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In this section, which is by invitation only, scholars from Asia express their personal views on regional and global issues. The length of such commentary should be between 1,000 and 1,500 words. Specifications are the same as for feature articles.

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Single book reviews should be no more than 700 words in length. Double book reviews can be up to 1,200 words. At the top of the review, please include the following information: Author's name, Book Title, place of publication: publisher, date of publication, total number of pages, ISBN number, price ($US dollars).
Asia Journal of Global Studies

FOREWORD

What has often been said of the Devil is, in paraphrase, true of religion over this last century: Its best strategy has been to lull liberal, secular souls into believing the spiritual no longer mattered. Certainly, most academics and journalists were caught off-guard by the post-9/11 rise of religious rightwing politics and geopolitics - most pointedly, tensions and terror involving the usual Abrahamic suspects: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Still today, oft-aghast confusion over this resurgence of zealotry remains intense among the worldly and the scholarly.

It is true that awareness of globalization's awesome complexity has gone mainstream. As the millennium got underway, even business publications grew aware (if dimly) that globalization could not be narrowly equated with its economic facts. Much ink has been spilt trying to conceptualize the global in "cultural" terms - whether as dawning cosmopolitanism, proliferating hybridizations, creeping McDonaldization, or an end-game civilizational clash. Yet even now, when the rule of religion over most minds has become impossible to ignore, too little scholarship on globalization exercises due concern with the sacred - or the apocalyptic - as a central (and immemorial) aspect of "the world becoming one place."

A timely corrective to that theoretical gap is offered by the main articles comprising this edition of AJGS. These three papers address fully disparate subjects, upon which the authors bring to bear wholly distinct perspectives. But each in their own way, our main contributions all illuminate the "mystical" mindset - whether militant or meditative - as a crucial element absent from most global scholarship. A review essay which concludes the issue takes a different but relatable tack to correcting the conflation of globalization with modern and/or Western mentalities - This piece emphasizes the agency exercised by Asians, historically and to date, by which Western inflows have been rejected or mastered.

Magdalena Karolak, at the Bahraini branch of the New York Institute of Technology, writes about globalization-related political paradoxes and problems in Bahrain, perhaps the most liberal of Arab countries: home to its own Formula One Grand Prix, Michael Jackson's 2005 choice for a "relaxation" refuge, and nearly half populated by migrants of all classes.

Increasingly, however, many Arab and Muslim natives associate Bahrain's burgeoning foreign population with socio-economic problems - from job scarcity and downward pressure on wages, to a spread in those crimes and vices distinct to the poor and the globe-trotting elite. Recent political liberalizations in this kingdom are putting into play a vicious irony, one seen increasingly in Islamic nations, and across the Christian west: Fundamentalists are proving happy to avail themselves of liberal-democratic institutions - in hopes of replacing them with theocratic rule. Bahrain's Islamist agitation threatens to overshadow more hopeful developments, such as a recent raft of policies aimed at advancing the rights of women, including their placement in high political office. Karolak's window on Bahrain presents a prism through which to apprehend globality, one in which she places due emphasis on piety, politics, culture, and class. Her paper closes with an admonition for Bahrain's elites: "Progressive economic reforms are surely needed to prevent a further sectarian split within Bahrain's society." This warning is equally applicable to rulers the world round, liberal or autocratic, who fear social unrest fomented by rightwing, religious and racist ideologies.

In another finely-grained study of globalization as refracted through religion, Silke Bechler at the University of Heidelberg reminds readers that not all is worrisome with the renascence and roamings of world faiths. These three papers address fully disparate subjects, upon which the authors bring to bear wholly distinct perspectives. But each in their own way, our main contributions all illuminate the "mystical" mindset - whether militant or meditative - as a crucial element absent from most global scholarship. A review essay which concludes the issue takes a different but relatable tack to correcting the conflation of globalization with modern and/or Western mentalities - This piece emphasizes the agency exercised by Asians, historically and to date, by which Western inflows have been rejected or mastered.

Bechler prefaces her study of yajña's contemporary permutations with a broader historical discussion exemplifying how Eastern traditions have long synthesized with Western principles, religious or otherwise. This backgrounding rightfully contravenes tendencies to frame such issues in terms of cross-cultural incommensurability and naked cultural imperialism. Bechler reminds readers that, as far back as the early 1800s, Indian reformists embraced liberal British ideas, but while rejecting both Christian conversion and conservative Hinduism. Enlightenment ideals were re-cast in a nativist mould - as resurrecting a Vedic heritage, purer than intervening Brahmanic aberrations, such as caste structures or widow-burnings.

Re-focusing on the yajña ceremony in present times, Bechler explains how similar cultural cross-pollinations, plus the sheer re-scaling that comes with globalization - both migratory and 'virtually' mediated - has transformed what was traditionally a sacrifice of narrow social scope focused on enhancing the
fortunes of self or family. Increasingly, yajña is performed as a communal spectacle, symbolizing the linkage of lives across diverse or diffuse diasporas. Moreover, both among host-nation converts and assimilated Indians, yajña has taken on Western, modern, and even - even decidedly - secular meanings. It has recently been invoked to ritually bestow gravitas upon "holidaying, personal care and leisure needs." Simultaneously, as part of its journey from "particularism to universalism," yajña is increasingly called upon to beseech and bless "the provision of healthcare, education, disaster relief, and other forms of social welfare."

In an age of increasingly bad press for religion, Silke's paper serves the important function of framing faith in its best light - as offering an anchor of meaning and morality for those who otherwise could only respond (with all too much justification) to the fluxes of world-compression through feeling "alienated or even threatened by forces beyond their control."

Christian Etzrodt, at Japan's Akita International University, explicates the entwinements of religiosity and globalization with a truth regularly ignored by Western secularists of all political persuasions: The economic ideologies - the faiths - which we uphold, whether neo-Marxist or neoliberal, are culturally embedded in Judaeo-Christian beliefs about the true and the good: a transcendental absolutism (in tense amalgamation with the Greco-Roman exaltation of logic).

Etzrodt critiques the delusion - or rhetorical gambit - of most free-market fundamentalists: that they are arguing on the basis of reason, or purely in pragmatic response to the brute exigencies of economic reality. This article works to expose the moralist underpinnings - even, the mystic extremism - animating invisible hand neoliberalism. Ezrodt's deconstruction focuses on the seminal Bible of modern (neo)liberal economics, Adam Smith's 1776 *The Wealth of Nations.*

Ezrodt argues that "Smith's central economic thesis is not very reasonable from an economic point of view" - prioritizing as it did savings at the almost complete expense of consumption. But the essay's main point is that, not only in his anti-consumerism but in all regards, Smith - who was a moral philosopher, not an economist - propagated his free trade doctrine primarily to spearhead the global spread of neo-Calvinist asceticism: Economic actors unwilling to devote themselves to financial restraint and unstinting labor would prove unable to compete with those agents predestined for success and divine grace.

The 2008 collapse of global finance, and then of economies around the world, knocked from its preeminent perch the doctrine that unfettered trade leads naturally to economic equilibrium and the greater good. It now seems amazing that anyone really believed markets to be driven principally by the calculations of rational agents, and not equally so by animal spirits alongside fantastic imaginaries. However, old faiths never die; they just lie dormant. Work like Ezrodt's essay shows that no side can claim the high ground of disinterested logic in ideological wars already afoot again, between those struggling to establish the proper reach of government's visible hand. Shades of John Calvin, then, might account for a growing conservative consensus: Governments must impose fiscal austerity upon their stagnant economies, despite a historical record showing this strategy usually invites greater and prolonged recession - or outright economic depression. Perhaps, if subconsciously, this is the very end-game of such proponents: Through suffering (or at least, the suffering of the non-Elect) shall humanity be re-purified!

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, at New York's Pace University, reviews two book-length works - proceedings from a 2006 conference at Hong Kong Baptist University, and a published dissertation. The former piece compiles essays attempting to conceptualize a distinctly Asian modernity, and the latter studies the challenges foreign media companies face in selling content throughout Asia. Lee's evaluation of these works censures the tendency, among scholars no less than multinational corporations, to overlook the meaning-generative agency of everyday people, and to thereby be thwarted in their aims - whether these are to increase understanding or make money and entertain.

This empiricist critique of elite macro-misapprehensions - of obtuseness toward obvious micro-societal truths - links Lee with the other authors in this issue of AJGS. Those three compositions detail why globalization is imploding into Islamist rage; they exemplify how it can manifest more hopefully in holy East-West coalescences; and they excavate religion's living legacy from within neoliberal rationalizations. In so doing, such contributors advance our publication's mandate: To explain globalization, but through detailing the concept-phenomenon's complexities - in this case, illuminating its religious heart - rather than letting reductionist frameworks stand. Praise be!
Religion in a Political Context: The Case of the Kingdom of Bahrain

Magdalena Karolak
New York Institute of Technology, Bahrain

ABSTRACT

The impact of globalization has been especially evident in the oil rich Gulf countries, the past 20 years having witnessed a major influx of immigrants that has put pressure on local cultures. The case of Bahrain, the smallest country in the Gulf, is particularly interesting. By 2008, the expatriate population represented nearly half of the island's inhabitants. As a result of increased globalization, Bahrain has embraced a Western lifestyle that has prompted the proliferation of upscale restaurants, nightclubs and vast shopping malls selling foreign products. Moreover, the English language has become the primary means of communication throughout the nation. According to critics of these changes, with immigrants not assimilating into Bahraini culture, local community values based on Islam, the dominant religion of the island, are threatened. The revival of the Bahraini Parliament in 2002 gave way to political expression by the Bahraini nation, with foreign cultural influence one of the main concerns of parliamentarians. This paper examines recent developments on the political scene, suggesting that religion, as part of Bahrain identity, is a key issue shaping proposed political reforms.

MODERNIZATION IN BAHRAIN

Modernization, linked closely to globalization, is a concept that operates on two levels: the economic and the socio-political (Utvik, 2003, p. 44). It occurs in the technological and economic spheres, stimulating urbanization, industrialization and marketization of the economy. It is also accompanied by profound changes in the social structure, where the traditional order of some societies organized through family bonds and patron-client ties are slowly eroded. Social and family networks stemming from village or kinship relations become less important in the new urban environment. On a political level it is characterized by an increase in social mobility as well as a re-structuring and strengthening of the state apparatus.

Bahrain is no exception to this pattern. The discovery of oil in the 1930s boosted economic growth to an unprecedented level. Oil revenues enabled the rapid development of the country through the creation of modern industry, infrastructure and a vast array of services. Since its oil reserves have begun to decline, Bahrain has re-positioned itself as a banking
center for the Gulf region. The past 50 years have also witnessed the formation of a large and highly educated middle class. This was accompanied by an increase in female participation in the workforce, from 4 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 2001 (Supreme Council for Women [SCW], 2001). Economic changes have led to a slow dissolution of traditional tribal links that were still firmly in place in the 1970s (Nakhleh, 1976). Development has also exacerbated the demand for foreign labor. Foreigners over time have come to fill various occupations from that of manual laborers to highly qualified professionals.

Political mobilization was initially centered on the issue of independence, which Bahrain gained from Britain in 1971. The following decades were marked by several Shia Islamist upheavals that were pacified by the government. Conflict between the Shia majority of Bahrain's indigenous population and the state apparatus controlled by the Sunni Al Khalifa dynasty was exacerbated by the perception among the masses of economic discrimination (Louër, 2008). The controlled liberalization of the country begun by Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 2002 was long-awaited. Bahrain became a monarchy and civil rights were restored, while Parliamentary elections held in 2002 and 2006 saw the popularity of Shia and Sunni Islamist parties reach new heights. This paper assesses aspects of globalization and modernization that are linked to the growing importance of religion in Bahraini politics, focusing on the three key issues of labor migration, the rise of consumerism, and the position of women in society.

LABOR MIGRATION AND ITS CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Migrants account for nearly half of Bahrain's population. Such a high ratio of foreign workers places Bahrain third in the Gulf region, surpassed only by the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, both with an estimated foreign resident population of 80 percent (Kapiszewski, 2004). The largest expatriate demographic presence in Bahrain is South Asian. Major foreign expatriate communities include Indians (nearly 290,000) Pakistanis (60,000), Egyptians (30,000), Iranians (30,000) and Filipinos (30,000). Although other Arab countries such as Egypt, Morocco or Syria could export a labor force of Muslims and Arabic speakers that could fit within the socio-cultural context of the Gulf, Bahrain and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries prefer to employ Asians (Kapiszewski, 2006). Since 1973, a decrease in non-Gulf Arab numbers has been noted. The employment of Asian nationals is a matter of choice among hosting countries because they are considered less expensive and easier to manage, being attractive as well for not holding revolutionary political ideas that could undermine political systems in the Gulf. Another factor that has worked against non-Gulf Arabs has been the nationalization of the public sector. Asian migrants have always held posts in the private sector, while non-Gulf Arabs used to occupy public posts. "Bahrainization," however, has transformed the public sector by favoring the employment of ethnic Bahrainis and thus reducing the numbers of non-Gulf Arabs (Rivlin, 2001).

In 2009, foreign workers made up about 75 percent of the total workforce in Bahrain with 391,000 employees (Central Informatics Organization [CIO], 2009). The large presence of foreigners has had a marked economic impact. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, which has been characterized by an economic revival of the GCC economies (Dito, 2008), Bahrain showed a stable annual GDP growth of 6.6 percent in 2007 (World Bank [WB1]). An increased demand for foreign labor was apparent in the case of large infrastructure projects as well as with private companies. Foreign workers as such are often seen as the key to the rapid economic development of the GCC region. As they represent a qualified workforce that accepts salaries averaging only one-third that of Bahraini employees (CIO, 2009), it comes as no surprise that their numbers have been constantly growing. It is estimated that in 2006 the foreign population in Bahrain nearly doubled, reaching 517,368 people at the end of 2007 (Bowman, 2008).
Table 1.

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<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>178,193</td>
<td>238,420</td>
<td>323,305</td>
<td>405,667</td>
<td>529,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Bahrain</td>
<td>37,885</td>
<td>112,378</td>
<td>184,732</td>
<td>244,937</td>
<td>317,368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>216,078</td>
<td>350,798</td>
<td>508,037</td>
<td>650,604</td>
<td>1,046,814</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of Bahrainis</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>51%</td>
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Foreign employees almost entirely dominate the private sector. Meanwhile, a gap exists in terms of income and offered benefits between the public and private sector. Low wages and difficult working conditions deter Bahrainis from employment in the private sector, and have led to structural unemployment among the native population. In 2001, unemployment reached a record high of 16 percent among local Bahrainis resulting in disenchantment within that population (Al Baik, 2007). Dissatisfaction was significant especially among the Bahraini Shia group who believed they were economically discriminated against (Burke, 2008). This disenchanted population blamed their predicament on the presence of foreign workers. Hence, riots against Asian businesses and houses swept through Bahrain in 2004. The years 2007 and 2008 saw more demonstrations coupled with economic demands that led to clashes with security forces. For good reason, Louër argues that "the main political consequence of migration has been the deepening of state/society conflict" (Louër, 2008, p. 52). Foreign workers often find themselves caught in between the internal issues of unemployment and the economic dissatisfaction of the majority of the local inhabitants, who might eventually turn their anger against expatriates. Labor market reforms initiated in 2006 managed, however, to curb unemployment to 3.5 percent in 2009 (CIO, 2009).

The sustained rise in the number of foreigners in the country's population has implications for Bahraini culture. If this growth continues, Bahrainis could find themselves a minority in their own country. Moreover, thanks to the liberal policies of Bahraini authorities, foreigners can easily set up their respective cultural foundations and not need to adapt significantly to the host culture.

Cultural Impact

The precise cultural impact of foreigners in the kingdom is an issue linked to labor migration that has not yet been fully assessed yet. Recent debates in the media have pointed to the lack of integration of foreigners as being responsible for a decline in the use of the Arabic language as well as for the deterioration of certain neighborhoods populated by manual workers (Klieger, 2008). English is no doubt the language of business in a globalized world but in Bahrain its use overlaps into everyday life. Employers in Bahrain usually look for English or bilingual English and Arabic speakers. The service sector mainly employs English-speaking foreigners. Hospitals, for example, employ a high number of foreign doctors and nurses who do not know Arabic. A Bahraini who does not speak a foreign language could for this reason potentially face, in his or her own country, unemployment or the predicament of being unable to communicate with a doctor. English has become a privileged means of communication among many nationalities that reside in Bahrain. Consequently, road signs, street names, vehicle registration plates and official documents are usually written both in Arabic and English.

Conversely, it is also important to note that proficiency levels in Arabic vary widely among Bahrainis themselves, whether they are naturalized or native. Policies for the naturalization of foreigners have resulted in an increase of 7,000 inhabitants in the population of non-Arabs in the last five years, according to the official data (Toumi, 2008). However, that...
number is often questioned by opposition sources who believe that the real number may be up to 60,000 new citizens (Black, 2007). Not all of the new citizens possess a working knowledge of Arabic. Some can barely speak it. The result is that a number of citizens in Bahrain have not mastered its official language. The peculiarities of Arabic also make it a language where it is difficult to assess the proficiency level of a speaker. Arabic is traditionally divided into dialectal, modern and classical Arabic (Holt, 1996). Dialects are spoken versions of Arabic. In Bahrain alone there exist several varieties of these colloquial forms (Al-Tajir, 1986). Many native Bahrainis complain that their children do not have a sufficient knowledge of the literary version of Arabic. Employment of foreign nannies and domestic staff exacerbates the problem as children grow up speaking languages other than Arabic (Taylor, 1985). Moreover, the constant influx of foreigners facilitates mixed marriages between Bahrainis and non-Arabs that are often seen as diluting the local culture.

The widespread use of English is also the legacy of an advanced educational system. Bahrain has the oldest public education system in the Gulf and its literacy rates are among the highest in the Arab world (Nydell, 2002). Today, foreign private schools offer classes delivered fully in English and in the other languages of the major migrant groups, Arabic is optional for the children of expatriates, as one language among others a student can choose from. Private national schools are bilingual, using both Arabic and English. The use of English is even more widespread in higher education. All universities except for the Arab Open University and Delmon University offer degrees in the English language and a high level of English language proficiency is a requirement for enrolment. Moreover, some private universities are branches of or are affiliated with foreign-based universities. Their degrees, recognized abroad, are attractive for young Bahrainis.

The number of foreign residents thus has a significant impact on the country's society. Migrants in Bahrain live in areas populated usually by their own countrymen and stay within that social circle. Their accommodations are concentrated in certain areas, such as the old Manama district, which is mostly populated by migrants from the Indian subcontinent. It has been observed that Bahrainis frequently move out of these areas and rent out their old houses that have never been maintained as accommodations for laborers (Al A’ali, 2009). Although it is not the deliberate intention of foreigners, whole districts of the city, in this way, turn into dilapidated neighborhoods inhabited by manual workers (Karolak & Razzaque, 2009). A high concentration of a particular ethnic group favors in turn the establishment of businesses catering to its needs in the area of clothing, foodstuffs and remittance services.

Bahrain, as one of the most liberal countries in the Gulf, allows the import and sale of alcohol and pork, in sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. Although the consumption of these products is against the principles of Islam, their circulation is permitted on the market. A liquor shop may display a warning that alcohol should not be sold to Muslims, but such signs act as more of a guideline rather than a law. Moreover, attracted by more social freedom, visitors from Saudi Arabia flock to Bahrain over the weekends in search of entertainment. Although foreigners are not the only consumers and distributors of traditionally prohibited items, public anger often turns against manual workers and results in riots, as occurred in 2004. The economic demands of the poor were strengthened by the supposedly immoral behavior of the immigrants, leading to violence.

THE FORMATION OF A CONSUMERIST SOCIETY

Thanks to petroleum and natural gas resources, Bahrain has entered along with other GCC countries into an era of consumerism. A surplus of public revenues as well as increase in individual incomes has allowed for greater access of foreign products (Assad, 2006). Being the smallest country in the Gulf region, Bahrain has a limited manufacturing base for consumer goods and thus depends heavily on imports. Modernization has resulted in an expanding market for household goods, electronic equipment, and cars. However, it has led also to the establishment of a strong market for Western luxury brands, thanks to the
development of advertising as popularized through the growing presence of mass media such as satellite TV and the Internet. In terms of phone and Internet connectivity, the use of information and communication technology in Bahrain was estimated as the highest in the GCC region (Bahrain Economic Development Board [BEDB], 2009).

The rise of a consumerist culture has been accompanied by a proliferation of magazines targeting the middle and upper classes. These include *Clientele*, *Bahrain Confidential*, and *Ohlala!* to name a few. They shape consumer behavior while promoting the status-symbol appeal of foreign brands. Large sections of the publications are devoted to fashion as well as to social events where individuals are seen through photographs published in magazines. A boom in supermarkets, hypermarkets and huge shopping malls has reinforced this trend. Opened in 2008, Moda Mall specializes only in luxury brands. Shopping has become a way for whole families to spend time together on weekends. For consumers, Western brands are usually synonymous with high quality products (Assad, 2006). Western influence is also visible in the implementation of Western know-how and technology, such as in product design.

The rise of consumerism is further evidenced by the value of total imports, which stood at BD 3.36 billion in 2006, an increase of 12 percent from 2005. Although oil imports constitute more than a third of total imports, 2006 also saw a 7 percent increase in non-oil imports that resulted from "escalating levels of private consumption and investment" (Bahrain News Agency [BNA], 2007). In a comparative report of private consumption in the GCC, Bahrain was ranked fourth, with an average of US$7,587 spent annually per person. Bahrain Monitor International estimated that retail sales would continue to grow from US$3 billion in 2007 to US$5.7 billion by 2013. The reasons stated behind such a forecast were "a favorable long-term economic outlook, growing interest in Western styles of retailing, and a steady rise in disposable income" (Bahrain Monitor International [BMI], 2009).

Consumerist attitudes have emerged among the middle and upper-middle classes as a result of Western education, overseas travel, and mixed marriages. A strong market-orientation toward Bahraini youth is also evident, as individuals under 24 years of age account for nearly 60 percent of the total population (CIO, 2006). Hoping to promote economic diversification, Bahraini authorities have pushed for the development of tourism and the leisure industry. Events such as the Formula One Race have put Bahrain on the tourist map and required the development of a related tourist base. Leisure activities include, but are not limited to, dining, relaxing in spas, attending concerts, lounging, and clubbing. The franchising industry in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region yields a revenue of US$14 billion with food franchising accounting for 40 percent of this market. (UAE Ministry of Economy, 2009).

Consumerism as such is often seen as undermining the traditional culture of Bahrain (Ibrahim, 1982). It is a new challenge in societies deeply shaped by Islam. As Turner (2000) notes: "These developments of global mass consumerism can be seen as a further extension of westernization and symbolic penetration, providing a problematic mixture of localist cultures and mass universalism" (p. 145), an observation that applies equally well to Bahrain as to other countries in the GCC region.

**PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY**

Economic development and the empowerment of women do not necessarily go together. The unprecedented economic boom in the Gulf region experienced in the 1970s did not really open doors for female participation in society. Although Bahrain's public educational system is the oldest in the Gulf and has included female students since the late 1920s, in the 1970s women accounted for only 4 percent of the total workforce (SCW, 2001). Ross (2008) argues that oil rentierism is the cause of the limited economic and political participation of women in the Middle East. The oil industry requires male labor and
impedes female activity in the workforce. Consequently, women concentrate on running households, which leads to higher fertility rates and limits opportunities for information exchange among women and thus political organization. In 2008, female participation in the workforce rose to approximately 30 percent (Dunne, 2008). Meanwhile, fertility rates dropped from 7.09 children per woman in the 1960s to 2.29 in 2007 (WB, 2009), and women came to account for 70 percent of all university graduates (BEDB, 2009). Oil depletion as well as soaring unemployment rates among Bahraini nationals, which created frustration and political unrest in the past, eventually gave rise to a shift in Gulf policies related to job market strategy ("Bahrain Unemployment - A Time Bomb", 2005) that has favored women. Indeed, job creation for Bahraini nationals is one of the primary factors promoting higher levels of economic activity among women, with Bahraini authorities now seeing women's higher education levels as a resource for development (SCW, 2001) while Bahraini women desire the opportunities associated with professional careers.

It comes as no surprise that the aspirations of women are on the rise. Modernization prompts an awareness of individuality and the self-fulfillment of women. However, Bahraini society is still traditionally male-dominated. The Global Gender Gap 2008 Report, a tool developed by the World Economic Forum, points out a number of inequalities between the sexes in Bahrain. Women can expect only 60 percent of the wage of a male employee in the same position. Women are also grossly under-represented in high-skilled positions. Female legislators, senior officials, and managers account for only 10 percent of total numbers of employees. Similarly their participation as professionals and technical workers is limited to 19 percent of the total numbers (World Economic Forum, 2008). Although women who break into the traditionally male dominated jobs, such as female judges or pilots, are highly praised and draw a lot of attention from the media, these are, for now, very rare cases ("New Crop of Arab Women Pioneers," 2010).

In its favor, the government has actively supported women's participation in politics. In 2002, Bahrain granted women suffrage as well as the right to stand for election in the lower house of the Bahrain Parliament. Until now only one woman, Lateefah Al-Qauod, has managed to secure a parliamentary seat, doing so in 2006, though running uncontested in her district. Women primarily have been appointed to high public offices. Cabinets in 2002 and 2006 included women as ministers of Health, of Social Affairs, and of Culture and Information. Women have also been appointed to the Shura Council, the upper chamber of the Parliament. In 1999, Shaikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa became the first woman ambassador appointed to France. The establishment of the Supreme Council for Women in 2001 also represented an important milestone women's empowerment. This governmental organization advising the King aims at the improvement of women's skills, the creation of job opportunities for women, and the promotion of awareness programs among women. Other key non-governmental associations now include the Bahrain Women's Association for Human Development, the Bahrain Women's Association, and the Women's Petition Committee. The goals of these organizations include the promotion of gender equality but also, in the case of the three latter organizations, protection of women from unjust treatment and abuse. For many women, steps taken by the government in the area of women's rights are only symbolic and not substantive (Torr, 2009). Thus, women's associations have become more and more vocal on the political scene demanding further improvement of women's status in society.

The empowerment of women faces challenges in many traditional patriarchal societies of the Middle East, including Bahrain. Although identifying women's inequality with Islam is misleading, some aspects of Islam contribute to male domination in society. The Bahraini legal system is, for example, a mix of Western legal standards and tribal laws combined with Sharia - a set of religious laws based on interpretation of the Quran. Sharia law is interpreted in varying ways, depending on whether one is a Sunni or Shia Muslim (Ahmed, 2009). However, Sharia treats genders in a separate manner and in many instances is subject to the personal interpretation of the judge (Mashhour, 2005). Moreover, Sharia courts can count a woman's testimony as amounting to only half the weight as that of a man's.
As identified by Moghadam (2003), women in the Middle East (including Bahrain) are lobbying for legal and societal changes related to: “(1) the modernization of family laws, (2) the criminalization of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, (3) women's right to . . . pass their nationality on to their children, (4) greater access to employment and participation in political decision-making” (p. 279). The battle for women's rights is not subversive with respect to Islam as such. Progressive activists call on the tradition of ijtihad (independent interpretation) within Islam to re-define laws within a modern context (Dunne, 2008).

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION AND RISE OF ISLAMIC POLITICS

The current revival of Islamic politics in the Middle East is attributed to a combination of factors. Esposito (2003) enumerates the following:

Governments . . . have failed to establish or strengthen their political legitimacy. They have been criticized by opposition voices for failure to achieve economic self-sufficiency or prosperity, to stem the growing gap between rich and poor, to halt widespread corruption, liberate Palestine, or resist Western political and cultural hegemony. (p. 72)

All of the factors mentioned above apply to a certain extent to Bahrain. However, the situation in the kingdom is even more volatile due to its social composition as 98 percent of native Bahrainis are Muslim while Jews and Christians make up the remaining 2 percent. Shia Muslims are more numerous and account for more than 60 percent of Muslims in the kingdom (Nasr, 2006). Arab Shias are the indigenous inhabitants of the land. However, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Sunni dynasty of Al Khalifa managed to take control of Bahrain and consolidate its rule through a series of treaties with Britain. Since then the split between the Shia and Sunni population has been a frequent cause of social conflict. Shias often claim to be victimized as a group in the kingdom, although they do not form a homogenous population and are divided among ethnic lines. Ethnic Shias include the Arab Shias (the Baharna), the first occupants of the islands, and Shias who migrated afterwards from Iran (the Ajams). Tensions between the two Shia groups are not uncommon (Rabi, 2008).

These intricacies of social composition have weighed heavily on Bahrain's political reforms. After Bahrain gained independence in 1971, Amir Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa promulgated the first constitution, and the first parliamentary elections took place in 1973. Two years after its establishment, the Bahraini Parliament was dissolved for almost 30 years. A lack of consensus on issues of foreign policy, the presence of a US naval base, and the State Security Law led to a split between parliamentarians and the Amir. In addition to political discontent, oil resources revolutionized Bahrain’s economy and the expectations of its population. Longrigg (1966) observed that before the discovery of oil, states such as Bahrain "had been satisfied with a low standard of living and government" (p. 105). The capitalist era of the 1970s widened the gap between the rich and poor, exacerbating the differences between those who could afford large homes, new cars and imported goods and those who could not (Moghadam, 2003). The state continued its centralization and used oil wealth to invest in infrastructure and services such as education, healthcare and social services.

Despite official efforts to provide improved public services, opposition to the government has grown over the past few decades. Since the 1970s, Islamists have run a number of charitable associations while Islamic educational centers have secured grassroots support among the poor. Shia Islamists have attracted more support due to resentment aimed at the ruling family for not having provided more economic opportunities for the people, the perception among Shias that they are discriminated against in the job market, and the unequal distribution of oil surplus wealth in society. Sunni Islamists have drawn support from the Sunni lower-middle class and the poor. Soaring unemployment rates and the
continuous presence of a US army base in Bahrain (used widely during the Gulf War and subsequently during the invasion of Iraq) have given radical Sunni and Shia Islamist groups a reason for discontent and led to rapid growth in their popularity. In the 1990s, Shia Islamists in fact lead a number of violent anti-governmental upheavals. Many of their leaders were either deported from the country or detained without trial, adding to discontent among their followers.

The beginning of the twenty-first century marked a change in Bahraini politics with the ascension to the throne of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. His predecessor, Sheikh Isa Bin Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa (1961-1999), ruled the country with an iron fist. In 2000, Sheikh Hamad initiated a plan to establish the National Action Charter. It was submitted afterwards for approval in a national referendum and was overwhelmingly accepted with 98.4 percent of Bahrainis voting in favor. On December 16, 2002 Bahrain became a kingdom. That particular political transformation established a new type of legitimacy for the ruling family. As observed by Zahid & Zweiri (2007) in "a new post traditional Persian Gulf . . . tribal affiliations may no longer suffice to legitimize a ruling tribe" (p. 9). A bicameral parliament was re-established with the Council of Representatives, the lower house, being elected through universal suffrage. For the first time, municipal elections were held. On the other hand, members of the ruling family still controlled the executive branch of the government.

The new laws do not recognize political parties, but Bahraini authorities have accepted the creation of associations or blocs. According to the requirements provided by the Political Associations Law (2005),

[T]he establishment or continuation of any political association is linked to the condition that its principles, objectives, platforms, policies and methods are in conformity with the principles of the Islamic Sharia as the primary source of legislation, or with the national constants on which the system of power in the Kingdom of Bahrain is based. Moreover, the association must not be established based on class, confessional, sectarian, geographical or vocational grounds, nor on discrimination based on race, origin, language, religion or creed. (Department of Legal Affairs, 2005)

There are more than 16 political associations in Bahrain. They represent a variety of viewpoints from religious to secular and include leftists, liberals and conservatives. However, clear cut definitions of viewpoints are difficult to establish due to overlapping ideologies and the restrictions imposed by the Political Associations Law.

The following section focuses on the growing success of the Islamist movement, as shown in Parliamentary elections in 2002 and in 2006. Groups associated with the movement base their aspirations on the revival of traditional religious practices. It is important to note that Islamism is "not essentially an anti-modern movement, but an effort at dislodging the West from the position of centrality that it claims" (Ismail, 2006, p. 4). Below is an overview of the Parliamentary elections in 2002 and 2006 and a contrastive comparison of the three most important Islamist associations.

Elections in 2002 and 2006

The second parliamentary elections in 2002 resulted in the division of the 40 seats of the National Council between the secular and independent parliamentarians (21 seats) and several Sunni Islamist associations, namely Islamic Forum (Al Menbar), Islamic Authenticity (Al Asalah) and Shura Society. Shia secular societies stood for elections and won a total of 6 seats, while Shia Islamist associations such as National Democratic Action (Wa'ad), Islamic Action (Amal) and Islamic National Accord (Al Wefaq) boycotted the elections. Changes in the structure of the Parliament granting the Shura Council (a 40-member upper house appointed by the King) the upper hand in the legislation process sparked the outrage of the Shia Islamists (Burke, 2008).
The third parliamentary elections in 2006 brought about change with Al Wefaq's participation and a clear victory for the Shia and Sunni Islamists. Al-Wefaq triumphed with 17 seats while two Sunni Islamist societies entered parliament, namely al-Menbar (7 seats) and Al-Asalah (8 seats). The remaining seats were distributed among independent, leftist and center blocs. The overwhelming victory of the Islamists was attributed to their good organisational skills within the societies and to the impact of their religious message and its strong appeal to the masses with the sectarian developments in Iraq as background. Disappointment with the overall performance of the outgoing council, the first in three decades, coupled with a strong desire to influence local governance and politics [were other factors]. (Toumi, 2006a)

As seen above, the Islamist trend dominated Bahraini politics. Next, we analyze the origins, development and ideology of the three most important associations: Al Menbar, al Asalah and Al Wefaq.

Islamist Associations in Bahrain

Islamist associations in Bahrain are divided along religious lines into Sunni and Shia associations. In the 40-member National Council, Sunnis are represented by two blocs that have managed to maintain a presence in Parliament since 2002. There are the Al Asalah (8 seats) and Al Menbar (7 seats) blocs. The Shiite bloc Al Wefaq became the largest association in the parliament with 17 representatives. It is also the largest association in Bahrain in terms of the number of its members (Niethammer, 2007).

Al Asalah is a Salafi movement that is deeply inspired by the Wahabbi ideology of Saudi Arabia. It promotes a very strict understanding and implementation of Islamic principles. Thanks to a well-organized network of charities and centers for Islamic education, Al Asalah has managed to secure the popular support of lower class Sunni Arabs, for example in the Muharraq District, which in the past had been faithful to leftist traditions (Niethammer, 2007).

Al Menbar is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist association established in Egypt in 1928 and which had an enormous impact on Arab societies through the works of Hassan Al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. The Muslim Brotherhood vehemently opposes secular and Western ideas. Although Islamist in its ideology, Al Menbar differs from Al Asalah in being more restrained in its orthodoxy. The core of al Menbar's activities concentrates on economic progress. Thanks to its moderate stand on morality and its focus on the economy, it draws supporters from the Sunni Arab middle class, such as small businessmen, teachers and engineers. A comparison between Al Menbar and Al Asalah shows that with higher economic standards, Muslims become more relaxed regarding moral issues. In the case of the poor masses, a lack of economic privilege translates into a stricter interpretation of Islamic principles to secure future reward from God.

Al Wefaq maintains close ties to religious figures and during the 2006 elections it was endorsed by the Islamic Scholars Council, a body of Shia clerics based in Bahrain. It is led by a charismatic young cleric, Ali Salman. Although in its political program Al Wefaq strives to represent Bahrainis above religious affiliations, it advocates an end to discrimination against Shias. It draws support among the Shia lower classes and the poor. Its ideology is somewhat similar to that of Al Salah, although Al Asala does not openly support Al Wefaq due to the Sunni and Shia ideological split (Burke, 2008). The Shia Islamist current has also abandoned support for an Islamic state.

It is interesting to observe that both Sunni Islamist blocs are pro-government. Al Wefaq, on the other hand, challenges the government on the issue of further political liberalization. Shites demand a constitutional monarchy in which the elected legislative body would have exclusive authority over the legislative process since in the present system the
legislative initiatives of the Council of Representatives can be easily blocked. In previous years Al Wefaq mobilized supporters in mass demonstrations to demand further political debate and reforms. However, demands for constitutional reforms are accompanied with religious rhetoric and calls for social reforms based on Islamic morality. Islamists are not averse to employing democratic institutions to acquire power or exert political influence but that does not necessarily make Islamists democratic in their general ideology. Sunni blocs support the status quo through which the ruling dynasty controls the government, thereby maintaining Sunni domination in the country and the ascendancy of the Sunni denomination of Islam (Niethammer, 2007).

**MAIN AREAS - ASSESSMENT**

The aspects of globalization and modernization highlighted above are shaping political life in Bahrain. To gain a more detailed and nuanced sense of political issues in the nation, however, it is necessary to analyze the approach of Islamist associations towards changes in Bahraini society. The most important aspects to consider in this regard are Islamic morality, empowerment of women, and immigration.

**Morality**

Al Wefaq, Al Menbar and Al Asalah, all agree that Islamic morality should be promoted aggressively. Thus, each bloc has initiated different law proposals to ban un-Islamic practices in the country. Usually opposing blocs have supported each other during votes on issues of morality. For Islamists, Arab identity is closely linked to the strict observance of Islam. Al Menbar enumerates, as one of its goals, the reinforcement of Islamic and Arab identity within Bahraini society. On the other hand, members of the Salafi movement have denounced plans to protect a historic pre-Islamic monument, viewing such a move as unnecessary. Still, Islamists in general have often criticized the government for turning a blind eye toward the problems of prostitution and the sale of alcohol and pork in Bahrain.

**The Empowerment of Women**

Islamists do not fully acknowledge women's rights to participate in politics. None of the Islamic associations has fielded women candidates. Al Asalah has stood firmly against female participation in politics, arguing that voters would not elect women parliamentarians anyway because it is against their beliefs. Al Menbar and Al Wefaq have expressed a more ambiguous position. According to Al Menbar, women should not be appointed as leaders of countries, although they may be allowed to participate in other areas of politics. Al Wefaq's members remain divided over the issue, with some in favor of women's participation in elections (Walid, 2007). No female candidates, however, have been promoted despite evidence of some support for women political representatives.

Reactions to women activists' growing pressure on the government differ. Bitter disputes continue over the proposed family law (Personal Status Law). The new law would codify divorce rights, alimony and child custody issues, replacing the jurisdiction Sharia judges traditionally have in these matters. Al Wefaq categorically opposes the interference of laymen in issues traditionally reserved for Sharia scholars, organizing protests against the formation of the Supreme Council for Women. Al Menbar is the only association to openly back women activists.

**Migration**

Labor migration to Bahrain is a central concern of the lower middle class and the poor as the constant influx of foreign labor is believed to be the cause of stagnant low wages. Moreover, lower classes fear the naturalization of foreigners who, becoming Bahraini citizens, would be entitled to free social services, thus making housing and healthcare
demand rise. Naturalization of foreigners was the key issue of the "Bandargate" scandal in 2006. A leaked report prepared by a former government adviser, Salah Al-Bander, allegedly implicated governmental officials in a planned naturalization conspiracy to adjust the Sunni-Shia demographic ratio, such that the Shia majority would get considerably weakened thanks to naturalization of Sunni citizens (Zahid & Zweiri, 2007). The scandal reinforced the perception of discrimination against the Shia population (Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2006). Al Wefaq, mainly representing lower class Shiites, has taken the strongest stand on the issue. Al Wefaq has demonstrated forcefully against the naturalization of foreign citizens. It has also focused on morality issues in those districts inhabited by manual workers. Many Asians occupy low-income occupations and live in shabby neighborhoods. These manual workers are looked down upon by society and they have been accused in the past of illegal liquor distribution and the running of prostitution houses. To counter these perceived problems, Al Wefaq members have proposed a physical segregation of bachelors from areas inhabited by families or their deportation to other parts of the country (Khonji, 2006).

It seems that the radical Islamist movement is linked directly with poverty and lack of educational opportunities. The poor masses have been relying on the charity and social support of Islamic centers of education. Religion also provides moral support for believers. It gives a sense of belonging and a sense of self-esteem for those who feel rejected in society. In that sense radical Islamists are easily able to win the support of the lower classes while promoting moral rigidity. More education in itself, however, is not necessarily what is essential for promoting more liberal attitudes in society. As a matter of fact, many supporters of Al Wefaq have been educated at or have ties to the nation's public university, the University of Bahrain (Toumi, 2006b). This trend is not new in Islamic politics. Islamists have managed to attract supporters from educated middle classes elsewhere (Bayat, 2007). In addition, education combined with a lack of job opportunities may cause further disillusionment with the political system and a radicalization of political demands. It seems, then, that education and wealth together can lead to a relaxation of rigid fundamentalist attitudes. Supporters of Al Menbar represent middle classes that include working and educated women. Thus, Al Menbar does not oppose completely the empowerment of women. A limited attenuation of the degree of Islamic fundamentalism, however, is not tantamount to true democracy in practice, as the examples of law proposals below indicate.

ISLAMISTS AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Economic issues have been a top priority in parliament. Indeed, many reforms have been introduced under the umbrella of the Ministry of Labor, and economic matters almost entirely dominated the parliamentary agenda for the years 2006-2007. A new kind of awareness emerged in January 2008 related solely to the preservation of culture. Calls for preserving the country’s identity and culture came from Bahrain's labor minister Majeed AlAlawi, a former Shia dissident exiled to London. They sparked heated debate in the media in Bahrain and abroad. According to Majeed AlAlawi, the huge presence of Asian immigrants could cause the dissolution of traditional cultural practices such as the use of the Arabic language. The need to implement measures to preserve Arabic was therefore deemed urgent. Notions of "cultural loss" or "loss of identity" were mentioned for the first time in a public debate.

Concerns over whether to blame the Asian workforce for the alleged loss of cultural identity or not were reflected in legal changes proposed in early 2009. At this time, the Bahraini Parliament worked on a series of laws that would promote the use of Arabic as a primary means of transmitting the national identity. A legal bill proposed that all official documents, outdoor signs or product packaging be in Arabic, with the option of additional information in another language ("Government Documents May Soon Be in Arabic Language," 2009). The use of Arabic would be compulsory also in all public dealings, including in the courts, in hospitals or at conferences. Since many foreign workers do not
speak Arabic, companies would have to employ translators to comply with the new law. Bahraini parliamentarians argued that the overwhelming use of English in Bahrain leaves Arabic as merely a secondary language in the country. Moreover, they suggested that foreigners should learn Arabic when they travel to Bahrain, as Bahrainis speak English when they travel to English speaking countries. The proposal was criticized as impractical, costly and simply impossible to implement. It was ultimately abandoned in January 2010. The critics of the new law argued that Arabic would be always relevant because of its religious value. Similar misgivings over cultural loss have also swept through other GCC countries, leading to debates in public forums in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar (Sambidge, 2009).

Early 2009 also also witnessed another set of legal proposals directly linked to the preservation of Muslim identity. These proposals centered on putting an end to the sale of alcohol and pork. As bars, restaurants, nightclubs and many hotels sell alcoholic beverages legally, many Bahraini parliamentarians also maintained that Muslim values, especially among youth, were under threat. Saudi visitors coming to Bahrain to enjoy the prohibited items was cited as a related detrimental phenomenon, as were hotels operating nightclubs as a cover for open prostitution, something criticized for corrupting districts inhabited by Arab families (Al A’ali, 2009b). To counter such perceived problems, parliamentarians expressed their intention to turn Bahrain into a family destination offering attractions other than nightlife and alcohol. The first proposed legislation they tabled focused on banning alcohol in Bahrain International Airport and on flights of the kingdom's national airline Gulf Air (January-February 2009). Demands were also made to ban alcohol in all public places (April 2009). Under new laws, hotel guests would be allowed to enjoy alcoholic beverages only in their rooms and individuals within the confines of their homes. However, parliamentarians were criticized in the media and by the public for their narrowmindedness, disregard for personal freedom and lack of foresight for possibly causing damage to Bahrain's economy by deterring tourism. As a result, the Culture and Information Ministry ultimately only banned one-star and two-star hotels from distributing alcohol and ordered them to stop all live entertainment. The alcohol ban proposal led to an unusual alliance between the Shiite and Sunni blocs in the parliament and liberal representatives. However, some establishments had by July 2009 already managed to re-open bars as separate businesses (“JJ's Nightspot is Re-opened,” 2009). The second proposal drafted by the Al Asalah bloc included a complete ban on the sale of pork and the introduction of penalties for its distribution in February 2009. Though parliamentarians insisted that Swine Flu epidemics increased the urgency of the issue, only a short-term import ban from countries affected by Swine Flu was introduced.

Successes with the ban on alcohol emboldened parliamentarians to clamor for further moral reforms. Al Wefaq pushed for a segregation of sexes and strict clothing guidelines at the University of Bahrain. Members of Al Wefaq also proposed a clamp down on mannequins in lingerie in display windows. Al Menbar on the other hand concentrated on the issue of cultural events that could promote immorality. The bloc opposed the filming of Big Brother in Bahrain as well as concerts by Nancy Ajram and Haifa Wehbe, two popular Lebanese singers known for their revealing fashions. Another preoccupation of Al Menbar was related to street voyeurism. A motion requiring the fitting of all new apartment buildings with one way windows to prevent passersby from looking in was supported by Al Wefaq. Al Menbar was also behind a clampdown on homosexuality in the kingdom and proposed the deportation of gay foreigners. Al Asalah suggested a ban on practices linked to witchcraft, sorcery, and fortune-telling (April 2009).

The Problem of Effectiveness

It is important to note that the majority of law proposals suggested by Islamists have been rejected in the legislative process. Once a draft is accepted in the Council of Representatives, it has to ultimately be approved by the upper house of the parliament, the 40-seat Shura Council.
Council, and by the King before it becomes effective. Shura members are appointed directly by the King, and it is expected then that they will follow the policies of the government. From 2006 to 2007, in fact, 25 of 27 legislative proposals submitted by the lower house were rejected by the Shura Council (Al 'A'ali, 2007).

In its exercise of controlled liberalization, the government has endeavored to keep the current political system intact. Indeed, because of the introduced blockades that would allow for full activity of the lower house, the ruling family acts as a moderator between the demands of Islamization and the nation's need for economic development. It is interesting to observe that in a number of instances the government has showed itself to be more liberal than forces in the parliament or even public opinion. In 2002, a public opinion survey found that 60 percent of women opposed their own participation in politics, a right granted the same year by the King (Janardhan, 2005). It is possible, however, that religion could play as a card in the hands of the government. The Press Law introduced in 2002, for example, shows how this might be possible in that it prohibits publications that have "harmed the regime, the official state religion, morality or different confessions [religious denominations] in a way likely to cause a breach of the peace" (Article 19 of the decree-law No. 47). As a result of this law, local Internet providers have been forced to ban websites displaying pornographic or erotic content. Many political websites, moreover, have been closed down or banned in Bahrain for alleged criticism towards the government or aggravating the Sunni-Shia split in the country.

Participation in this partially controlled system does not guarantee full influence on the process of legislation. Moreover, Islamist leaders occasionally have shown moral lapses that have disappointed their followers, such as in March 2006 when a delegation of leaders were embroiled in a scandal after they went missing in Bangkok, a city renowned for its night entertainment, while taking an unscheduled break from a conference in Malaysia ("Councillors 'Missing' in Bangkok," 2006). A lack of political successes combined with questions of Islamist leaders' personal integrity could lead to the disappointment of voters supporting Islamist policies. It should be noted as well that Al Wefaq's domination is threatened by the emergence of a splinter group, the Al Haq movement. Al Haq demands further political reforms and rejects the idea of participation in the nation's "unfair" political system. How such issues will affect the future of Bahrain is the subject of the next section.

FUTURE REPERCUSSIONS

Globalization today involves at least two distinct phenomena. First, it is associated with many chains of political, economic and social activity that are becoming interregional in scope; and second, it based on an intensification of levels of interaction and interconnectedness within and between states and societies (McGrew, 1992). For its part, the technological dimension of globalization has changed the Arab world. It has given the Shia community, for example, a new interconnectivity. Shias in the Gulf living in the so-called "Shia crescent" (not including Iran) reside in Sunni-dominated countries and often fall victim to discrimination. The rapid exchange of information through satellite, cable and Internet connections, however, has created a sense of proximity among Shia communities around the Gulf. Such communications pose new challenges for the Sunni rulers of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, such as when events in Iraq reverberated among the Shia population in Bahrain creating a fascination with martyrdom (Bayat, 2007) and Shia-led demonstrations in Bahrain and in the Gulf were organized to protest against the US-led Karbala and Najaf strikes that destroyed holy shrines. Moreover, Bahrain was shaken by Shia demonstrations in 2008 on economic and political issues, some of which involved violent riots at shopping malls, restaurants and concerts. In one case a nationwide protest was planned for the Formula 1 race in May 2009, an event that would attract international visitors from all over the world. Although the protests did not take place, the plans revealed how globalization
could create potential opportunities to publicize discrimination against the Shia community before an international audience. Here, it is important to highlight how the concept of democracy can be used in the hands of the Shia opposition to lobby for political rights that in the end may not necessarily lead to an adherence to democratic values in other ways.

The Internet in Bahrain today provides a platform for the exchange of information and for political mobilization, especially with regard to youth. A number of popular websites are blocked due to government censorship. However, those still in use offer an interesting insight into what public opinion says about the current political situation. In a country where talking about politics in public is not welcome, the Internet has become an essential tool for expressing personal opinions. A Bahraini blogger comments on his site: "Al Wefaq is really desperate to participate in the political arena. Unfortunately, the Shia Islamist group seems to be the only opposition group that has the desire to make a difference. Yesterday's protest was a one party, one sect demonstration. Again I ask, Where is everyone else?" It would seem that the reason for the lack of participation of Sunnis is that Sunnis do not share the political goals of the Shia majority. As a matter of fact, Sunnis have watched the events with growing resentment and even outrage. Some believe that the dissent is due to Iranian influence intent on dividing Bahrainian society (Santana, 2009). The problem of a further sectarian divide of society poses a growing challenge for Bahrain. Private initiatives to heal such divisions such as an Internet action launched under the slogan "Not Shi'i, Not Sunni, Just Bahraini" have had a limited impact.

The possibility that antagonisms among Muslim factions may worsen requires a careful evaluation of the situation from the government's side. Before the 2006 parliamentary elections, when the prospect of a Shia party leading parliament was met with growing anxiety, electoral district boundaries were redrawn to minimize the influence of the Shia population (Burke, 2008). The victory of Al Wefaq, however, forced the government to reevaluate its strategy as the participation of a Shia party in the Council of Representatives has restrained the government's legislative powers. Yet the current situation might be turned into an advantage. Shia public opinion could be harnessed and at the same time attempts by Islamists to effect change will not lead to major modifications to the political system. A "carrot and stick" strategy might be employed with the proposed Personal Status Law, which would give the government an upper hand in negotiations with Shia leaders. The introduction of the law would, according to Shia Islamists, undermine the position of Shia clerics in the Shia community allowing laymen to interpret Sharia law (Torr, 2009). The government has offered to introduce the law only for Sunnis, thus preserving the leading role of Shia clerics. However, Shia Islamists would need to reject the idea of challenging the political system. At the same time, the King has shown himself to be sensitive towards Shia public opinion. A demonstration against bombings of holy shrines in Karbala and Najaf was at first subdued by government forces, but King Hamad replaced the minister of information responsible for the police action and issued a note of support to the Shia population ("Bahrain Minister Fired after Clash with Protesters," 2004). Still, this strategy of balancing incentives with punishment could prove difficult given the rise in popularity of the Al Haq movement, which directly challenges the political system. Those dissatisfied with slow and unsuccessful attempts at reform could be forced to turn to leaders who are more willing to engage in direct confrontations with the regime.

CONCLUSION

In this paper the impact of globalization on religion in the Kingdom of Bahrain has been assessed. It was observed that transformation within the economic domain has ultimately brought the issues of labor migration, consumerism, and female political activism to the fore. It was further shown that Bahrain's traditional religious values are thought by many to be under threat and a desire to support these religious values combined with calls for economic reform have brought Shia and Sunni Islamists to power. As the limited legislative
powers of the Council of Representatives accompanied with growing economic demands could lead Al Wefaq to withdraw its participation or divert supporters to associations that boycott the present political system, progressive economic reforms are surely needed to prevent a further sectarian split within Bahrain's society.

NOTES

1. In 2006 marriage cases between Bahrainis and non-Bahrainis accounted for 18 percent of all marriage cases of Bahriani citizens. This trend has been stable since 2004 (CIO).
4. The "Shia Crescent" forms a ring around the Persian Gulf from parts of Yemen to Jordan.

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