

Sectarianism the subtext in Bahrain's protests

Rodger Shanahan

ABC - The Drum

21 February 2011

The brutal Government crackdown on Bahraini Shi'a protestors was both deplorable and inevitable. But the protests in Bahrain are qualitatively different from those elsewhere in the region because Bahrain's pro-democracy demonstrations represent a sectarian threat to Sunni political interests — a threat that could not be tolerated.

There was no way King Hamad or his close Gulf allies could accede to any significant political reforms demanded by the country's majority Shi'a population. These Gulf leaders are already smarting from perceptions about growing Iranian influence in the region, having endured the humiliation of a Shi'a prime minister wielding power in Baghdad and seen Shi'a Hezbollah defeat Sunni political interests in Lebanon both politically and militarily.

With Manama's security forces virtually bereft of any Shi'a members and bolstered by non-Bahraini Sunni Arabs offered a job and citizenship in return for loyalty to the Government, the Shi'a protestors were deluding themselves if they thought the Government was going to stand idly by while the rafidun (a derogatory term for Shi'a used by Sunnis — it means 'dissenters') forced a diminution of Sunni political power.

The Bahraini Government has acted in its own interests, but also with the understanding that it has the generous support of its neighbours, who consider it a bulwark against Shi'a politicisation. Riyadh would likely have counselled a swift resolution to the protests to reassert government authority during a period of turbulence in the region, and to reaffirm the limits to political protest to its own Shi'a population in its eastern province, just across the causeway from Bahrain.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign ministers met in emergency session in Manama as a pointed reminder of their support to the ruling family and 'reiterated full political, economic, security and defence support to Bahrain', while rejecting 'any external interference in the internal affairs of Bahrain' — code for blaming Iranian agitators for the protests rather than legitimate disputes about economic, political and religious discrimination against Bahrain's indigenous inhabitants.

It is hard not to feel sorry for Bahrain's Shi'a. With the Government a close ally of the US, and enjoying strong backing from the GCC states, the Shi'a have no natural allies to advance their cause. A good proportion of the Shi'a population has Persian ancestry, and the ruling family makes every effort to paint its Shi'a population as a stalking horse for Iranian interests.

Iran's occasional irredentist claims against Bahrain also do little to help the Shi'a cause. The Lowy paper, 'Bad moon not rising: The myth of the Shi'a crescent', gives a synopsis of their situation.

The Bahraini Shi'a political leaders I have met see themselves as loyal Bahrainis but without being acknowledged as such. All of them were frustrated at the lack of political reform, for good reason. The track record of Sunni Arabs voluntarily undertaking political reform that favours the Shi'a in any meaningful way is poor, to say the least.

Kuwait has made the biggest strides in this regard, and the Emir has close relations with several of the country's leading Shi'a merchant families; but there are still severe limitations on Kuwait's political aspirations. In Iraq, the Shi'a only came to power in Baghdad courtesy of the US invasion, while in Lebanon, Hezbollah has advanced politically by making itself militarily stronger than the state.

In the Gulf states, it has been too easy to dismiss Shi'a political aspirations by equating political advancements for its Shi'a populations with increased influence for Iran. And while there are indications that the Bahraini Government has opened a dialogue with opposition groups, it is unlikely any substantive political reforms will result.

The fall of autocratic rulers in Tunisia and Egypt is one thing, but sectarian threats to Sunni political primacy is another. This week's events in Manama have demonstrated just how seriously Sunni rulers view sectarian threats to their power.

Rodger Shanahan is a non-resident Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy