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ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

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The Amir and the Fly

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With each new riot and bombing or other signs of unrest in the Gulf, I think back to life there more than a decade ago when oil prices were high and the public coffers were flush. The Shi'ite majority in Bahrain and the al-Hasa, eastern province of Saudi Arabia, were already waging their quiet war against the status quo, flavored with Islamic undercurrents that have waxed and waned over the years. In a separate, coexisting world, a more secular, professional bourgeoisie was angling for more political rights and representation. Now these two groups have found each other and are singing the same chorus. The autocratic princes have monopolized power and plundered their national treasuries for too long. With the surpluses of the 1970s having turned into deficits in the 1990s, there is no money left to maintain the generous subsidies of the past. Now, faced with tough fiscal choices, the best the monarchs of these countries can offer is a consultative council.

Listening to recent news reports of unrest, I am reminded of one monarch's hypocrisy, alienation from his subjects, and his classic story of the fly. Sheikh Isa's Beach, named after His Royal Highness the Amir, was a waterfront compound on the southwest coast encompassing one of the Amir's palaces. It had a lovely garden of date palms, fruit trees, and a large green lawn bordering an extensive stretch of private beach. The compound was enclosed by a high wall and at the entrance stood four armed guards who scrutinized every patron.

Asians, Africans, and Arab nationals were not allowed in. Only western expatriates were welcome. Here they could expose themselves, in various degrees of undress, without being ogled by natives. Some went wind surfing on breezy days, but most of the time we lazily roasted and toasted our pale bodies, pausing only occasionally to quench our thirst and replenish our fluids at Sheikh Isa's bar. The natives could only hear of the bar but could not share in the excitement. Their resentment was evident and it made no difference that the bar did not serve alcoholic beverages.

The Amir was too busy to enjoy his seaside playground. But on Fridays, he would discreetly arrive in an unmarked car, pace back and forth in the courtyard for his exercise, and then attend to business of the day. The business consisted of informal meetings with distinguished expatriates from the diplomatic and commercial communities. When a guard approach a chosen party, in accordance with an unwritten protocol, they would quickly cover their bare bodies and proceed to the courtyard where a large canopy had been erected. Beneath the canopy the Amir sat in front of a small glass coffee table surrounded by a few garden chairs. Under the table was a small tissue box and a hand mirror. The Amir was extremely conscious of his appearance.

One day a new visitor arrived on the island and was brought along as guest of one of the chosen parties. It was the visitor's

first time to the Middle East and the Amir was most interested in hearing his early impressions.

Precisely on cue an Indian servant came with tea and Sara Lee cake, the Amir's favorite. Minutes passed and some guests had proceeded with their third round of tea. The new visitor was conspicuously not joining in for when he lifted the cup to his lips he noticed a dead fly floating on the surface, and froze.

Observing the young man's mortified expression, the Amir peered into the cup and a barely detectable grin formed across his face. He glanced around at his guests and proceeded to tell his story. "Every Friday morning I must rise up at 6 a.m. to make a formal appearance at the Mosque. One day the ceremony was being broadcast on national television. It was a special holiday and all the media were represented. The cameras were pointed at me and everyone was watching. Just as the prayer was about to begin, a fly flew up my nose. I was mesmerized for there was nothing I could do. I sat there without a move for an hour with that fly in my nose." Everyone laughed except the Amir.

A metaphorical fly has been stuck up the Amir's nose for the past twenty years, angrily tickling him to make a move. The Amir continues to sit still on his throne refusing to budge. If he squashes the fly it will be martyred and worshipped. If he does not, he will continue to be bothered. However, waiting will not make the fly go away. It will lay its inconspicuous larvae and sooner or later will multiply into many flies, and it will be impossible to shoo them away.

The royal family in Bahrain continues to blame the buzzing agitation on Iran, but this excuse has worn thin. In 1981, after a failed coup attempt, they blamed Iran. When hidden arms caches were discovered in outlying Shi'a villages, they blamed Iran; they did so again and again, but trouble continues just the same.

Why is the discontent so vocal in Bahrain? The Bahrainis have a long history of unrest and activism, and they have had a taste of democracy. In 1973 they had free elections of a national assembly, but only a year later it was dissolved by the Amir's brother.

It would be foolish to limit the explanation to these factors. The Bahraini ruling family are Sunni while 75 % of the population are Shi'a. It is no accident that many of the Shi'a population are relatively impoverished. The children who were raised in dilapidated shantytowns, next to luxury expatriate compounds, are now fully grown, graduated from school, but unemployed.

Just next door, across the causeway, lies the eastern Saudi province, al-Hasa. The major of the population are also Shi'a, while the Saudi ruling family are Sunnis. The Saudis too have been running fiscal deficits and unemployment among recent graduates has been high.

All the ingredients of trouble are in place. Yet the ruling families in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, as in other Middle Eastern countries, are reluctant to bring about change. They are unwilling to implement even the kind of compromise solution adopted by Kuwait--a partly elected national assembly with strict restrictions on suffrage.

Why the intransigence? The Bahrainis have the most plausible excuse. Their hands are tied by their dependence on the Saudis. They depend heavily on the financial assistance they receive from the Saudis who have direct influence on Bahrain's policies.

The options are few. If reforms are not undertaken soon, there are likely to be more disturbances, coup attempts, and acts

of sabotage against domestic and foreign institutions. This will seriously bring into question the continued American presence in the region and jeopardize the security guarantees that these monarchies have from the west.

The only way to head off the rising tide of violent zealots is for the ruling families to introduce moderation and implement, if only slowly, some new ideas. An elected legislature would be a great first step, women's suffrage would be ideal, and more freedom for the press would be great. Even an open dialogue with the opposition seems overdue.

Let us hope reform will come and the fly will be there no more.

W.Y. is a pseudo name for the author whose name is withheld by request.

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