants of the islands, and Shias who migrated afterwards from Iran are not unheard of⁸.

The foreign workers residing in Bahrain come from a number of countries and occupy posts ranging from unskilled workers to specialists with advanced degrees. The major foreign expatriate communities are Indians (120.000 workers) Pakistanis (50.000 workers) and Egyptians (30.000 workers), Iranians (30.000 workers) and Filipinos (25.000 workers)⁹. Although such data is not available, it is visible that a large portion of foreign workers are physical labourers working in construction, housekeeping, cleaning and so on. It is also important to state that most of foreigners are temporary migrants. They live in areas populated usually by their countrymen and stay within that social circle. Certain areas in Bahrain are almost exclusively inhabited by migrants from the Indian subcontinent (the old Manama) or Westerners (Juffair). That explains why foreign workers hardly learn Arabic or follow other local traditions. Instead they set up their respective cultural foundations to sustain their cultural identity promoting their own lifestyle, cuisine, clothing, language and so on. Bahrain has a well established reputation of a liberal country where foreigners are welcomed, between the others, to practice their faith. Although other Arab countries such as Egypt, Morocco or Syria export their labour force that would fit within the socio-cultural context of the Gulf, as Arabic speakers and mostly Muslims, Bahrain and other GCC countries prefer to employ Asian workers¹⁰. The latter are considered less expensive, easier to manage and most importantly do not carry with them revolutionary political ideas that could catch on in the Gulf.

It is obvious that foreigners leave their imprint on the society of Bahrain. Bahrain is not a melting pot but resembles a salad bowl where respective cultures keep their autonomy. We will try to assess that foreign influence on native population below.

2. Cultural impact of foreigners

Measuring the cultural impact could be a daunting if not an impossible task. That is why I am going to concentrate on areas which are the most marked and important, namely language, education and elements of lifestyle.

The official language of Bahrain is Arabic, yet already on our arrival to the kingdom, in Bahrain International Airport, we can observe that announcements are made in Arabic, English and Hindi as well. English is no doubt the language of business in globalized world but its use in Bahrain is not a new phenomenon. During the years 1932-1971 when Bahrain was a British protectorate, government infrastructure, healthcare and education systems that run entirely in English were set up. Learning English became a must for any educated person. Bahrainis started to learn other foreign languages also thanks to trade connections with the Indian subcontinent. Merchants would travel by sea and had to learn local languages to trade more efficiently. The knowledge of foreign languages would usually run in the family. Until today many Bahrainis have a basic knowledge of spoken Hindi or Urdu that enables them to communicate better with foreign workers they employ.

Learning foreign languages had a practical reason for Bahrainis. As Ali, an 80 year old Bahraini explained to me, referring to British presence on the islands:

“It was difficult for us to communicate with the invaders therefore we had to learn any mean of communication in order to save ourselves from being accidentally killed.”

Nowadays, learning English or other foreign language can help Bahrainis communicate in business related situations as well as in daily life. Employers in Bahrain usually look for English or bilingual English and Arabic speakers. Most of the sector of services employs foreigners. Hospitals, for example, employ a high ratio of foreign doctors and nurses who do not know Arabic. A Bahraini who does not speak foreign languages could face, in his own country, a problem of communication during a visit to a doctor. The situation is as paradoxical as that.

It has been observed that Bahrain is a relatively easy country to adapt to for foreigners. It is not surprising since even mosques and churches in Bahrain provide services in many languages. Streets in Bahrain show an

array of languages in the display windows. Services relative to a particular nationality, such as money remittance services to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or the Philippines, advertise in the languages of the targeted group. And the customer service person usually turns out to be their countrymen, which facilitates the procedures. Road signs, street names, vehicle registration plates or official documents are either in Arabic and English or in English alone. All in all, Bahrain gives an impression of a very cosmopolitan place.

It is also important to understand that level of knowledge of Arabic vary widely among Bahrainis, native and naturalised as well. The politics of naturalisation of foreigners brought an increase of population by, according to the official data, 7000 inhabitants in the last five years¹¹. However that number is often questioned by opposition sources¹². Not all of the new citizen have a good knowledge of Arabic. Some can barely speak it. The result is that a number of citizens of the country did not master its official language. There is also a peculiar characteristic of Arabic language that makes it even more difficult to assess the level of a speaker. Arabic is traditionally divided into dialectal, modern and classical Arabic¹³. Dialects are spoken versions of Arabic. In Bahrain alone there exist varieties of these colloquial forms¹⁴. Many native Bahrainis complain that their children do not have a sufficient knowledge of the literary version of Arabic. Employment of foreign nannies and domestic staff exacerbates the problem as children grow up speaking other languages than Arabic¹⁵. Moreover, the constant influx of foreigners facilitates mixed marriages. It might be difficult to assess the impact of mixed marriages between Bahraini and non-Arab on the knowledge of Arabic of their children. However, from my observation of students it seems such children have usually only a limited knowledge of colloquial Arabic.

It all comes back to the issue of education in Bahrain. Bahrain has the oldest public education system in the Gulf and the literacy rates are among the highest in the Arab world¹⁶. Nowadays, private schools offer classes delivered fully in English, though Arabic bilingual option exists in some places. Arabic is optional for foreigners, as one language among others a student can choose from. From my interviews with locals, I observed that private primary and secondary schools are considered to have higher educational standards as compared to governmental schools that are free of charge and offer classes in Arabic only. This issue is even more visible in higher education. All universities except for the Arab Open University offer degrees in English language and a good level of English language is a requirement for enrolment. Moreover some private universities are branches of foreign-based universities or are affiliated with other universities from abroad. Their degrees, recognized abroad, are attractive for young Bahrainis. The fact that English becomes a primary mean of communication is not related to lack of education but is a deliberate choice.

Finally, I would like to emphasize certain elements of lifestyle that are clues of foreign cultural impact. The oil revenues gave a direct push for Westernization of the country. Huge shopping malls, 5 star hotels and nightlife entertainment became a part of daily life in Bahrain. Bahrainis took to the Western technology, luxuries and pop culture. Nowadays Arab families usually spend their free time in shopping malls. It is not easy to assess whether this phenomenon is a direct influence of foreigners in Bahrain or a more general process occurring worldwide in the era of globalization. However other aspects suggest cultural influence of foreigners. Such area is Bahraini cuisine. Popular dishes include aromatic rice called biryani or potato filled pastry sambosas that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Also grilled meat recipes for tikka and kebab were imported from Persia. This few examples are not illustrative of the whole process of foreign cultural influence however it is a choice due to the limited scope of this paper.

We shall now examine how Bahrainis and Bahraini authorities tackle the problems of cultural impact and whether they are effective.

3. Tackling the cultural changes

Reduction of the numbers of foreign workers comes to mind as a way of preserving local culture and traditions. Bahraini authorities did not apply any quota to the number of foreigners in the country yet but concentrated on the problem of replacing foreign workers with local ones. First attempts of nationalisation of job market were started already in the 1970s¹⁷. “Bahrainisation” was dictated purely by economic reasons, namely high unemployment ratio among Bahrainis. We have however mentioned previously that foreign workers ratio sore in the past years. That is true especially for the private sector where low wages and hard working conditions deter locals from employment¹⁸.

A new kind of awareness related solely to the preservation of culture emerged in 2008. The calls for need of preservation of country’s identity and culture came from the Bahrain’s labour minister Majeed AlAlawi and the National Assembly of Bahrain causing heated debate in the media in the country and abroad¹⁹. The discussions on whether to blame Asian workforce for loss of cultural identity or not, were replaced by law proposals in the early 2009. Bahraini Parliament proposed a series of laws that would promote the use of Arabic, a primary mean of transmitting the national identity. The bill would ask to present all official documents, outdoor signs or local products in Arabic language with an option of additional information in another language²⁰. Use of Arabic would be compulsory also in all public dealings, including in courts, hospitals or conferences. Since many foreign workers do not speak Arabic, companies would have to employ translators in order to comply with the new law. Bahraini parliamentarians argued that the overwhelming use of English language in Bahrain leaves out Arabic as a

secondary language in the country. Moreover, foreigners should be expected to learn Arabic when they travel to Bahrain, as Bahrainis speak English when they travel to English speaking countries. The proposal was criticized as impractical, costly and simply impossible to implement. It was ultimately abandoned. The critics of the new law argued that the use of Arabic would be always alive because of its religious value. That realization of cultural loss is a new phenomenon that swept through other GCC countries. It brought on further debates on public forums in the United Arab Emirates²¹ and in Qatar²².

The alternatives to a somehow forced use of Arabic include initiatives of promotion of national culture aimed at expatriates. The Al-Fateh Mosque in Bahrain organizes free guided tours of the mosque in English that provide information on the foundations of Muslim traditions. The Justice and Islamic Affairs Ministry and Discover Islam centre reach out to foreigners also during Muslim holidays. Open day initiatives aim at attracting expatriate families. Activities for all ages include presentation of traditional arts, crafts and snacks. 100,000 people visit yearly the Al-Fateh Mosque including tourists as well as residents of Bahrain. Such programs are also promoted in other GCC countries. In the UAE, Watani centre hosts a number of initiatives jointly for Emirati nationals and foreign participants such as desert camps, celebration of religious festivities or seminars. Their aim is to keep local culture and traditions alive²³. It is all the more important since changing lifestyle in the Gulf region made many arts such as falconry, basket weaving or Yolla dancing almost obsolete. Other educational initiatives in the Gulf include history of Bahrain and elements of Arabic language as part of compulsory university curriculum in Bahrain.

The beginning of year 2009 brought also other type of law proposals directly linked to the preservation of Muslim identity. Bahrain is one of the exceptions in the Gulf where alcohol and pork, items prohibited for consumption in Islam, are legally sold. Bars and nightclubs, which operate in hotels, sell alcoholic beverages. There exists as well one liquor store. A general rule is that Muslim cannot purchase alcohol. However that rule is more of guideline and faith of the buyer is never put to test.

Bahraini parliamentarians recognized the risk of corrupting Muslim values especially among the youth. What followed was a series of proposals aimed at eradicating alcohol and pork from the island. First proposed legislation asked to ban alcohol in Bahrain International Airport and on flights of kingdom's national airline Gulf Air (January-February 2009). Further proposals included a complete ban on pork (February 2009) and alcohol (April 2009) in the kingdom. Parliamentarians were criticized in the media and by the public opinion for ignorance, restraining freedom and possibly causing damage to Bahrain's economy²⁴. These proposals were not passed as laws.

It is interesting to note that the only law that possibly preserves Muslim values and is in effect in Bahrain relates to the press and Internet censorship. The 2002 Press Law prohibits publications that “harmed the regime, the official state religion, morality or different confessions in a way likely to cause a breach of the peace.” Consequently, websites displaying pornographic or erotic content are banned by the local Internet providers. Morality is one of the aspects of the law since many political websites were closed down or banned in Bahrain for alleged criticism towards the government or promoting the Sunni – Shia split in the country. The law sparked criticism of the public opinion and a petition against Internet censorship is available on a website²⁵.

It is evident that no satisfying measures were proposed to preserve the national culture in Bahrain. We shall examine now the possible outcomes of foreign cultural in the country.

4. Future challenges

Mike Moore, a former director-general of the World Trade Organisation described recently in an interview the situation of the United Arab Emirates in these words:

”The fundamental issue here is; where in history have local people been so overwhelmed by expats? In the past, we’ve called it colonisation. It’s how my country was founded.²⁶”

This description applies equally well to Bahrain and other GCC countries with a high ratio of expatriates. Shall we expect then an Asian colonisation of the Gulf? What will be the future trends in politics related to cultural change?

To answer the first question we must understand that the right to residency in Bahrain follows strict rules. It is mostly given to those who have a permanent employment in Bahrain. Their close relatives might be eligible to join a family member working in Bahrain. The stay in the country requires a renewal of residency permits every two years. However migrants from Iran or the Indian subcontinents often renew their contracts one after another²⁷. They make Bahrain their second home and have children born here. Bahraini authorities do not acknowledge labourers as “migrants” to the country but only as foreign workers assuming their stay is temporary²⁸. Among the newly naturalised citizens of Bahrain, official data shows 3,599 citizens of Asian origin out of a total number of 7,012 cases over the past 5 years²⁹. Naturalisation is a delicate subject that has already caused several riots. Added to the increasing numbers of Asian temporary workers, the Asian migration is a source of tensions among native Bahrainis.

In 2004 riots against Asian businesses swept through the country. Their reasons were mainly economic but also cultural³⁰. Many Asians occupy low income jobs and live in shabby neighbourhoods. Manual workers are looked down by the society. They have been accused of illegal liquor distribution or running prostitution houses. In the common perception, Asian workers are, as expressed by Manama councillor Sadiq Rahma, making the neighbourhood “dirty”³¹. A law proposed in 2007 aimed at indirectly segregating the areas where manual workers could live. The parliamentarians argued that they behave in immoral manner and should not live in residential areas corrupting family life. Preserving local culture and traditions is closely linked to Islam. During the 2004 riots, tourists and Western restaurants serving alcohol were targeted as well. We can conclude that ways of behaviour considered as un-Islamic are targeted no matter the nationality of the person at fault. That trend seems to dominate more and more the political scene.

Many locals as well as foreign residents interviewed by me remember Bahrain in the 1970s era as a much more entertaining place than it is today. The direct influence of the British was that people spent their evenings going out to bars. European clothes were worn much more often than the traditional Arabic dress. I conclude that building of a new national identity after independence was partially based on the values of Islam. Bahraini Constitution states that Bahrain is an “Islamic Arab state”. It is visible in the streets of the country. Today, a majority of locals wear thobes for men or abayas for women. Covering one’s head is popular with women although not compulsory. During the holy month of Ramadan timings of all businesses change according to the hours of fasting. Eating or drinking in public is not allowed.

In 2002, a political reform established a hereditary monarchy in Bahrain. Slow political opening reestablished the Bahraini National Assembly with an elected Lower House. Shia and Sunni Islamist dominated the political scene in the 2006 parliamentary elections. The climate of the politics changed with more demands to adhere to a stricter implementation of Islamic way of life in public places. Other demands, apart from those previously mentioned, included removing lingerie mannequins from display windows, installing a dress code at the public University of Bahrain or fitting apartments with one way windows preventing passersby from seeing the inside. The powers of the Bahraini parliament are very limited. However incidents in the past, such as the 2004 riots, testify that the mood of local society is a reflection of their voting patterns.

Years 2007 - 2008 brought several demonstrations organized by the Shia majority over economic demands. The demonstrations were pacified by the security forces. L. Louër argued that “the main political consequence of migration has been the deepening of state/society conflict”³². Foreign workers

are caught in between the internal issues of unemployment and economic dissatisfaction of the majority of local inhabitants who might eventually turn their anger against expatriates. The economic demands linked with rediscovery of cultural identity might spark further demonstrations and prove to be a burning problem in Bahrain and other GCC countries.

5. Conclusion

The cultural influence of foreign workers in Bahrain is undoubtedly an important problem for the future of the country. With constantly rising numbers of expatriates, Bahrainis could soon end up as a minority in their own country. Economic dissatisfaction of the Shia majority as well as the rediscovery of national identity may become two problems with one culprit to be blamed by the masses, namely the foreign workers. No satisfactory solution has been proposed yet to tackle the cultural change. The society is becoming increasingly anxious and demands further Islamic measures to be taken in order to stop the process of erosion of national identity. Bahrain as well as other GCC countries faces a vicious circle of temporary work migration: foreigners affect Bahrain's culture and identity, yet the country cannot go on developing without them. Islamisation of the society could prove to be a ready made solution to stop the identity loss but is it a right one?

Notes

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- ³ *ibid.*
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