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The Politics of Bahrain

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Bahrain, a small island nation in the Arabian Gulf, occupies a significant place in both the history and politics of the Middle East. Despite its modest size, Bahrain has become emblematic of the region's tensions and aspirations, serving as both a platform for reform efforts and a battleground for contested political values. From its emergence as a British protectorate in the 19th and 20th centuries, through its independence and ongoing process of nation-building, the political system of Bahrain has evolved in response to both domestic social dynamics and broader regional influences.

Bahraini politics are marked by the enduring legacy of the Al Khalifa monarchy, whose rule began in the late eighteenth century and continues to shape the nation's institutions to this day. The foundations of government combine hereditary authority with constitutional frameworks, while significant power remains concentrated at the apex of the system—the monarch and his immediate circle. Efforts at reform, including the introduction of parliamentary institutions and broadening participation in the political process, have characterized recent decades. Yet, these steps forward have often been met with criticism regarding the true extent of governmental openness and inclusivity.

The society itself is a mosaic of communities reflecting centuries of migration, trade, and cultural exchange. The interplay between Bahrain's majority Shia population and ruling Sunni elite has been a defining factor in the country's politics. Tensions along sectarian lines have at times erupted into open confrontations, most notably during the political protests and unrest that swept the region in the 2011 Arab Spring. Bahrain became a focal point for demands for political reform, accountable government, and respect for civil rights—and the government's response to these events has drawn international attention and scrutiny.

At the institutional level, Bahrain's system is defined by a bicameral legislature—comprising one elected and one royally appointed chamber—an executive branch dominated by royal appointments, and a judiciary whose independence is constitutionally guaranteed but frequently debated in practice. The reality of political parties is shaped by legal restrictions, resulting in the formation of “political societies” rather than parties, and the opposition has faced significant challenges in maintaining an ongoing presence.

Externally, Bahrain's regional and international relationships are just as pivotal to its political landscape as any internal dynamic. Close ties with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council nations, ongoing friction and cautious engagement with Iran,

and the strategic alliance with the United States—especially given Bahrain’s role as host to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet—add layers of complexity to both domestic decision-making and geopolitical posture. Economic reforms, particularly since the end of the oil boom, and efforts at economic diversification have both influenced and been influenced by the nation’s political trajectory.

This book provides a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Bahrain. It traces the historical evolution of its government institutions, analyzes the interplay between official and de facto centers of power, explores the challenges of civil rights and representative politics, and examines Bahrain’s key regional and international alignments. In doing so, it offers an accessible and informed entry point to understanding one of the Gulf’s most intriguing and complex political systems.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Bahraini Politics

The story of Bahrain's political landscape is a deep dive into millennia of history, shaped by its crucial location in the heart of the Arabian Gulf. Long before the modern state, this archipelago was a nexus of trade and culture, influencing and being influenced by the great civilizations of the ancient world. Understanding this deep past is essential to grasping the complexities of its present-day politics, where echoes of ancient trade routes, religious currents, and shifting regional powers still resonate.

Archaeological evidence points to Bahrain being the center of the ancient Dilmun civilization, a significant trading hub that connected Mesopotamia with the Indus Valley from the late fourth millennium BC. Described in Sumerian texts as a land of immortality and prosperity, Dilmun's strategic location allowed it to flourish as a vital intermediary in the exchange of goods like copper, ceramics, and textiles. The remnants of this era, including the Barbar Temple and the impressive burial mounds, attest to a society with advanced urban planning and a keen understanding of trade. The capital of Dilmun is believed to have been located at Qala'at al-Bahrain, a site that shows continuous human presence for thousands of years.

Following the decline of Dilmun around 800 BC, Bahrain came under the sway of various empires that dominated the wider region. The Assyrians and Babylonians exerted influence, with evidence suggesting Assyrian King Sennacherib attacked the area in the 8th century BC and Babylonian control in the 6th century BC. From the 3rd century BC, Persian empires, including the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids, controlled Bahrain for significant periods. The Greeks knew the islands as Tylos, recognizing its importance as a center for pearl trading. Nearchus, an admiral serving under Alexander the Great, is believed to have visited the islands, finding a fertile land engaged in a wide trading network.

The arrival of Islam in the 7th century AD marked a pivotal turning point in Bahrain's history. The islands were among the earliest areas to embrace the new faith, and from this point forward, the political and social fabric became deeply intertwined with Islamic developments. However, the centuries that followed were far from stable, marked by a succession of rulers and periods of turmoil.

One of the more colorful, and perhaps controversial, periods in Bahrain's early Islamic history was the rise of the Qarmatians. This radical Ismaili Shia sect, originating in Iraq, established a powerful state centered in Bahrain in 899 AD. Known for their unconventional beliefs and actions, the Qarmatians challenged the Abbasid Caliphate

and controlled much of eastern Arabia from their base in Al-Ahsa. They famously sacked Mecca in 930 AD and even carried off the Black Stone, holding it for over two decades. Their rule in Bahrain lasted until 1077, when they were overthrown by the Arab Uyunid dynasty.

Following the Uyunids, Bahrain was ruled by a series of local dynasties, including the Ufurids and Jabrids. This era saw a resurgence of trade and pearling, industries that had been central to Bahrain's economy for millennia. However, external powers continued to cast their gaze upon the strategically located islands. In the early 16th century, the Portuguese, expanding their maritime empire, arrived in the Gulf.

Drawn by the lucrative trade routes and pearl fisheries, the Portuguese, in alliance with the Kingdom of Hormuz, invaded and captured Bahrain from the Jabrid ruler in 1521. Their rule lasted for approximately 80 years, during which they often relied on local Persian governors to administer the islands. The remains of their presence can still be seen in the form of the Bahrain Fort, also known as the Portuguese Fort. However, Portuguese control was not without challenge, facing several revolts and protests from the local population.

In 1602, the Portuguese were expelled by the Safavid dynasty of Persia under Shah Abbas I. The Safavids reasserted Persian control, which, with some interruptions, lasted for nearly two centuries. During this time, the islands experienced invasions by Omani forces in the early 18th century, adding another layer to the complex tapestry of external influences.

The late 18th century marked a significant turning point with the arrival of the Bani Utbah tribal confederation. These Sunni Arab tribes, with roots in central Arabia, had migrated to Kuwait and then to the Qatar peninsula. Drawn by the rich pearl banks, a group of Utub tribesmen, including the Al Khalifa family, moved onto the islands of Bahrain, which were at the time controlled by the Persians through an Omani governor.

In 1783, the Bani Utbah, led by Sheikh Ahmed bin Khalifa (later known as Ahmed al-Fateh, "the Conqueror"), successfully challenged and defeated the Persian forces. This victory in the Battle of Zubarah and the subsequent expulsion of the Persians from Bahrain marked the beginning of Al Khalifa rule over the islands, a dynasty that continues to govern Bahrain to this day. Ahmed al-Fateh became the first Hakim of Bahrain, establishing a new political order based on tribal supremacy. The arrival of the Al Khalifa and other Utub tribes significantly altered the demographic and social structure of the islands, bringing with them their tribal institutions and customs. This historical shift from various external controls to the establishment of a local ruling dynasty laid the foundation for the modern political history of Bahrain.

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