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Interview with Dr. Ali Khalifa Al Kuwari, author of *The People Want Reform... In Qatar, Too*

By **Jenan Amin**

In the summer of 2012, *The People Want Reform... In Qatar, Too* was published in Beirut. The book which includes 11 contributions from different Qatari writers and academics was coordinated and edited by Dr. Ali Khalifa Al Kuwari, an academic researcher, writer and thinker. The following is an interview conducted with Dr. Al Kuwari on the background of compiling the book and the demands for reform in Qatar.

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Can you talk a little about the background of demands for reform in Qatar?

The background of demands for reform in oil-era Qatar goes back to the thirty-five demands of the 1963 petition, the strikes, imprisonments and expulsions that preceded and accompanied it and the subsequent pledge by the then ruler to enact reform and ratify the majority of the petition's demands. Demands for reform did not stop there, however, but continued at a lower intensity, urged on in carrot and stick fashion for the next two decades, before finally emerging into the light in 1992 in the form of two petitions. The most important of these petitions' demands was the election of a consultative council, appointed and tasked to draw up a permanent constitution. As a consequence of this, the signatories were punished with prison sentences, travel bans, the denial of their rights and the threat to rescind their Qatari citizenship. In 2010 I published the texts of these petitions and analysed the background to their reformist demands in a paper entitled *The State of Democracy in Qatar*, which can be viewed on my official website.

Who are the Qataris for Reform group?

There is no organization with that name at the present time. The hope is that such a group can take shape when the law allows for the Monday Meetings forum (which is currently held in a private residence by invitation) to be convened in a public place and open to all, men and women alike. In my estimation, all citizens calling for root-and-branch reform of the most important long-term problems in Qatar should form a patriotic group called *Qataris for Reform*, but only when the overall legal framework permits the functioning of an effective civil society. This will require substantial changes to the law governing associations, which currently prevents the creation of any association concerned with public affairs on the grounds that this constitutes political involvement. In doing so, the law fails to recognize the essential difference between an interest in policy, which is the proper business of civil society organizations, and an interest in politics as a means to attain political power, which is one of the functions of political parties. Furthermore, the current law of associations protects the administration's decisions from being challenged in the courts; complaints must be made to the council of ministers, which is itself at the summit of the executive! The law states that no civil activities can be licensed by the relevant agencies unless both the agencies and the authorities first grant their permission.

What are the Monday Meetings? When did they start and why?

“The Monday Meetings started in March 2011 and are a monthly gathering of Qatari citizens who believe in

the urgent need for reform. They debate issues of reform and development.”

This is how I described the meetings on my website when they first began and the description still applies. The meetings themselves continue. Both the eighteenth and nineteenth meetings (October 8 and November 19, 2012) were held after *The People want reform... In Qatar, Too* was published and in the wake of the controversy and excitement generated by the book's title and introduction. The eighteenth meeting evaluated and summarized the results of the first round of Monday Meetings, and all participants agreed that the meetings should continue to follow the same approach and format. In the nineteenth meeting, we debated *The planning and implementation of public projects in Qatar* by Ahmad Al Ansari.

The outbreak of revolutions in other Arab countries seems to have influenced your group.

Qatar is an Arab country and whatever happens in the region will find an echo here. The pro-democracy movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen were a rallying cry for us. We set up the Monday Meetings in an organized fashion and debated the most deep-rooted and pressing problems in need of reform in Qatar with the aim of fostering a better understanding of the obstacles, issues and starting points for reform on the part of participants, Qatari society and other concerned individuals. Previously, such debates had taken the form of one-on-one encounters or were raised in individual publications.

To explain further, there are four obstacles to reform: concealing and preventing the publishing of information related to public affairs; a lack of transparency; the absence of freedom of opinion and expression, and the absence of clearly defined boundaries between public and private interests and inadequate public administration. The principal issues in need of reform are also four in number: a long-term population imbalance in both Qatar and other GCC nations; a production-based economic imbalance; an imbalance in the social contract exacerbated by the absence of democracy; a regional security imbalance and the need to transition from the GCC to a genuinely democratic Gulf federation. There are five starting points for reform, as follows: halting and reforming the rising imbalance in the population; reforming and developing the public administration; transitioning to a democratic political system; revising and completing the *National Vision* and the *National Strategy* documents; continuing to strengthen the institutions of the judiciary and ensuring the right to a court of law.

You turned the summary of your Monday Meeting debates and discussions into a book. There is a clear difference here between movements in other Arab countries, where modern, high-speed technology is used to communicate, disseminate data and influence events, and between your group, which communicates its ideas on the printed page. How are you going to be able to share your ideas with your fellow citizens given that, as you mentioned in your introduction, you expect the Qatari authorities to prevent the book entering the country?

There are only two hundred and fifty thousand Qatari citizens, which means they can easily and continually stay in contact through private gatherings and meetings, articles in the local press and the Internet. The papers presented in the Monday Meetings, plus pictures of participants and some of the debate transcripts, are all published as they occur on my website, which is hosted by a dedicated server. Other individuals have also previously published some of this information using social media sites, Facebook, Twitter, and mailing lists. I can say with confidence that our Monday Meetings debates have reached the majority of those Qatari citizens interested in public affairs and by and large have met with their approval because they deal with subjects that are taboo in the media and shed light on the obstacles to reform and how to confront them.

By reaching those concerned in public affairs as they appear and in a relatively complete form, the Monday Meetings documents have helped foster a common understanding between all individuals and groups within Qatari society in addition to non-Qataris interested in Qatari affairs. The failure to license the book's distribution is normal procedure and should be temporary. The authorities only license many books published by Qataris abroad that contain an alternative perspective to that propagated by the Qatari media after a few months or years have passed. The book being banned does not mean that it won't reach those who are interested in it, and in any case, its entire contents are available on the Internet and Qataris who follow such things would have read the entire thing before it was published. The book is an honest portrayal of the status quo.

As for our decision to publish a book, which you've described as different to movements for change in other Arab countries: it is more a question of the circumstances that pertain in every country and the fact that every people requires an appropriate means to express its desire for reform. In Qatar, we are working to develop a common understanding of the reasons for these problems and the best way to effect reform. We are not trying to expand our call for reform further than is possible or acceptable in Qatar. We hope that the frank, honest and responsible way we have expressed our views will not ruin our case with the Qatari

government; indeed, we anticipate that it will understand the need for reform and open the way for a national dialogue.

Do you think there can be "an effective (popular) demand for reform" if the authorities refuse to permit the existence of independent civil society institutions? Why does the Qatari regime ban the formation of associations and institutions concerned with social and political issues?

If the law governing associations remains as it is and individuals and groups within society continue to be barred from involvement in politics I do not think such a demand can be made. But the current ban must not discourage those calling for reform. Their task is as difficult as it could be, but it is not impossible and they have a duty to ensure the transition to a democratic political system is one of their key demands. The democratic system of government guarantees the participation of the people in defining the policy choices and decisions that lead to reform.

Those outside Qatar and the Gulf have the impression that Qatar is a bed of roses. Your book shows the many "imbalances" that afflict the country's internal political system and the contradiction between the grand role the country plays on the world stage, supporting the peoples of the region in their demands for justice and their social and political rights and the Qatari citizen's own inability to participate in shaping policies that affect his present and his future. Could you explain to the non-Gulf reader the nature of these fundamental imbalances, which affect the life of Qataris and their ability to enjoy their rights and duties as citizens?

There can be no doubt that Qatar—and the rest of the Gulf states—enjoy a relatively high standard of living and the benefits of excellent social services and an advanced material infrastructure, the result of revenues from oil and gas exports coupled with small populations.

However, this high standard of living does not mean that the future will be a bed of roses, due to the growing imbalances outlined above. These include citizens representing an ever-decreasing percentage of the total population, currently standing at around 10 per cent in Qatar and the UAE, alongside the absence of democracy and effective political participation in guiding public policies, and a security imbalance that sees us relying on outside parties to guarantee our protection.

The roses people see are a material phenomenon. They dazzle outsiders but Qataris themselves, who lack peace of mind as regards both their present and future, have to suffer their consequences. They see their role in their own lives (which they regard as paramount)

steadily declining, their societies shrinking into irrelevance, their oil wealth running dry and its available revenues being squandered. They see all of this, and at the same time they are being prevented from deciding their own fate and safeguarding their future.

What is your view of the role played by the Qatari media in these contradictions, and how has it entrenched the imbalances you have mentioned or delayed the enactment of reforms?

The Qatari media is not neutral. This is true of the government media and the private press, which suffers from the intervention of government agencies that appoint editors and dictate editorial policy. The Al Jazeera network and Aljazeera.net calls itself a voice for the voiceless, but only with the notable exception of Qataris who want to speak their mind on issues affecting their country. The Qatari media is therefore uninterested in the imbalances, silent on the subject of reform and deeply averse to airing criticisms. Indeed, some media outlets regard criticism as “unpatriotic”, an approach that has led several Qatari writers to be denied media appearances in the country, refusing them their right to expression because they tried to be honest about what they felt.

Reading your book I noticed that it makes very few references to sources and other works that might help a critical evaluation of policy-making in Qatar. What prevented the inclusion of references that would otherwise have strengthened the arguments put forward by your various contributors?

The papers were written to be debated and were largely based on their authors’ previous work so on the whole they make no mention of sources and previous studies, except when to do so is vitally important. Their credibility cannot be attacked on this point; the authorities’ dispute with the book was more to do with the topics being raised for debate in the first place. In the future it might be better if we asked contributors to create a fully referenced copy of each paper before publication.

About a decade ago, Qatar built the Education City in Doha and persuaded some of the premier American universities to open branches there, as well as drawing up a long-term National Development Strategy. This was described as a revolution and clear evidence of the state’s concern for its citizens and its efforts to develop society. As a Qatari intellectual active in the social and political fields have you felt any tangible results from this major educational project and what has been its impact on the younger generations of Qataris?

Before answering your question I must emphasize that I am not an activist in political or social issues. I am an

academic, a researcher and a writer interested in reform in Qatar, the Gulf and in the region in general.

I have a fairly detailed view of the National Development Strategy, which can be found in my paper *Qatar’s National Vision and National Development Strategy from a Reform Perspective*. There is no space to go into it here, but it can be accessed on my official website.

The Education City is part of the Qatar Foundation (a private foundation with a public mission), which is run by an administrative committee, itself appointed by the founder and not beholden to any government agency or obliged to follow any official education policy. All its educational programmes and activities are conducted in English and its approach is not Qatar-specific. The entry requirements and procedures followed by the university branches are those of their parent institutions in the US and there is no binding requirement to accept Qatari students or researchers. As a result Qataris have a poor chance of taking up available positions as they are in competition with students and teachers from around the world, most of whom are supported by study grants from the Qatar Foundation. As a result the number of Qatari students in the six American universities in Doha is not more than a quarter of the total student population. No more than two thousand students in other words. At the same time, the University of Qatar has an estimated seven thousand Qatari students out of a total of nine thousand. This means that the American universities have a relatively small impact on the country compared to the University of Qatar, despite the fact that the government supports the Education City by granting it land, buildings and budgets in the tens of billions, several times over what it sets aside for the University of Qatar.

It is worth mentioning that the Education City only publishes the most basic data on its budgets, funding sources, expenditures and the number and nationalities of its student body. In this it resembles the Al Jazeera network: based in Qatar but neither particularly concerned with the country nor subject to the regulations and oversight of the public administration. Indeed, it hardly engages with local society at all and depends very little on the contributions of its citizens. The six American universities have only two Qataris on their teaching staff and both of these individuals work at the parent institutions in America.

The upshot of all this is that the Education City remains a riddle, whose true size, intentions and value to the country are secrets for the Qatari citizen to try and unlock for himself. How many administrative decisions have been taken there and funded by the public purse without once being subjected to national debate? How many decisions have been taken and

funded without Qataris being able to examine and evaluate them before they are implemented?

I feel a profound sadness whenever I happen to visit Education City and see its lecture halls, buildings and its costly facilities, all funded by government money, without meeting any Qataris to speak of. Their security personnel and receptionists, faculty staff and researchers, the Arabic language, the courses and the conferences and seminars they convene: there is no interest in Qatar or desire for its involvement. At the same time, those of us calling for reform cannot even find a hall to hold a public meeting in.

A number of the contributors to The People Want reform... In Qatar, Too express concern about the country's population imbalance. In your introduction, you describe this as "the most serious and pressing challenge in need of radical reform and the most deserving". The book gives the impression that the issue is linked to immigrant labour, and if this is the case the outside observer might ask why Qatar and other Gulf countries that have traditionally relied on foreign expertise and skills persist in wooing workers from abroad, even after the advances made by the Qatari educational system, which now provides Qatari citizens with the skills they need to operate in a wide range of professional fields.

The current population imbalance in the region is quite without parallel. The proportion of citizens in Qatar and the UAE has fallen to 10 per cent of the population and 6 per cent of the workforce without either of their governments taking any measures to check this decline and restore their citizens to a leading role in society. As we know, major powers like the UK and France, as well as other democratic countries who safeguard their citizens' interests, productivity and political influence, have taken severe measures and made electoral pledges to protect their identity and stability by reducing immigration. They do this to prevent the proportion of citizens in the population falling below 90 per cent, and not 10 per cent as is the case with us. There has to be an underlying cause for the population imbalance seen in the GCC's smaller member states, a situation that grows ever worse without any population policies being put in place to turn the tide in the foreseeable future.

To start with I would say that we have already analysed the reasons why autocratic regimes remain in power in the Gulf long after such regimes have evolved into monarchical, constitutional or republican democracies elsewhere in the world. At the development forum we came up with three main causes for this phenomenon:

One, the concentration of vast oil revenues in the hands of the ruler to be disbursed as he sees fit and used to purchase loyalty both at home and abroad.

Two, foreign protection of the regimes as long as they remain happy that the ruler will continue to act in their interests.

Three, the relative decline in the number of citizens as a proportion of the total population as a consequence of the support given to immigrant workers, who neither share their interests nor feel that they are owed any political or social rights by the autocratic ruler, leaving the ruler to govern a country, most of whose population have no political rights and can be disposed of whenever he likes (or at least this is what he imagines). Therefore the great influx of immigrant workers, regardless of how necessary they are, is a benefit to the ruler, who is keen to treat people as temporary and readily disposable, rather than as citizens with all their attendant rights.

In 2004, Oman, UAE, Qatar and Bahrain enacted population policies and passed legislation granting anyone who purchased a residence in their countries permanent citizenship for themselves and their dependents, regardless of their intention to work. In this fashion, the population imbalance has been transformed from a temporary and unavoidable consequence of the need for foreign labour and skills into an official policy designed to increase the population and reduce the role of citizens within it, turning them into an unproductive and vanishing minority, not even the largest minority in their own country. My colleague Dr. Mohamed Ghobash coined the phrase "a more than absolute authority and a less than powerless people" to describe the states of the Arab Gulf.

Thus it is that the population issue's refusal to go away is due first and foremost (without of course overlooking important social and historical contributory factors) to a political administration that implements the desire of the ruler to govern a population without political rights, coupled with a foreign strategic presence whose interests are bound up in perpetuating autocratic rule and which feels no compunction about changing the Arab identity of Gulf countries with their vast reservoirs of oil and natural gas. Such a policy is another card in the hand of the major powers that dominate the region, to be used against their competitors, and a further safeguard of their economic interests.

This is why the steady decline in the percentage of citizens in Qatar from 30 per cent in 2004 to 12 per cent in 2010, has failed to sound a warning for the government. Quite the opposite; it is regarded as one of the great achievements of a government that can continue on this path due to its ability to produce approximately five million barrels of oil and gas in compensation, without having to enact developmental policies to increase the productivity of its citizens, protect their dignity, preserve the common identity that

binds society together or consider the lives of future generations.

In Kuwait and Bahrain women play a prominent role in public life. In Qatar, such freedom appears to be restricted to female members of the ruling family. Do you think this situation should be addressed? What is the position of the Monday Meetings group on making women partners in the call for reform in Qatar?

The absence of any prominent political role for women in Qatar compared to Kuwait and Bahrain is caused by the same factors that disbar their male counterpart from politics: repression and a narrow margin for freedom of expression and effective political participation. I could add that Qatari women as aware of the need for reform as men and they express this awareness in all available channels both at home and abroad. It can be found in articles written by Qatari women, in discussions on social media and in poetry and literature. The Monday Meetings group hopes for the participation of Qatari women when a public venue for their meetings becomes available. We hope that the margin for free expression in Qatar will soon be extended for our gatherings to become public meetings in which everyone who wants to can participate, men and women alike.

Could the current demand for reform in Qatar be described as an elitist venture? What is the likelihood of young people from a variety of social and economic backgrounds being allowed to participate?

The need for reform in Qatar concerns everyone, but the demand for it remains mostly a personal initiative, given that it is still illegal to set up civil society organizations deemed undesirable by the authorities. Anyone who has listened to the *Watani Al Habib* (My Beloved Homeland) radio programme, which has been aired every morning for decades, knows just how powerless the poor in this country are to obtain their personal rights without their community leaders petitioning government agencies to intervene. Women's councils and personal meetings hash over the same old complaints over and over on the "complain to me, I'll weep for you" principle: nothing is done. When it comes to a group expression of the need for reform, this is both limited and risky; it requires courage and the commitment to speak frankly as a group. It is here that enlightened Qataris—I wouldn't say "elites"—play a vital role in guiding demands for reform and fostering a consensus over the agenda that might benefit Qatari society in general and the youth in particular, no matter how fast or slow the process. The Qatari people are no different to the other people of the Arab world; its men and women have demands and will voice them in their own way, without having to take advice from the elites.

You say that the discussions your group held over the first year were just a first attempt. What is the next step on the road to reform? Has there been anything to make you feel optimistic about your chances of achieving reform in the state of Qatar?

Reform requires that the inhabitants of Qatar, government and people alike, reach agreement over their agenda and the steps that lie ahead. This means opening a dialogue to develop a common vision of the need for reform and the best way to achieve it. The Monday Meetings began this process and we will continue with it until it grows into a national discussion and the atmosphere is conducive to full participation by the people and official parties. I am optimistic. I am full of optimism that the people of Qatar will, whether quickly or slowly, break the barrier of silence, and that their leaders will realize the truth of what they say. Clearly and maturely, they will express their deep need for reform. I am also certain that the government of Qatar will respond to Qataris demands even if some of its agencies might appear unhappy with this publicly-voiced collective demand. Until this happens, however, the participants in the Monday Meetings and all those who call for peaceful reform can only advise patience and common sense, for they are the voice of society's conscience no matter how few they be.