**AFP: Bahrain under pressure 5 years after the start of the protest movement**

Five years after the outbreak of the popular protest movement that was violently oppressed, experts believe that the Kingdom of Bahrain is facing a political predicament and an economic crisis they emphasize the necessity of reaching a settlement between the government and the opposition.

On the 14th of February 2011, the “Arab Spring” reached this small Gulf country. The protest movement began asking for real reforms and a constitutional monarchy in the country. In June 2015, Sheikh Ali Salman, president of Al Wefaq organization, was sentenced to four years in prison for disobedience. Dozens of opponents were imprisoned or stripped of their citizenship.

Bahrain has been facing intermittent troubles for five years now. Authorities have warned this week that any call to demonstrations, on February 14, will be considered a “criminal offence punished by law.”

Authorities have additionally accused Iran of “interfering” in its affairs. They regularly state that they have dismantled a “terrorist cell linked to Iran,” but Iran denies it.

Amnesty International affirmed this week that “hopes for justice and reforms are dwindling”. James Lynch, Deputy Director of the Association on the Middle East and North Africa Affairs, said that “Today, anyone who dares to criticize the authorities in Bahrain can be punished”.

Mohammed Baharoon, Deputy Director of “Buhuth” Research Center in Dubai, said that “the events of February 14, 2011 created a major rift” between the political components. He also said that “the political situation is still obstructed but the economic crisis provides the opportunity for a common ground to deal with this challenge.”

**-Growth has stopped-**

Lower oil prices caused considerable economic damage in Bahrain, a country that produces 190,000 barrels per day, 150, 000 of which are extracted from the Shur field shared with Saudi Arabia.

This breakdown pushed the government to reduce subsidies on fuel, meat, and tobacco and soon even on electricity and water in order to address the budget deficit, as has happened in other Gulf States.

Jaafar al-Sayegh, head of the Bahraini Economists Association said that Bahrain adopts austerity measures in order to face the decline in oil revenues, which provide “between 86 to 88% of its income”.

It’s expected for Bahrain to witness a 2.25% decline in the growth rate compared to 3.2% in 2015 and 4.5% in 2014. Whereas, according to the International Monetary Fund, the rate of the budget deficit and public debt respectively constituted 15% and 63% of the gross domestic product last year.

Padmaja Khandelwal, the analyst who led the International Monetary Fund’s mission in January in Manama expected that “prices will continue to decline over medium term.” She also added that Bahrain’s government could enforce the implementation of value-added tax and freeze public sector wages.

**-Dialogue and settlement-**

Joseph al-Sayegh said that “the only hope to get out of the crisis goes along a rise in the oil prices”, adding that it also “contributes to help stabilize political understandings.”

According to Ali Fakhro, the former Minister of Education, austerity measures “will not solve the economic problem.” He added that “austerity must start by reducing expenses in defense and security sectors, which use up to 25% of the public expenditure of the country, and should tackle corruption instead”. Ali Fakhro calls for a consultative policy between the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to lay foundations for a “productive economy” that was initially planned since the founding of this regional bloc in 1981 yet never implemented.

He said that “Bahrain will not be able to get out of the economic crisis alone and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries must provide help otherwise all of them will have to face the same problem.” He added that “the political crisis has reached a crucial stage and both parties, the opposition and government are not able to deal with it, hence additionally complicating the economic crisis. The alternative is to reach a compromise through dialogue”.

The opposition seems open to discussion. “Getting out of this crisis starts by involving citizens (…) in the decision-making”, four opposition groups said. They also emphasized the importance of “real partnership that should be initiated and which will contribute in resolving the political and constitutional crisis while also helping in finding solutions to the deterioration of the citizens’ living conditions.”