

Basic information about Bahrain

Part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) together with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. It's current GDP per capita is around 27 000\$. It's the "rich South".

Oil revenues account for roughly 80% of the state budget.

Roughly 1,2 million inhabitants, of which 51% are expatriates, mainly coming from India.

Among the national population the most salient divide is between Shias and Sunnis

70% of the national population is Shia, 30% is Sunni.

The Bahraini Political System

A constitutional monarchy on the paper. Ruled by a dynasty: Al-Khalifa, who belong to the Sunni minority
There is an elected parliament since 1973, that was disbanded in 1975 and reinstated in 2002.

The parliament has few powers.

A liberalized autocracy (D. Brumberg).

A generous welfare state

The main opposition movement is a Shia Islamist movement: al-Wifaq (the Concord). It has a relative majority at the parliament.

Nationals and Expatriates

Mass influx of expatriate workers since the inception of the oil industry in the 1930s.

Dramatic increase of the expatriate population with the oil boom of the mid-1970s.

The « *kafala* » or « sponsorship system ».

Sunnis and Shias

Ascriptive identities

Conquerors and conquered

Peasant, urban dwellers and Bedouins

Natives and aliens

In the 1960s and 1970s: emergence of the Shia Islamist movements, influence of the Iranian revolution (1979)

Increasing correspondence between religious divide and political positioning: opposition is led by Shias while the bulk of the Sunni population is pro-regime.

The employment divide

Segmentation of the labour market in order to avoid competition between nationals and expatriates

Pattern that emerged in the 1970s: nationals tend to work in the public or semi-public sector while expatriates tend to work in the private sector

Crisis of the type of labour market regulation in the 1990s: dramatic increase of unemployment among nationals.

The politicization of unemployment

The Shia Islamist movements politicized the unemployment problem. For these movements, mostly Shias are suffering from unemployment as the result of a deliberate discrimination policy in the public sector.

Depoliticizing the unemployment issue

The labour market reform: raising the cost of
expatriate labour

Unemployment is a technical problem that have
technical solutions

No debate between the opposition and the
government about socio-economic reform: consensus.

Why?

The reforms aim at preserving the welfare state

Opposition activists have affinities with the private
sector

Economics is not politics

The government fights any attempt at politicizing economic issues

The opposition thinks that economics is not a political issue

In Bahrain, contentious political debates revolves around identity issues

Since politics in this sense is not debated at the parliament, clerics have retreated from it