

# The foundation of modern Bahrain

*Bahrain's National Action Charter laid the foundations of the nation as a representative democracy and constitutional monarchy*



AHMED MOHAMMED AL MANNAI

Bahrain has marked the anniversary of its National Action Charter, the document that laid the foundations of the nation as a representative democracy and constitutional monarchy.

The Charter was acclaimed by Bahrainis – a national vote on its adoption in 2001 saw 98.41 per cent in favour, with a turnout of 90.2 per cent.

This year, on the 18th anniversary of the historic vote, Bahrain honours the document as the Charter of Gold.

The Charter lays down the principles of Bahrain's government – the division between the executive, legislative and judicial branches, the establishment of an elected Council of Representatives, the codification of governmental responsibilities, including the independence and immunity of the judiciary, and acknowledging the people as the source of all power.

But it goes further. It sets down the rights people should enjoy in Bahrain, guaranteeing personal freedoms such as freedom of religion, and marking rights such as the inviolability of personal property and equality in the eyes of the law.

Bahrain has long been a diverse nation, a trading hub that has



BACA President Shaikha Mai speaks at an event organised to mark the 18th anniversary of National Action Charter.

attracted business people from the region, and further afield, for centuries.

The Charter commits Bahrain to sustainable economic development and diversification of national income. This drive is further developed in the Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 and suc-

cessive government action plans.

It further commits Bahrain to a free economy, including free movement of capital. This has helped increase the attractiveness of Bahrain as a business hub – the Kingdom ranks third in the Middle East and North Africa on the World Bank's Ease of Doing

Business index.

The Flexible Worker Permit, a first in the Gulf Cooperation Council, creates further opportunities for both employers and employees in the private sector. The US State Department cited the Flexi-Permit as a key reason for moving Bahrain into Tier 1

# High unemployment? Stagnant economy? J

*How Italy's leaders are tapping resentments, old and new, over immigration,*



ILARIA MARIA SALA

White sauce and migration, the fork and the Mona Lisa, a fast train and an African currency – the points of contention are many. Since coming to power eight months ago, the most unpredictable and quarrelsome government Italy has ever known has managed to pick a colossal fight with, yes, France.

On Feb 7, the French government called back for “consultations” its ambassador to Italy. Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio, both deputy prime ministers of Italy, had said that they gave their full support to the Gilets Jaunes, or Yellow Vests, who have been protesting throughout France for weeks, rattling the presidency of Emmanuel Macron. Then, after meeting representatives of the movement a few days ago, Di Maio declared that a “new Europe is being born.” The French foreign ministry called the statement yet more “provocation” and manipulation for “electoral aims.”

Italy's two-headed govern-

ment – an opportunistic alliance between the extreme-right League of Salvini and the populist, anti-establishment Five-Star Movement of Di Maio – has made a sport of going after France, especially Macron.

Di Maio, in particular, has called out France's supposedly neocolonialist relationship with its former territories in Africa, which supposedly impoverishes the continent and causes its people to flee – for Italy. On a popular TV talk show recently, Alessandro Di Battista, a prominent leader of the 5-Star Movement and the group's unofficial economic theorist, pulled out of his pocket a copy of a CFA franc bank note. The CFA, which is used in 14 African states, is pegged to the euro and guaranteed by the French treasury against those states' foreign reserves. Di Battista tore the bill apart angrily, blaming the currency for keeping Africa down and under France's yoke.

He didn't mention Italy's own adventures in Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries, when Italian troops are said to have raped, murdered and gassed civilians, bombed the Red Cross and starved children held in detention. (Those facts still hardly feature on the history curriculum of Italian schools.) Nor did he men-

tion that many asylum-seekers who arrive in Italy today come from Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia – an area once colonised in parts by Italy.

This flimsy anti-colonial stance may be designed to give the Italian government a patina of idealism, but it belies a muddled understanding of African political and economic dynamics. A new unit called Task Force Cina, or “Task Force China,” has been set up in the Ministry of Economic Development, which is under Di Maio's control: Its goal is to increase economic exchanges with China and stop migration to Italy by helping China invest in Africa. The Italian government calls France's involvement in Africa exploitative but seems to think that China's is no problem.

This French-bashing is a new twist in an old story of resentment and rivalry – a medley of unprocessed feelings that can be triggered just as easily by talk of the Napoleonic invasions or the French footballer Zinedine Zidane's famous head-butt against an Italian player in the 2006 World Cup Final. Italy won the championship, but in a whiff of illegitimacy after Zidane was taken out of the game.

For a long time, I think, some Italians have felt that our coun-



Flags compete during a demonstration in Ventimiglia, Italy, on the French border.

try's contribution to French culture has gone unacknowledged, usurped by our neighbours. But now, in the hands of Salvini and Di Maio, this sentiment is reaching new heights, in terms of both political expedience and pettiness.

The Louvre museum in Paris, where the Mona Lisa is exhibited, has been preparing to commemorate later this year the 500th anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci's death. The painting became the property of Francis I, a king of France and da Vinci's

patron, after da Vinci's death in France in the early 16th century – a time when the concept of Italy as a nation was shaky at best. Last year, Italy promised to contribute to the special exhibit by lending the Louvre major, sumptuous pieces, but the new