The fraud of US democracy crusade

American media silent over mass protest in Bahrain

Bill Van Auken
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The contrast between the reaction to this popular upsurge against a dictatorial monarch in the Persian Gulf and the attention lavished on the so-called "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon could not have been starker.

The *New York Times* was among the few to print anything at all, limiting its coverage to a 13-line Reuters dispatch placed at the bottom of page 6 in its international briefs column. The *Washington Post*, the other paper of record of the US ruling elite, published nothing at all, and the major broadcast media remained completely silent.

Apparently, the US corporate media's only interest in Bahrain is the preparations for a Grand Prix motor race to be held there on April 3. The aspirations and the oppression of the country's population are a matter of indifference.

Friday's peaceful march saw an estimated 80,000 people—roughly 12 percent of the Gulf state's total population—demanding constitutional reforms. They called for greater power for the elected lower house of parliament, which currently is subordinated to a handpicked upper chamber, the consultative council—an arrangement that leaves all real legislative power in the hands of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. They also demanded a constitution ratified by elected representatives, rather than the current charter, which was imposed by royal decree in 2002.

This action signaled the refusal of the Al-Khalifa dynasty to relinquish the absolute power it has exercised since declaring its independence from Britain in 1971. As a consequence, the opposition parties boycotted an election held that year.

The monarchy denied organizers of the march—principally the main Shia opposition movement, the Islamic National Accord Association (INAA)—a legal permit for the protest, citing "tension and regional threats." Also participating in the march were the left-wing National Democratic Action Association, the National Democratic Rally—a pan-Arabist group—and the Islamic Action Association, another Shia opposition movement. Political parties, like labor unions, remain banned in Bahrain.

On Saturday, the daily newspaper *Al-Ayyam* quoted a senior minister in the Bahrain regime declaring that the INAA "will face legal measures after it organized an unlawful demonstration yesterday."

Opposition leaders are threatened with arrest. The regime has increasingly cracked down on dissent. In the past month alone, it jailed three young men for running an online discussion forum—Bahrainonline.org—that posted comments critical of the regime. It accused them of "defamation...inciting hatred against the regime and spreading rumors and lies that could cause disorder."

Also arrested March 9 were three members of a recently formed Committee of the Unemployed for distributing leaflets urging participation in a picket on behalf of the jobless. It is estimated that as much as 25 percent of the country's population are unemployed. An opposition group reported that the three were subjected to physical abuse and harsh interrogations.

Last September, Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, vice-president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested for violating royal decrees restricting freedom of speech and association. The rights group was also proscribed.

Al-Khawaja earned the monarchy's wrath by

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speaking at a public forum on poverty and social inequality in Bahrain, blaming the policies of Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa—the king's uncle. The regime is a family affair, with al-Khalifas occupying 10 of the 21 ministries, including all those most important to the exercise of state power.

While the Shia community represents an estimated 70 percent of the country's population, there are only five Shia ministers in the government, all of them occupying relatively unimportant posts. In the last elections, the ruling family shamelessly gerrymandered electoral districts to dilute the Shia vote.

Given the Bush administration's incessant proclamations of its dedication to the struggle for democracy and against tyranny, one might anticipate the administration embracing the demonstration in Bahrain as an indication of a democratic wave sweeping the Middle East.

After all, here were tens of thousands openly defying a regime that suppresses freedom of speech and assembly, discriminates against the majority of the population and routinely locks up those who criticize it.

But George Bush did not take to the airwaves proclaiming his desire for the liberation of the people of the Bahrain—as he has done in relation to Iran and Lebanon—nor did he suggest sanctions against the tyrannical monarchy, as he has implemented against the Syrian regime.

Rather, there was an embarrassed silence, both in Washington and the media. The events in Bahrain cannot be reported because they expose US policy as a lie.

Washington is not condemning this tyrant, because he is a pliant and valued instrument of US imperialist policy in the region. The small gulf emirate he rules serves as the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. Some 4,500 US military personnel are deployed there, occupying a 79-acre base. The Navy and Marine components of the US Central Command are also based there, and the royal family allowed the use of its territory for carrying out military attacks on Iraq.

Economically, the autocratic regime has likewise subordinated itself to Washington, signing a free trade pact last year that effectively abrogated an existing customs union joining it with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. US firms dominate the oil sector.

With a population and landmass that are both approximately equivalent to those of Indianapolis, Indiana, Bahrain has been designated as a "major non-NATO ally."

Last November, when King Hamad flew to the US, the White House celebrated him as "the first Arab leader to meet President George W. Bush since his re-election as US president."

During the visit, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell lauded the King for sharing the US commitment to "help the Iraqis have their election." That the election staged in his own country was so blatantly rigged that political organizations representing the majority of the population boycotted them went unmentioned.

King Hamad's regime in Bahrain, the Saudi royal family, Egypt's Mubarak, General Musharraf of Pakistan and ex-Stalinist dictators like Karimov of Uzbekistan—these are the regimes that Washington props up and depends upon in the Middle East and Central Asia. They are the real face of the supposedly democratic goals of US imperialism in the region.

The reaction to the Bahrain protests serves to expose the obvious. In its pretense of a worldwide crusade for democracy and against tyranny, US imperialism designates who is a democrat and who is a tyrant based entirely upon its own strategic interests. Thus, protests in Lebanon that are seen as a means of strengthening both US and Israeli dominance in the region are celebrated by the US government and given massive coverage in the media, while a demonstration in Bahrain that threatens to undermine a US-backed regime is censored from the news.

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