

Could a Corbyn Government Change UK Foreign Policy in Bahrain?

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While we all know about Jeremy Corbyn's support for the Palestinian struggle, his progressive foreign policy positions do not end there. Many oppressed peoples are looking at Corbyn's record of supporting their struggles and daring to dream about what could happen if he became UK Prime Minister. Corbyn gave us a taste at last year's Labour Party Conference, when he said Britain "cannot be silent at the cruel Saudi war in Yemen, while continuing to supply arms to Saudi Arabia, or the crushing of democracy in Egypt or Bahrain".

Bahrain is the smallest country in the Middle East, a tiny Gulf island. For Bahraini exiles living in the UK, Corbyn's shout-out for their struggle was a big deal. To find out more about what Corbyn means to them, I went to the Bahrain Embassy in London and spoke to dissidents protesting on the pavement outside.

When I arrived, a tall, wizened man was perched on some wooden pallets and zipped up snugly inside a thick green hoody, framing his wispy brown beard. On this crystal-clear August night, Ali Mushaima's body temperature was unusually low, but he welcomed me warmly. He had spent the last 25 days camped outside the Embassy on hunger strike, shedding 11 kilos. Ali was starving himself to highlight the case of his father, Hassan, who was jailed for life after leading the pro-democracy movement during Bahrain's Arab Spring uprising in 2011. Hassan, now 70 and recovering from cancer, is struggling to access healthcare in prison in Bahrain, much to his son's concern.

The story of this father and son can tell us a lot about Britain's relationship with Bahrain. Hassan was born there in 1948. The same year a Labour government founded the NHS in Britain, Hassan grew up under colonial rule. The next Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, also failed to grant Bahrain independence, despite an [Intifada](#) ("uprising"). Instead, he sent colonial policeman [Ian Henderson](#) to run Bahrain's internal security apparatus. Henderson had built his reputation by crushing the Mau Mau independence uprising in Kenya, a campaign characterised by the torture and executions of prisoners.

By the time Labour won another election in 1974, Bahrain had become independent, albeit with a pro-British leader, Sheikh Isa, on the throne. In 1975, the Sheikh dissolved Bahrain's nascent parliament, and with Henderson at his side launched a major crackdown on the opposition. As in Kenya, vast numbers of people were imprisoned and tortured, and the country's vibrant left-wing groups suffered a severe long-term blow. It was not until the 1990s that opposition activists were able to launch a fresh campaign, and this time Hassan played a leading role. He had built a following in Bahrain, where he worked as an English teacher and gave lectures on politics. As protestors took to the streets, Hassan was repeatedly imprisoned. "My father met with Ian Henderson many times in the 1990s when he was in prison," Ali told me. "The opposition were trying to negotiate with Ian Henderson and only Hassan spoke English. Henderson agreed to release my father first, and then

the others later, over a three-month period. The authorities pledged to reform but they were lying and arrested my father again and held him for six years.”

With the older generation in prison, the youth took over the daily street protests. Ali was just 15 when he was arrested in 1998 and held for two years. “I was tortured by two police officers,” Ali said. As we are sitting on the pallets, Ali suddenly rolls onto his back, pulls his knees into his chest and put his feet in the air. “They put a stick through my knees and hung me and hit me on my feet”, he says while gesticulating. “Many of the prisoners were my age. One was tortured to death. When I was 16 in prison we all went on hunger strike, around 600 of us, to simply demand our basic rights.”

Ali’s teenage ordeal took place when Ian Henderson was a special adviser to Bahrain’s interior ministry, and in the early years of Tony Blair’s New Labour government. While the situation in Bahrain was still bleak at this point, Ali and other Bahraini exiles on the pavement remember one New Labour figure fondly: Robin Cook. He was Blair’s first Foreign Secretary, and is widely recognised for advocating an “ethical dimension”. While Cook helped the Red Cross gain access to Bahraini prisoners, limiting some of the worst abuses, the regime stayed firmly in place and the ‘War on Terror’ situated Bahrain as a major staging post for the US/UK invasion of Iraq.

In the 2000s, resentment at Bahrain’s ruling family continued to simmer away under the surface, despite some reforms by Sheikh Isa’s son, King Hamad. The tension erupted during the Arab Spring in 2011. Addressing huge crowds at Bahrain’s iconic Pearl Roundabout, Hassan called for a “complete change, a republic, through a peaceful non-violent movement,” Ali told me. “He was talking about Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and how they made changes.” Bahrain’s police, however, had little time for non-violence. One of Ali’s cousins was the first person [killed](#) in the crackdown on the Pearl Roundabout protest. While David Cameron’s government proclaimed support for unrest in some Arab states, Whitehall was not prepared to see a staunch British ally and reliable customer of UK weapons like Bahrain fall to the opposition. Hassan was sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court. This time there would be no pardon. The King stayed on the throne, and in 2014 announced he was paying to build a base in Bahrain *for* the UK’s Royal Navy. Much of the world’s oil passes close to Bahrain as it is shipped out of the Gulf. Location matters.

Throughout these decades of UK-back repression in Bahrain, several figures stood out to the opposition, among them was Jeremy Corbyn. “I’ve met Jeremy Corbyn a few times,” Ali said. “Actually, I sent him a letter when I went on hunger strike.” In that letter, he told Corbyn “I know you as a principled man from my meetings with you, before you became the leader of the opposition ... you have spoken passionately about injustice and human rights abuses in Bahrain.” The letter continued: “In 2014, you raised the ordeal of my father, Hassan Mushaima, and called for his immediate release alongside other political prisoners in Bahrain. I greatly respected your stand against the double standards of the UK government on Bahrain’s human rights situation.”

Ali depicts Corbyn in the letter as a street protest veteran, someone he resonates with. “Not unlike yourself, my 70-year-old father is a believer in social justice,” Ali wrote. However, when I discuss Ali’s views on a Corbyn premiership, he is more reserved, perhaps not wanting to be disappointed. “I don’t know if the establishment here in this country will let him be Prime Minister in future,” he commented ominously. “He will face counter forces against him and he will struggle to hold on to the principles and he was fighting for. It’s not easy. I don’t think he will close the Naval base in my country or stop arming Saudi and Bahrain, but if he becomes Prime Minister many things will change.”

As we sit on the pavement, I’m joined by some more Bahraini dissidents, Duaa and Sayed Alwadaei, and their two young children Yousif and Hajar. Sayed has an unmissable scar on his forehead, from where he was tortured during the Arab Spring. He now runs the Bahrain Institute for Rights and

Democracy (BIRD) from a small office in London. When King Hamad visited Theresa May in Downing Street in 2016, Sayed leapt in front of his limousine in protest. Later that night, Duaa, was arrested trying to fly out of Bahrain, where she was visiting her mother. "I didn't know my husband was in a protest until I read the news on my phone," she told me. "I went into the airport and when the man opened my passport and saw my name, he held it in the air, and all these plain clothed police came over."

Duaa was searched and made to wait for several hours, during which time Yousif, then 18 months old, was periodically taken away from her. At one point, "They called the *Mukhabarat* (secret police) to take me downstairs. I sat on the floor crying, holding Yousif tightly on my lap. A police woman forcibly removed Yousif from me, he was crying too, and they dragged me to the lift. When I arrive in the interrogation room they gave Yousif back to me. This man was sat in the room and said: 'When we tell you to come, you come quietly.' He was smoking and asked me if I'd seen what my husband had done in London."

What followed was a gruelling seven hours of questioning throughout the night, only ending at 8am. The man was shouting at Duaa, asking her where her family lived. Chillingly, he asked her "which one do you want us to start with?", challenging her to choose between her relatives or her in-laws. Meanwhile, back in the UK, Sayed was working round the clock to free Duaa. Although the Home Office had granted him asylum here, and he is one of the Middle East's top human rights activists in London, the UK Foreign Office did almost nothing to help his wife and son. "The British government did not care, they did not even pretend to care," Duaa said. Instead, it was the US who eventually intervened (Yousif was born in the US and holds a US passport). The American Embassy in Bahrain sent a diplomat to the airport to ensure they could leave the country. As his parting shot, her interrogator said "If you see me another time you will see what I can do."

Although Duaa and Yousif were now safe, the Bahraini authorities decided to target Dua's remaining family in Bahrain. "I was not expecting that they would take my mother, and I haven't seen her since then," Duaa said. "If I return, I will face the same fate." Her brother and cousin have also now been imprisoned. Duaa is so worried about her mother's health in prison that she joined Ali on a temporary hunger strike outside the Bahrain Embassy.

Although Duaa faces years of not seeing her family as they languish in jail, Jeremy Corbyn gives her some hope. "I think he is a good man and he will change a lot of things in Britain. He's 100% different from Tony Blair," Duaa said. Her husband, Sayed, agreed. "Once were protesting outside Parliament about arms sales and Jeremy Corbyn passed by. I told him Duaa's brother was shot by Bahrain's riot police as a teenager and is trying to get asylum in the UK. Minutes later Jeremy walked into Parliament and he raised the case." In his lighter moments, Ali also shares their optimism. "Jeremy is an honest man and a freedom fighter. I think he can change something."

Ali Mushaima spent all of August on hunger strike outside the Bahraini Embassy in London, where his protest continues. You can follow him on twitter at @AMushaima. To find out more about the situation of Duaa's family, follow @BirdBahrain_

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