

Discours de la députée du Bahreïn

Conférence du 19 janvier 2010 organisée à l'occasion du passage à Paris de Mme Alice Samaan, Vice-Présidente de la Shura - Chambre Haute du Parlement du Royaume du Bahreïn.

Didier Billion, chargé de mission auprès du directeur de l'IRIS, modérateur de la conférence

Bien, Mesdames, Messieurs, nous allons commencer cette réunion. Je vais faire une très rapide introduction en français. J'en ai l'autorisation de notre oratrice principale. Ensuite Madame Samaan s'exprimera pendant environ trente minutes, ce qui nous laissera suffisamment de temps pour lui poser des questions, lui soumettre des réflexions si nécessaire. Vous pourrez les poser soit en anglais, soit en français, à votre convenance.

Je tiens à remercier Madame Samaan à double titre. Tout d'abord, pour avoir bien voulu dialoguer avec nous et nous faire partager ses réflexions sur son pays, sur les réformes en cours, sur l'avenir de ce pays et aussi parce que Bahreïn est un pays qui est, finalement, très peu connu en France. On en parle peu souvent dans les médias, dans la presse. Certes, c'est un petit pays à la fois par la taille, par la population (environ 800 000 habitants), mais c'est un pays qui, probablement par sa structuration sociale, par sa structuration confessionnelle, et je pense qu'elle vous en parlera longuement, par l'existence d'une opposition structurée, par sa position géographique bien évidemment, est un pays extrêmement important pour l'équilibre de la région, pour l'équilibre de la péninsule arabique.

Vous le savez, le cher Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa est arrivé au pouvoir il y a une dizaine d'années, en 1999. Deux ans plus tard, c'est extrêmement important et intéressant, il a organisé un référendum sur ce qu'on avait appelé à l'époque une Charte d'action nationale et en 2002, donc trois ans après son accession au pouvoir, il a décidé de mettre en place une monarchie constitutionnelle, avec entre autres, l'existence de deux chambres parlementaires, dont aujourd'hui Madame Samaan, qui nous fait l'amitié de participer à ce débat, est vice-Présidente de la Choura, c'est-à-dire la chambre haute du Parlement.

Ce qui nous intéresserait ce soir, Madame, si vous l'entendez ainsi, c'est tout d'abord de savoir où en est précisément le mouvement de réformes, qui a été initié par le Roi il y a maintenant une dizaine d'années. C'est aussi de mieux connaître les rapports entre le pouvoir exécutif au sein duquel, nous le savons, il y a une forte présence et une forte influence de la famille royale bien évidemment, et le pouvoir législatif, d'autant, je me permets de le rappeler, qu'il existe dans ce pays une opposition structurée, ce qui est assez notoire. Ce n'est pas le cas dans tous les pays de la région. Cette opposition, mais elle nous en parlera, avait par exemple appelé au boycott des élections législatives en 2002. *A contrario*, cette opposition, ou une large partie de celle-ci en tout cas, a participé aux élections législatives de 2006, emportant même dix-sept sièges sur quarante, ce qui est quand même intéressant. Cette opposition est aussi en partie, pas exclusivement mais en large partie, organisée sur une base confessionnelle, puisque Bahreïn a aussi la particularité d'avoir une importante partie de sa population, qui est de confession musulmane chiite, alors que la direction de l'Etat est sunnite. Il nous intéresserait donc de mieux comprendre cette singularité de votre pays, voir comment cela fonctionne. Est-ce que cela suscite des tensions, des crises éventuellement ? Nous savons que votre pays a connu des crises à certains moments, quelques

agitations politiques. Il est intéressant de voir l'évolution, où on en est aujourd'hui. Ce qui nous intéresserait aussi, je me permets, je profite d'avoir la parole pour vous poser un certain nombre de questions, c'est de savoir quelles sont les relations entre ce qu'on peut appeler la question sociale et la question confessionnelle, la question du statut des femmes, de la place des femmes, dont vous êtes une des représentantes éminentes dans ce pays, mais sur laquelle vous avez par ailleurs travaillé depuis de nombreuses années. Quelle est la place de la société civile ? Comment est-elle organisée ? Quelle est la place de la presse ? Comment est-elle structurée ? Quelle est la place des entrepreneurs privés ? Enfin, toute une série de questions sur la société de Bahreïn, qui nous intéresse singulièrement et aussi, voir peut-être quels sont les rapports entre le Roi, qui incontestablement est porteur d'un projet réformiste, et la famille royale, car on a parfois l'impression, mais peut-être est-ce une fausse impression, que le Roi est parfois un peu solitaire et qu'il rencontre au sein même de la famille royale quelques oppositions ou une force d'inertie qui, peut-être, entrave une partie de sa volonté réformiste.

Enfin, et si vous en avez le temps bien sûr, il y a l'aspect de la politique extérieure de Bahreïn, non seulement au niveau régional, c'est-à-dire les relations avec les pays arabes de la péninsule, bien évidemment, savoir si Bahreïn peut servir de modèle éventuellement pour un certain nombre de ses voisins. Vous avez, au niveau régional, la question de l'Iran, ce grand voisin de l'autre côté, avec lequel bien sûr, les relations peuvent être parfois plus compliquées. Puis au niveau international, mais là, décidément, je me permets de poser beaucoup de questions, quels sont les rapports avec les Etats-Unis, dont nous savons qu'une partie de la cinquième flotte est basée à Bahreïn, les rapports éventuellement avec l'Union européenne et bien sûr la France ? Donc, tout cela fait une série de questions sur lesquelles nous attendons, avec impatience, les réponses que vous voudrez bien nous apporter, les grilles d'analyse, et enfin, savoir à quelle étape en êtes-vous à Bahreïn. Quelles sont les prochaines échéances, en termes de réforme initiée par le pouvoir parlementaire et le pouvoir exécutif ? Quels défis devez-vous relever ? Quels sont les principaux ? Et aussi, quels sont les prochains rendez-vous électoraux, puisque je sais qu'ils sont maintenant dans un avenir très proche ? Voilà, c'est donc toute une série de questions. Je suis bien présomptueux de vous les avoir posées dès l'entrée de ce débat, mais bien évidemment, je suis certain que vous nous apporterez une série d'éclairages sur ces problèmes, dus probablement à une insuffisante connaissance de votre pays. Et pour les réponses que vous voudrez bien nous fournir, je vous remercie par avance, Madame.

Mme Alice Samaan, Vice-Présidente de la Shura - Chambre Haute du Parlement du Royaume du Bahreïn

Thank you very much. Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening. I am grateful to Didier Billion from IRIS who gave us this unique opportunity to address you today. Please allow me to begin by providing you with some background information about my country.

Bahrain is the Arabic term for Two Seas, which refers to the freshwater springs, sweet water, that are found within the salty seas surrounding it. Thus we have the two flavours, sweet and salty. Believe me, life in Bahrain does have that wonderful flavour. The kingdom of Bahrain comprises of a collection of 33 islands on the western side of the Arabian Gulf. It has a total area of approximately 800 square kilometres, with a population of about 1 million. It is linked to Saudi Arabia by a causeway, and another causeway is currently being planned to link it to the state of Qatar, which, by the way, is welcomed by the consortium Qatar Development and Vinci Construction, a French company.

Throughout our history, and certainly today, Bahrain has been an important crossroad and a place where East meets West. Its history goes back more than 5,000 years to its role as the centre of

the ancient civilisation of Dilmun, the land of immortality, which was referred to in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as the fabled Garden of Eden. It was also viewed by the ancient Sumerians as an island paradise, to which the wise and the brave were taken to enjoy eternal life. Today, Bahrain prides itself on a rich history of linking civilisations, and that it is a country of multiplicity of cultures, ethnicity and religions. In fact, it is the only country in the Gulf region that has Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Hindu citizens.

Bahrain is really a great place to live, with its multicultural environment, its old traditional buildings resting close to modern skyscrapers, giving it an added beauty and attracting foreigners ever since it became known for its pearls and pearl diving. The welcoming, generous nature of its people make their stay last longer than planned. It is also viewed as a financial hub and a gateway to the region. Therefore it is only natural that Bahrain is committed to international cooperation and world peace by promoting dialogues between nations, cultures and religions. The kingdom of Bahrain pursues a balanced, effective foreign policy to maintain, protect and defend its national sovereignty and its strategic, political and economic interests.

Bahrain also places great emphasis on the importance of developing and strengthening ties and relationships between all countries and nations, of course, within the legitimacy and the framework of the rules and principles laid down by international laws and the United Nations. Now, in the Bahrain-French bilateral context, our ties are strong, multifaceted and longstanding, dating back to the anchoring of the French frigate La Favorite in Bahraini waters in 1842. These excellent relations and ties, based on mutual trust and respect, have been maintained throughout the years and are reflected in the exchange visits of officials of both countries, especially the two visits by His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa to France in 2008, followed by the visit last year by the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, which was the first visit of a French president since 1980.

These visits have focused on expanding the framework of bilateral cooperation, as well as the efforts of both leaders for world peace. All these visits have resulted in the signing of several agreements of cooperation in the fields of military, economy and industry, culture, youth and sports, tourism, air travel, archaeology and restoration, promotion and protection of investments, postgraduate training of doctors, their joint declaration on cooperation in nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, training and exchange of technical information in the field of civil defence, and the fight against crime, protocol to avoid dual taxation. The cultural and technical cooperation agreement was signed by both countries in 1976.

Diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level between both countries were established in the early 1970s. At the local level in Bahrain, there is a French school, as well as the Alliance Francaise that teaches the French language. French is taught in the government and private schools and at the University of Bahrain. The number of French people living in Bahrain is growing, especially with the increased work opportunities. There are now more than 70 French commercial agencies in Bahrain in various fields, such as engineering, construction, project and real estate development, advertising, banking and investment such as BNP Paribas, Ceylon and AXA. The trade figures show a positive upward trend between both countries, amounting currently to around USD 300 million annually. This upward trend is due to Bahrain's policy of diversification of its economy, strong business, good infrastructure, political stability, good laws and regulations and economic freedom.

Bahrain ranked first for the 16th consecutive year among the 17 Arab states, and 13th in the world according to the latest Index of Economic Freedom. This open economic environment has helped to propel a construction that includes multibillion dollar projects, such as the World Trade Centre and the Bahrain Financial Harbour. An indicator of Bahrain's regional commercial standing is the

fact that it is the first financial centre of the Gulf and it is home to more than 412 banks, most of which have a regional focus and an overall budget of more than USD 220 billion.

Now, in the political context, our monarch and his government have chosen comprehensive peace as a strategic option in their policies. Bahrain being a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the GCC, the Arab League and the United Nations plays an active role with its diplomatic initiatives for the achievement of peace and stability regionally and globally. Bahrain also fights international terrorism, but within the framework of the GCC, the Arab League and the United Nations. Bahrain's leaders have undertaken multiple significant reforms, aimed at laying a firm foundation for Bahrain's future. No one has acted more vigorously in this respect than His Majesty the King.

Some of the most important transitions began in 1999, with His Majesty's reform programme, which launched a series of sweeping unprecedented reform measures. Censorship was relaxed. State security law was lifted. Political prisoners were freed. Exiles were repatriated and outdated laws were repealed. In February 2001, a national referendum was held with an overwhelming popular approval of 98.4%, and the National Charter was adopted, by which Bahrain became a constitutional monarchy run on the basis of democracy, separation of power and the rule of law. The National Charter stipulated some amendments in the constitution, which included the setting up of a two-chamber parliament, giving men and women equal rights in political and public affairs, making all citizens equal in all rights and responsibilities, regardless of gender, religion or ethnicity.

In 2002, Bahrain held its first parliamentary elections in over 30 years. 40 members were elected directly by the people to the Council of Representatives, and 40 members were appointed by His Majesty the King to the Shura Council. Currently, one woman sits on the Council of Representatives and 10 women sit on the Shura Council. His Majesty's reform programme reflects Bahrain's desire to preserve our nation's security and stability, to ensure the rights, economical and social prosperity of our people, and also to ensure the participation of all citizens in the political, legislative, economic and social aspects of the nation through the various posts and channels they are involved in.

Democratic governance has certainly become an unwavering priority of our government and our people. It has set out to build its primary structures and provide numerous regulations and vehicles to support it, such as the Constitutional Court, the National Audit Court, the National Human Rights Authority. Bahrain has also signed and ratified a number of international agreements dealing with human rights issues, such as the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the CRC, CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women, Convention on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention Against Terrorism, Money Laundering and others.

On the economic level, His Majesty's actions to open up the economy have helped spur a GDP growth rate of nearly 7% in recent years. His Majesty is seeking to further transform Bahrain through out Economic Vision 2030 to forge a sustainable economy based on competitiveness, capitalism, tempered by justice and fairness, which aims at having a balanced society that supports those who need help. Now, this is close to my heart. High among the changes of His Majesty's reform programme is the full support and backing His Majesty has given and continues to give to women. Bahrain was ahead of many Arab countries in giving women their full and equal social, political and economic rights. This also came as a result of the progress that women themselves have achieved in their education and in their careers.

Formal education for women in Bahrain was introduced in the early 1920s and literacy among women is very high, in the upper 90s. The number of women with Masters degrees and PhDs is equal, if not more than men, and their number in university exceeds that of men. We have had women teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers and architects for decades. Women also work in banks, major and small companies, shops, hotels, factories and as taxi drivers. Now, Bahraini women have a role in the decision-making process. They are members of parliament and hold the posts of ministers, ambassadors, judges, district attorneys, undersecretaries, director-generals, chief executive officers in banks and companies. Now we have a woman pilot, so you see the sky is the limit for Bahraini women. We are also very proud that Bahraini woman Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa chaired the General Assembly of the United Nations, a post seldom held by women. Before that, she was our ambassador to France.

All these achievements and appointments only serve as an example of the dedication and the seriousness that Bahraini women take their education and careers. It also serves as yet another example of the Bahraini government's role in recognising the potential of women as equal and capable partners in the workforce and also in the decision-making process. The establishment of the Supreme Council for Women in 2001 under the capable leadership of Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, wife of His Majesty the King, was a major development of the past decade. This council is really the umbrella that looks after all issues relating to women, in close coordination and cooperation with government ministries, establishments and the private sector, as well as regional and international agencies.

The council has implemented a number of successful programmes, aimed at empowering women to improve themselves and their careers in any role they choose, and especially to empower women to take leadership positions in the public and private sectors through its pioneering programme the National Strategy for the Advancement of Bahraini Women. Bahraini women have been active in civil societies since the early 1950s. They have very innovative social, educational and counselling programmes for women and children. In addition to the women's societies, Bahrain has around 500 registered welfare, civil, religious, political, cooperative and vocational societies, as well as over 100 clubs of various interests that serve local residents, as well as expatriates.

Bahrain has always been an open society. It is a country of multiple ethnicities, religions, sects and cultures. Religious belief is regarded as a basic human right by both the government and the people. Our constitution has reaffirmed that in articles 18 and 22. Muslims, Christians, Jews and Hindus have been practising their religion, praying at their mosques, churches, synagogues and temples freely and openly for centuries. There are now alongside the mosques 17 registered churches, a synagogue and several Hindu and Sikh temples. By the way, the first church was built over a century ago with the arrival of the American missionaries. This is my church.

With its population of multiple backgrounds, cultures and faiths, Bahrain has been a pioneering country regionally and globally in hosting interfaith dialogues. Consequently, it has earned a unique regional and global position in promoting a comprehensive moderate message about religion. This message reflects a deep-rooted social and cultural heritage based on acceptance and peaceful coexistence. Our monarch has made many initiatives in this respect, nationally, regionally, globally and during visits to the Vatican and to the United Nations, where he stated, 'The real cause of many of the traumas facing humanity today has been the absence of systemic dialogue among cultures and civilisations.'

His Majesty's commitment is constant and unwavering on this issue. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press is stipulated in article 23 of our constitution. As a result, the last decade saw unprecedented developments and vast changes in our national press, especially the topics and

subjects they cover, the critical and contradicting views they present, and the freedom with which they present them. Of course, all this is in line with the true spirit of His Majesty's reform democratic programme. The number of daily and weekly newspapers increased from four to 14 in both languages, English and Arabic, in addition to the tens of weekly and monthly magazines, as well as works on various topics. There also has been a tremendous increase in electronic journalism and websites. Our radio and TV programmes are now focusing more and more on human rights issues.

His Majesty the King and this government believe that Bahrain's greatest asset is its people. All citizens are entitled to free medical care through our most up-to-date hospitals, and our health centres, which are within reach of all inhabitants. If treatment is required abroad, the government pays all expenses. Education is free and compulsory up to the age of 14, and parents whose children in that age group are not in school face a penalty. There is a law about that. Secondary education is also free, and fees for university education are subsidised. Our literacy rate is one of the highest in the world. His Majesty has initiated reforms in the education system to meet the needs of the nation and the people. Educational reform is one of the cornerstones of the Economic Vision of 2030 spearheaded by the Economic Development Board. To that end, the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training was set up in 2008 to review and analyse the performance of all education establishments in Bahrain.

At the social level, the government provides housing or land and loans to families with low income. All Bahrainis are involved in various social security programmes. Furthermore, we have loans for the care of the old, people with special needs, the unemployed, where they receive salaries for six months while being trained for a job, and our new labour law gives benefits to foreign labourers and freedom to move to other employers if certain conditions in their contracts are not met. These are some of the programmes that the government of Bahrain provides for its people. Unfortunately, time does not allow me to go into all of the other programmes provided, either by the government and its various organisations and establishments, or by the private sector.

Of course, such remarkable achievements have not been unmarked with many challenges. We realise that the road ahead requires commitment, perseverance, dedication and hard work. Only by embracing the elements of democracy can we create peaceful societies that uphold the basic principles of peace, equality, political and social justice. I am very proud of the accomplishments that have been attained by my country and realise that it will require an evolution rather than revolution in order to maximise its full potential. We are very optimistic about the future, one where citizens truly enjoy greater freedom without abandoning the constructive customs and cultures and traditions that give our country its distinctive character.

I thank you for joining us here today and I sincerely hope that you will one day have the opportunity to visit Bahrain. We have been welcoming visitors for centuries and we have won their hearts with our warm and genuine hospitality. Please give us that pleasure soon. Thank you.