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ABSTRACT

“Authoritarianism in Bahrain: Motives, Methods and Challenges”

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This paper seeks to identify different elements in Bahraini society and government that indicate the existence of authoritarianism and repression as well as the methods which the state has utilized to maintain them. Drawing on Benjamin Smith, this study will search for coercive state apparatuses and alliances that encourage authoritarianism, especially in times of crisis. A number of sociologists have also identified ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) as mechanisms that maintain hegemonic worldviews and limit changes in an existing power structure. In addition to coercive state apparatuses and alliances, the government of Bahrain has utilized the media, schools, mosques, private and public sector jobs as ISAs to influence and coerce public affirmation of the status quo. Tactics include the characterization of Bahrain as an Arab and Sunni country, infiltrated by protestors who are dangerous, deceitful, sectarian, and loyal to Iran. Hardliners in the government particularly promote anti-Shi'ite agendas that stigmatize, disenfranchise and repress the majority of its citizens. Various investigations have identified the claims of the state as largely fictitious; however, over a thousand citizens have been detained and some convicted and sentenced for crimes predicated upon these claims. The government has carried out a systematic crackdown of protests and justified its actions through discourses on loyalty and citizenship. Protesters were publicly accused of treason, while pro-government partisans were portrayed as loyal and loving citizens. An analysis of the claims and policies of the state indicates its fear of the political and financial empowerment of its Shi'ite population. The empowerment of such a population would greatly disrupt the unity of the GCC-led bloc against Iran, a paradigm that claims “pro-Arab must mean pro-Sunni,” and the triumphalist hegemony of Sunni-Arab cultural currents which dominate discourses on history, religion, and politics. The concurrent effects of all these elements have succeeded in obstructing changes to the balance of power, generally, and democratization specifically. There are indications that authoritarianism in the country is largely motivated by personal and strategic interests. This investigation presents a framework for understanding the ideological, political, and economic methods and motives that encourage hardliners in the monarchy to maintain authoritarianism rather than shift power toward a more democratic, parliamentary state.