

## **DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN**

*Ala'a Shehabi*

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### **FEBRUARY 14: DAY OF RAGE IN BAHRAIN**

**W**e were glued to the screen on February 11 to watch the announcement of the end of Mubarak's reign. That was when many Bahrainis, including myself, decided to heed the February 14 call for a "Day of Rage." There is no doubt that the Arab Spring effect spilled over directly into Bahrain because we had just seen the impossible happen. Mubarak fell, and what the Egyptians managed to do we could do as well, couldn't we? Every time another country rises, and another dictator falls, I can still physically feel the resurgence of revolutionary zeal pump through my veins.

The winds of democracy had finally reached the shores of the Arab world. The authoritarianism that had been sustained for de-

cares depended on fear and involuntary servitude. Now the fear had gone, and people in Bahrain faced tanks and bullets with bare chests. I therefore did not falter a moment in my decision to take part in the uprising on February 14.

It was either now or never. I held the firm conviction that the time had come. Bahrainis no longer wanted to be "subjects of the King." They wanted to be considered citizens by the state. Even a handout payment of nearly \$3,000 the day before did not stop people from going to the street on February 14. We occupied the Pearl Roundabout after the funeral of Ali Mushaimi nearby on February 15. I worked hard for a month in the encampment at the Pearl Roundabout.

Before that, I had shied away from direct political activism and worked as a researcher and economics lecturer. Politics were always trouble in this part of the world, and the youth my age were interested in other things: becoming successful bankers, traveling to Europe. Very few young people appeared to be concerned or active in politics. My small circle of friends would meet every week and complain but felt they could not do much.

But now people, including myself, have completely changed. Every minute of the day, I think about what I need to be doing next to sustain the battle to gain freedom, not just for my husband but for myself and for others. None of us are free. We have been living off the whim of an autocrat who decided our fate with a stroke of the pen. Because of this, there have been cyclical uprisings in Bahrain since the 1930s. This one (in 2011) was the biggest in history, and I prayed that it would be the last one so that our children could live in a better world.

The dream wasn't to last long. For each one of us who found our freedom at the Pearl Roundabout, we felt heart-wrenching pain as we watched the Pearl monument be destroyed in mid-March.<sup>26</sup> What Bahrainis have proven is that such a spirit cannot be crushed with brute force.

It was difficult for me initially facing the fear of repression,

death, the pre-dawn raids, the mass arrests, and the sectarian persecution. I had lived a fairly sanitized life up until this point.

### PUNISHMENT BY PROXY: MY HUSBAND'S ARREST

My husband Ghazi was not an activist, but I had become one on February 14. He would joke that he had never carried a placard in his life, and I would look at him with disdain, but other times I would envy his nonchalance, given the seemingly hopeless state of the Arab world and the disillusionment of many people at the time. When the uprising began, he preferred to stay at home and look after the baby, and he told me to “go do [my] thing.” This was a great deal as far as I was concerned: I could devote myself from February 14 onwards to the *intifada*<sup>27</sup> that was unfolding.

On April 12, we had lunch at home as usual. Ghazi played with our newborn baby and then drove back to his office, where he works as a property executive in one of the biggest commercial companies in Bahrain. I did not hear from him again that day, and his phone was switched off. That evening, the notorious *mukhabarat*<sup>28</sup> Twitter account called Hareghum tweeted, “Ghazi Farhan the traitor has been successfully arrested.” This news was a total shock. I feared for my baby as I expected police to raid the house at any moment. Ghazi was the last person I imagined to get arrested.

I later found out from his colleagues at work that Ghazi was followed into his office car park by three SUVs, and men in street clothes—not uniforms—accosted him in the parking lot of his building. They blindfolded and handcuffed him and took him away. This was the notorious National Security Agency, the *mukhabarat*. He endured five days of torture during interrogation and was forced to sign a confession. The officers would call him “Shehabi” (my name, not his), and many of the questions were about me. The last line of the confession (which I have recently obtained) reads, “I have advised my wife many times to stop all



political activity.” It was clear as day that the point of his arrest was to punish and to silence me.

It wasn’t until forty-eight days after his arrest that he emerged alive, but only to be summoned before a military tribunal, which sentenced him to three years in prison following a ten-minute hearing. His two charges were “participating in an illegal assembly of more than five persons,” based on the fact that he had visited the Pearl Roundabout, where the protests were centered, and “spreading false information on the Internet,” based on a single comment he made on Facebook. He has remained in jail since.

The first glimpse I had of my husband during this time was when he appeared at the military tribunal. It was a terrible sight. He was exhausted, with bloodshot eyes and red marks on his wrists from being handcuffed overnight. I guessed he had lost about twenty pounds. He also looked disoriented, and I can only imagine how shocking it was for him to find himself in a courtroom after such a long time and to be read his charges by three stern judges—serious charges, which he was hearing for the first time—and told to state his plea. And he did all of this while trying to overcome the emotions of seeing his loved ones sitting on benches at the back of the courtroom for the first time in nearly seven weeks. “Is this my husband?” I thought. The man who usually dressed in expensive suits, who drove fast cars and had the airs and graces of a “high-flyer” was in a gray prisoner jumpsuit trying hard to compose himself. The intention was to degrade and punish him.

For months, I was unable to communicate regularly with Ghazi as he was moved around from prison to prison. But on further meetings at the court and on the phone, I saw a new man. The transformation in him was astounding and captures the essence of the Arab Awakening—that it is fundamentally about dignity, not politics. Ghazi refused to be broken or to appear broken. He stood tall, would sneak in a wink, and would express more worry over me than for himself. He was taking the bullet on my behalf, and I am eternally grateful to him.

It's important to remember that there are five hundred other political prisoners in a similar or worse predicament than Ghazi and who remain in jail, out of a total of nearly three thousand arrested over a two-month period. My husband tells me he has been "spoilt" relative to others with him who faced much more severe torture and sentences of up to life imprisonment. Part of why I am so outspoken about his ordeal is that this is not just a personal issue—it's a national tragedy.

I found my personal ordeal very painful, particularly with a newborn baby, and I had to find a way to either detach or deal with the pain so that it didn't paralyze me. After my husband's arrest, I had to decide: Do I continue activism at further risk to myself, or do I stay at home to look after the baby? Certainly I was under a lot of pressure from my family to do the latter. But my overriding instinct was to fight for my husband and to fight against the injustice. I saw heroes and brave people around me and was proud of how many Bahrainis decided that our silence would be our grave and that, at whatever cost, we could not lose the battle for freedom, dignity, and social justice.

Little things touched me. I saw how released prisoners were greeted as heroes. Busloads of people from across the country came to visit Aayat Alqurmuzi, the student who was jailed for reading a poem at the roundabout. I gained strength from my husband, who told me he made sure to laugh and make his inmates laugh in their prison cell every morning so the guards could hear and understand that despite their torture, they could not take his right to smile. In the military courts, a mother of a prisoner went home to write on the cake she prepared, "Congratulations, fifteen years." This was after she shouted at the judge that he may as well have sentenced her child to life while he was at it.

For me, these anecdotes showed that guns and tanks cannot break the spirit. And this time around, in the era of the Arab Spring—the social upheaval and the consciousness of emancipation is not one that can be repressed. Bahrainis, as Arabs, have proven this.



## THE FORGOTTEN REVOLUTION

The uprising in Bahrain has been described by Al Jazeera as “the revolution that was abandoned by the Arabs, forsaken by the West, and forgotten by the world.”<sup>29</sup> It is indeed a tragedy that the counterrevolution is perceived to have won and that this is the narrative the media has used, but I contend that the opposite is true. The counterrevolution, led by Saudi Arabia, tried to use force, violence, and direct repression to quell the uprising. However, crushing the revolution also means crushing the spirit of revolution, and this is something that neither tanks nor guns can do. Though it became physically impossible to mobilize mass gatherings and protests for a while, the uprising turned into numerous low-intensity smaller protests in many villages on a daily basis. This is still a direct challenge to the system. In addition, other creative forms of protests have emerged, such as traffic go-slows, coordinated attempts to return to the Pearl Roundabout area, and nightly chanting from rooftops. Unlikely revolutionaries have also emerged. The doctors who were sentenced to up to fifteen years for treating the injured have become figureheads in the uprising, and their discourse is one about justice, freedom, and accountability for those who tortured them.

Today, the blinding sun of torture and injustice has reached its zenith and scorched the entire island. My personal horror, and that of thousands of others, has lasted for several months and is still ongoing. My husband has experienced multiple violations that have left an everlasting physical and psychological effect on him. The trauma and wounds will not be healed through financial compensation or the reinstatement of sacked workers to their jobs. The best of the best in Bahraini society don't want material reparation, but justice will be in the form of accountability and tangible attainment of full political, economic, and human rights.

In the spirit of the Arab Spring, the revolutions of dignity, people are no longer interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself their

master. The people want the full menu of rights. Unfortunately, in Bahrain, our blood and tears are worth less than oil and interests.

### **THE BAHRAIN INDEPENDENT COMMISSION OF INQUIRY: TRUTH WITHOUT JUSTICE**

The report the BICI published late in 2011 has caused an international stir. It confirms that mistreatment of prisoners has been systematic, and in fact "systemic," as we had said all along. At the same time, some say the report has given the regime legitimacy: since they commissioned it, they can claim that they are open to reform. But as I have said and written, it will be used as a political shield and to delay and distract real reform.

Given the pain and suffering that Bahrainis have endured firsthand, we don't need a panel of outsiders to validate this for us. I don't need anyone to tell me what happened to my husband: the scars on his back say it all. The commission's utility will be measured by its results and whether we receive justice. At the very least, I expected it to demand the immediate release of political prisoners. It will have to establish accountability—there needs to be justice for the murder, torture, and false imprisonments that have taken place. This accountability needs to go straight to the highest levels of authority in Bahrain. Finally, it should have recommended political reconciliation. Bahrain needs an explicit framework for transitioning to democracy and writing a new constitution.

### **A HUMAN RIGHTS CHARADE**

On November 23, 2011, in one of Bahrain's royal palaces, a lavish ceremony commenced with all the pomp and ceremony of a great occasion. In the era of the so-called Arab Spring, one would expect such a celebration to herald the handover of power. But in fact it was a ceremony for the handover of the report of the BICI, a government-appointed commission with the nominal mandate of

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demonstrations were peaceful, demands of the opposition were legitimate, the opposition did not call for an Islamic republic, military tribunals were wrong, and yes, there was not just torture but systemic torture. Despite these acknowledgments, the report adopted much of the government narrative in some parts, particularly those concerning the Salmaniya hospital and the University of Bahrain—two of the most contentious events. Ultimately, despite the confirmation of the severity of abuse, the commissioners hardly made any brash recommendations, considering they avoided demanding the release of political prisoners at the very least. I believe this was a failure in their moral and professional duty. I have expressed this to them directly.

The verdict on the street was more belligerent. The February 14 Youth Coalition, the new youth movement that is driving the uprising, said the report was “honey laced with venom.” The days immediately following the report saw huge mourning processions turn into massive political protests that were quelled much the same way as before.

The commissioners, who had the power to demand the release of prisoners, to incriminate those directly responsible, and to suggest tangible steps for reconciliation, failed on all three counts.

Five hundred political prisoners of the nearly three thousand arrested remain in Bahraini jails today. They must be released. My husband puts it aptly when he says, “I am in handcuffs, and the torturers get promoted.” This is what Bassiouni wanted to allow the government to do.

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I am hopeful for the future of our country. History is always on the side of the people, and we are not asking for more than what other people have achieved elsewhere. So the question isn't *if*, it's *when*.

Sometimes this uncertainty is a challenge. My husband is in jail, which is not something that I can normalize, and our face de-

pende on the political whim of the king. I always hope that there is no "next prison visit," that each visit will be the last. I see the old mothers hugging their handsome young sons, with a sparkle of joy in their eyes that are otherwise flooded with tears of pain. It is their tears that I would like to wipe away before my own. My husband echoes that spirit. He says that even if he were released tomorrow, he would not be able to leave in prison his newfound brothers, young and old, whose wounds he helped nurse and whose spirits he helped lift. His imprisonment has been an extraordinary experience that has changed both of us, but it has also reinforced our love and determination for each other and for our cause.

An emissary offered to make a special request for a "royal pardon" to free my husband. I told them that if they thought I would ever ask for that, despite my anguish, they have missed the entire reason for our uprising. This uprising will bring an end to this servitude. I'd rather that my husband stays in jail then emerge as a slave.