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“Understanding the Struggle for Power and the Democratization Process in Bahrain”

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Bahrain’s political landscape is often reduced by western media to a discussion of the Sunni minority’s rule over a Shia majority population, an oversimplification that ignores the fact that the sectarian nature of the Bahraini regime is only a symptom of a much deeper problem. Moreover, the international community tends to focus on the prevention of human rights abuses, rather than examining the root causes of these violations. During his presentation, former member of Parliament and leading democracy activist **Matar Ebrahim Matar** described how Bahrain is dominated by a kleptocratic regime, in which the ruling royal family and its allies rely on an exploitative system to maintain control over the country’s resources and population. He argued that a reconceptualization of power dynamics would provide a better explanation for the country’s political and economic challenges and also lead to more realistic and effective solutions for meeting Bahrain’s complex challenges.

While it is difficult for frustrated Bahrainis to imagine the ruling party undertaking serious reform, Matar expressed hope that the country would see eventual progress, with cooperation from the international community, including a constructive role played by the United States. Major international actors must be willing to develop a clear strategy to challenge the entrenched kleptocratic system, Matar noted, and U.S. policy makers must recognize that their country’s tacit support for Bahrain’s ruling party upholds an uneasy and unjust stability in the country.

Discussant **Sarah Chayes**, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, situated Bahrain and its people’s struggle within the wider context of countries that can be considered kleptocracies, and responses to them, including the Arab uprisings. Calling vertically structured kleptocratic regimes tantamount to criminal organizations, she pointed out the significant international security challenges they pose. Overlooking their impact in favor of short-term priorities often leads to more intractable problems in the future. She also raised a concept developed initially by activists in Tunisia: that in the current context, acute, structured state corruption should be considered a “gross violation” for the purposes of transitional justice. Conventional human rights concerns, such as abductions or detainee treatment, she argued, receive the bulk of U.S. attention and tend to focus on individual cases, whereas corrupt systems affect whole populations and are often the root cause of these individual sufferings.

In response to questions, Matar emphasized that corruption is rooted in personal gain, rather than in culture or ideology. The ruling party has perpetuated the notion of a Sunni-Shia divide, despite evidence to the contrary. For example, Sunni Muslims participate in the pro-democracy movement alongside Shia Muslims, and interreligious marriages have been common for generations. Rather than focus on the sectarian divide, Matar recommends that the international community stand firmly with human rights defenders and support the aspirations of all Bahrainis seeking democratic change.

“Western governments and others in the international community must look beyond the supposed sectarian divide to incorporate a more nuanced analysis of Bahrain’s complex power structure into their policies and practices. It is time for the United States to reconsider its ambivalent relationship with Bahrain and be prepared to challenge the Bahraini government in defense of peaceful activists calling for democratic change.”

—Matar Ebrahim Matar
Political Activist, Bahrain

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