The Bahraini Supreme Court on Choice of Court Agreements, Bases of Jurisdiction and… Forum non Conveniens!

I. Introduction:

In a previous post on this blog, I reported a decision rendered by the Bahrain High Court in which the court refused to enforce a choice of court agreement in favour of English courts. The refusal was based on the grounds that the case was brought against a Bahraini defendant and that rules of international jurisdiction are mandatory. The Bahraini Supreme Court's decision reported here is a subsequent development on the same case. The ruling is significant for many reasons. In a methodical manner, the Supreme Court identified the foundational justifications for the jurisdictional rules applied in Bahrain. Moreover, it clarified the role and effect of choice of court agreements, particularly their derogative effect. Finally, and somehow surprisingly, the Court supported its position by invoking to "the doctrine of *forum non conveniens*", explicitly mentioned in its decision.

The decision is particularly noteworthy, as it positively highlights the openness of Bahraini judges to adopting new legal doctrines previously unfamiliar within the country's legal framework. This openness likely signals an increasing acceptance of such jurisdictional adjustment mechanisms in legal systems outside the traditional common law or mixed jurisdictions. However, the decision also negatively highlights the challenges of importing foreign doctrines, particularly when such doctrines are applied in contexts where they are not fully integrated or properly understood. These challenges are further exacerbated when the reliance on the foreign legal doctrine appears to be driven by judicial convenience rather than a genuine commitment to the principles underlying the imported legal doctrine.

II. Facts

The facts of the case have been previously reported (see here) and need not to be repeated. It suffices to recall that the dispute involved a breach of a pharmaceutical distribution sales agreements between an English company (the plaintiff) and a Bahraini company (the defendant). Relying on the choice of court agreement included in the contract, the defendant challenged the jurisdiction of Bahraini court.

The court of first instance rejected the challenge on the ground that the jurisdiction of Bahraini courts was justified by the "Bahraini nationality" of the defendant, and the mandatory nature of the Bahraini rules of international jurisdiction (see the summary of the case here).

On appeal, the Court of Appeal overturned the initial ruling on the grounds that Bahraini courts lacked jurisdiction.

Dissatisfied, the English company appealed to the Supreme Court, arguing that, as the defendant was a Bahraini company registered in Bahrain, jurisdiction could not be derogated by agreement due to the public policy nature of the Bahraini jurisdictional rules.

III. The Ruling

In its decision rendered in the *Appeal No. 5/00071/2024/27 of 19 August 2024*, the Bahraini Supreme Court admitted the appeal and overturned the appealed decision holding as follows:

"International jurisdiction of Bahraini courts, as regulated in the Civil and Commercial Procedure Act [CCCA] (The Legislative Decree No. 12/1971, Articles 14 to 20) and its amendments, is based on two fundamental principles: the principle of convenience (*al-mula'amah*) and the principle of party autonomy (*'iradat al-khusum*).

Concerning the principle of convenience, Article 14 of the CCCA states that Bahraini courts have jurisdiction over cases filed against non-Bahraini [defendants] who have domicile or residence in Bahrain, except for *in rem* actions concerning immovable properties located abroad. This is because it is more appropriate (*li-mula'amati*) for the courts where the immovable is located to hear

the case. Similarly, Article 15(2) of the CCCA stipulates that Bahraini courts have jurisdiction over actions involving property located in Bahrain, obligations originated, performed or should have been performed in Bahrain, or bankruptcies opened in Bahrain. This means *a contrario* that, under the principle of convenience (*mabda' al-mula'amah*), the [said] provision excludes [from the jurisdiction of the Bahraini courts] cases where the property is located outside Bahrain, or where the obligations originated in and performed abroad, or was originated and should have been performed abroad, or concerns a bankruptcy opened abroad unless the case involves a cross-border bankruptcy as governed by Law No. 22 of 2018 on Restructuring and Bankruptcy.

Regarding the principle of party autonomy (*mabda' 'iradat al-khusum*), Article 17 of CCCA allows Bahraini courts to adjudicate cases, even when they do not fall within their jurisdiction, if the parties explicitly or implicitly accept their authority. While the law recognizes the parties' freedom (*iradat*) to submit (*qubul*) the jurisdiction of Bahraini courts to hear cases that otherwise do not fall under their jurisdiction, the legislator did not clarify the derogative effect of choice-of-court agreements when the parties agree to exclude the jurisdiction of Bahraini in favor of a foreign court, despite the Bahraini courts having jurisdiction over the case. In addition, the legislator remains silent on the rules for international jurisdiction in cases brought against Bahraini nationals. However, this cannot be interpreted as a refusal by the legislator [of the said rules] nor as an insistence on the jurisdiction of Bahraini court. In fact, the legislature has previously embraced the principle according to which Bahraini courts would decline jurisdiction over cases that otherwise fall under their jurisdiction when parties agree to arbitration, whether in Bahrain or abroad.

Based on the foregoing, nothing in principle prevents the parties from agreeing on the jurisdiction of a [foreign court]. However, if, one of the parties still brings the case before Bahraini courts despite such an agreement, the issue extends beyond merely honoring the agreement to a broader issue dependent solely on how Bahraini courts assess their own jurisdiction. In this case, the parties' agreement [relied upon] before the Bahraini courts becomes just one factor that the court shall consider when deciding whether or not to decline jurisdiction. The court, in this context, must examine whether there are grounds to decline jurisdiction in favor of a more appropriate foreign [court] in the interest of justice, and the court shall decide accordingly when the said grounds are verified. This

principle is known as "*The Doctrine of Forum Non Conveniens*" (*al-mahkamat al-mula'amat*).[1] Therefore, if all the conditions necessary for considering the taking of jurisdiction by a foreign court and the rendering justice is more appropriate (*al-'akthar mula'amah*) are met, Bahraini courts should decline jurisdiction. Otherwise, the general principles shall apply, i.e. that the taking of jurisdiction shall be upheld, and the courts will proceed with hearing the case.

Accordingly, the Bahraini courts' acceptance to decline jurisdiction in favor of a foreign court, based on the parties' agreement and in line with the principle of party autonomy, presupposes that [doing so] would lead to the realization of the principle of convenience (*mabda' al-mula'amah*). [This would be the case when] (1) the dispute shall have an international character; (2) there is a more appropriate forum to deal with the dispute [in the sense that] (a) the validity of the choice of court agreement conferring jurisdiction is recognized under the foreign law of the chosen forum; (b) evidence can be collected easily; (c) a genuine connection exists with the state of the chosen forum; and (d) the judgments rendered by the courts of the chosen forum can be enforced therein with ease.[2]

Furthermore, since the jurisdiction of Bahraini courts is based on the consideration that the adjudicatory jurisdiction (*al-qadha'*) is one of the manifestations of the State's sovereignty over its territory and that the exercise of this jurisdiction extends to the farthest reach of this sovereignty, it is incumbent [upon the courts] to ensure that declining jurisdiction by Bahraini courts does not infringe upon national sovereignty or public policy in Bahrain. The Assessment of whether all the abovementioned conditions are satisfied falls within the discretion of the courts of merits (*mahkamat al-mawdhu'*), subject to the control of the Supreme Court.

Given the above, and based on the facts of the case [.....], the appellant—an English company—entered into an agreement of distribution and sale in Bahrain for pharmaceutical products [.....], supplying the appellee—a Bahraini company—with said products. Seven invoices were issued for the total amount claimed; yet the appellee refused to make payment. [Considering that] Bahrain is the most appropriate forum for the administration of justice in this case – given the facts that appellee's domicile and its place of business, as well as the place of performance of the obligation are located in Bahrain – the parties' agreement to submit disputes arising from the contract in question to the jurisdiction of the

English courts and to apply English law does not alter this conclusion. It is [therefore] not permissible to argue here in favor of prioritizing party autonomy to justify declining jurisdiction, as party autonomy alone is not sufficient to establish jurisdiction without the fulfillment of the other conditions required by the principle of *forum non conveniens* (*mabda' mahkamat al-mula'amah*).

Considering that the court of the appealed decision [unjustifiably] declined to hear the case on the grounds that it lacked jurisdiction, it violated the law and erred in its application. Therefore, its decision shall be overturned.

IV. Comments

Although the outcome of the case (i.e. the non-enforcement of a derogative choice-of-court agreement) might be somehow predictable given the practice of Bahraini courts as noted in the previous comment on the same case, the reasoning and justifications provided by the Supreme Court are – in many respects – surprising, or even … puzzling.

A comprehensive review of the court's ruling and its broader theoretical and practical context requires detailed (and lengthy) analyses, which may not be suitable for a blog note format. For this reason, only a brief comment will be provided here without delving too much into details.

1. International Jurisdiction and its Foundation in Bahrain

According to the Supreme Court, the international jurisdiction of Bahraini courts is grounded in two fundamental principles: convenience (*al-mula'amah*) and party autonomy (*'iradat al-khusum*).

Convenience (*al-mula'amah*), as indicated in the decision, is understood in terms of "proximity", i.e. the connection between the dispute and Bahrain. This connection is essential for proper administration of justice, and efficiency of enforcing judgments. Considerations of "convenience" are reflected in the Bahraini rules of international jurisdiction as set out in the CCCA. Therefore, when the jurisdiction of Bahraini courts is justified based on these rules, the dispute can be heard in Bahrain; otherwise, the courts should dismiss the case for

lack of jurisdiction.

However, Bahraini courts, although originally incompetent, can still assume jurisdiction based on party autonomy (*'iradat al-khusum*). Here, the parties' agreement – whether explicit or tacit – to submit to the authority of Bahraini courts establishes their jurisdiction.

At this level of the decision, it is surprising that the Court did not include the Bahraini nationality of the parties as an additional ground for the jurisdiction of Bahraini Court. While the Supreme Court rightly pointed out that the Bahraini regulation of international jurisdiction does not regulate dispute brought *against* Bahraini national, and that, unlike many codifications in the MENA region, nationality of the defendant is not *explicitly* used as a general ground for international jurisdiction, this does not imply that nationality has no role to play in Bahrain. In fact, as explained in the previous post on the same case, Bahraini courts have regularly assumed jurisdiction on the basis of the Bahraini nationality of the parties and have consistently affirmed that "*persons holding Bahraini nationality are subject to the jurisdiction of Bahraini courts as a manifestation of the state's sovereignty over its citizens*". Moreover, Article 16(6) of the CCCA allows for jurisdiction to be taken based on the *nationality* of the plaintiff in personal status matters, particularly when Bahraini law is applicable to the dispute.

Furthermore, one might question the inclusion of various aspects, such as the connection with Bahrain, administration of justice and efficiency, under the broad and somewhat vague label of "convenience". In a (more abstract) sense, *any* rule of international jurisdiction can be justified by considerations of "convenience". In any event, it worth mentioning here that modern literature offers a multitude of justifications for different rules of international jurisdiction, taking into account various interests at stake, theories of jurisdictions, paradigms, and approaches (for a detailed account, see Ralf Michaels, "Jurisdiction, Foundations" *in* J. Basedow *et al.* (eds.) *Elgar Encyclopaedia of Private international Law – Vol. 1* (Edward Elgar, 2017) 1042).

2. The Unexpected Reference to *Forum Non Conveniens*

Once the Court identified the foundational bases of the Bahraini courts'

jurisdiction, it engaged in a somewhat confusing discussion regarding the circumstances under which it might decline jurisdiction.

It is important to recall that the legal question before the court pertains to the effect of a choice-of-court agreement in favor of a foreign court. In other words, the issue at hand is whether such agreement can exert its derogative effect, allowing Bahraini courts to refrain from *exercising* jurisdiction.

Traditionally, Bahraini courts have addressed similar issues by asserting that the rules of international jurisdiction in Bahrain are mandatory and cannot be derogated from by agreement (as noted in the previous comment on the same case here). However, in this instance, the Court veered off in its analysis. Indeed, the Court (unexpectedly) shifted from the straightforward issue of admissibility of the derogative effect of choice-of-court agreements to the broader question of whether to decline jurisdiction, ultimately leading to a discussion of……*forum non conveniens*!

The Court's approach leaves an unsettling impression. This is because the ground of appeal was not framed in terms of *forum non conveniens*. Indeed, the appellant did not argue that the choice-of-court agreement should not be enforced because the chosen court was inappropriate or because Bahraini courts were *forum conveniens*. Instead, the appellant merely referred to the mandatory nature of the jurisdictional rules in Bahrain, which cannot be derogated from by agreement, irrespective of *any* consideration regarding which court *is clearly more appropriate to hear the case*.

This impression is further strengthened by the manner with which the Court addressed the issue it raised itself. Indeed, after setting out the test for declining jurisdiction on the basis of *forum non conveniens* (but, in fact, primarily concern more the conditions for the validity of a choice-of-court agreement), the Court failed to examine and apply the very same tests it established. Instead, the Court concluded that Bahraini courts were *forum conveniens* simply because they *had* jurisdiction on the grounds that the defendant was a Bahraini company registered in Bahrain, had its domicile (principal place of business) there, and that Bahrain was the place of performance of the sale and distribution obligations.

However, upon a closer examination at the fact of the case, one can hardly agree with the Court's approach. On the contrary, all the reported facts indicate that

the requirements set forth by the Court were met: (1) the international nature of the dispute is beyond any doubt; (2) English courts are clearly appropriate to hear the case as (a) the choice-of-court agreement in favor to English court is undoubtedly valid under English law; (b) it is unlikely that the case would raise any concerns regarding the collection of evidence (since one of the parties is an English company, one can expect that parts of the evidence regarding the transaction, payment, invoices etc. would be in English, and to be found in England); (c) there is no doubt about the genuine connection with England, as one of the parties is an English company established in England, and parts of the transactions are connected with England. Also, it is unclear how a choice-of-court agreement in this case would violate the sovereignty of Bahrain, as there is nothing in the case to suggest any public policy concerns.

The only potential issue might pertain to the enforceability of the future judgment in England (point (d) above) as there is a possibility that the appellee may have no assets to satisfy the future judgment in England. This might explain why the appellant decided to bring in Bahrain in violation of the choice-of-court. However, such concern can be mitigated by considering the likelihood of enforcing the English judgment in Bahrain, as it would meet the Bahraini enforcement requirements (articles 16-18 of Law on Execution in Civil and Commercial Matters [Legislative Decree No22/2021]).

V. Concluding Remarks

This is not the only case in which challenges to choice-of-court agreements in favor of a foreign court are framed in terms of *forum non conveniens* in Bahrain (see e.g., the *Bahrain Chamber of Dispute Resolution, Case No. 09/2022 of 17 October 2022*). However, to my knowledge, this is the first Supreme Court decision where explicit reference is made to "the doctrine of *forum non conveniens*" (with the terms cited in English).

In the case under discussion, there is a concern that the Court seems to have conflated two related yet distinct matters: the power of the court to decline jurisdiction on the ground of *forum non conveniens*, and the court's authority to decline jurisdiction on the basis of the parties' agreement to confer jurisdiction to a particular court (*cf.*, R. Fentiman, "*Forum non conveniens*" in Basedaw *et al.*,

op. cit. 799). In this regard, it is true that in common law jurisdictions the doctrine of *forum non conveniens* is generally recognized as a valid defense against the enforcement of choice-of-court agreements (see J.J. Fawcett, "General Report" *in* J.J. Fawcett (ed.), *Declining Jurisdiction in Private International Law* (Oxford University Press, 1995) 54). However, it also generally admitted that the respect of the parties' choice should not be easily disregarded, and courts should only intervene in exceptional circumstances where there is a clear and compelling reasons to do so (see, Fentiman, *op. cit.*, 799). Such compelling reasons, however, are clearly absent in the present case.

Moreover, the way with which the Supreme Court framed the issue of *foreign non conveniens* inevitably raises several intricate questions: would the doctrine apply with respect to the agreement's prorogative effect conferring jurisdiction to Bahraini courts? Would it operate in the absence of *any* choice-of-court agreement? Can it be raised in the context of parallel proceeding *(lis pendens)?* Would it operate in family law disputes, etc.?

In my opinion, the answers to such questions are very likely to be in the negative. This is primarily because Bahraini courts, including the Supreme Court, have traditionally and consistently regarded their jurisdiction as a matter of public policy, given the emphasis they usually place on *judicial jurisdiction as a manifestation of the sovereignty of the State* which, when established, cannot be set aside or diminished. Such conception of international jurisdiction leaves little room to discretionary assessment by the court to evaluate elements of *forum non conveniens*, ultimately leading them to decline jurisdiction even when their jurisdiction is justified.

————————————————-

[1] English terms in the original text. The Arabic equivalent can be better translated as "*forum conveniens*" rather than "*forum non conveniens*".

[2] Numbers and letters added.