

Mass protests continue in Bahrain

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24 February 2011

Tens of thousands of anti-government demonstrators took to the streets of Bahrain's capital, Manama, this week. Defying government demands to end protests, amid vicious police attacks on crowds last week that left an estimated eight people dead and hundreds more wounded, crowds called for the fall of the regime and justice for slain protestors.

Manama's Pearl Square has become the focal point of the protests in Bahrain, a tiny island kingdom in the Persian Gulf that is home to a major United States military base. King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and his family rule the country with the support of Washington and the neighboring kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Police had brutally attacked sleeping demonstrators in the square in the early hours of Friday morning, firing teargas and shotguns, and beating men, women and children. Following the withdrawal of security forces from Pearl Square over the weekend, hundreds of people have re-established a protest camp there.

Monday's demonstration was billed as the "march of loyalty to the martyrs," in reference to those killed by the regime. Many chanted for the removal of the ruling dynasty, though the main object of popular rage is the prime minister, Prince Khalifa bin Salman, the king's uncle, who has headed the government since 1971.

"We want a new government. The people need to rule the country," crowds chanted in Pearl Square on Tuesday afternoon. Thousands gathered earlier in the day to attend the funeral procession of Redha Mohammed, a 20-year old gunned down by police last week.

AOL News reported one protestor, Ibrahim Al Hur, an unemployed crane operator, brought his 6-year-old daughter to Pearl Square on Tuesday. "I want to prove we are peaceful, we don't come to fight, just to ask for our rights—young, old, men and women."

As well as anger at the lack of democratic rights, youth and workers face tough economic circumstances. There is a serious shortage of affordable housing and the youth unemployment rate stands close to 20 percent.

The Al Khalifas and the ruling elite have kept power by

manipulating sectarian tensions. They are Sunni Muslim, while 70 percent of the country's population of 1.2 million is of the Shiite denomination. The Shiite masses face sectarian discrimination and are not allowed to serve in the security forces or most areas of government. The monarchy hires Sunnis from other areas of the Middle East to police the country.

Though the majority of anti-regime demonstrators are Shiites, the protestors have striven to unite opposition to the regime across the sectarian divide. A common chant on the demonstrations has been, "There are no Sunnis or Shias, just united Bahrainis."

However, in a move indicating that the monarchy and its backers are contemplating openly sectarian violence against the protestors, supporters of the regime organized a counter-demonstration of several thousand Sunnis outside a mosque in central Manama on Monday night. The organizers of the pro-monarchy gathering demanded that all opposition parties abandon the streets and submit to talks with representatives of the government.

Official opposition leaders have indicated that they are willing to negotiate with the monarchy, rather than seek its downfall. But given the depth of popular hatred for the regime, they have so far refused to enter into formal talks before political prisoners have been released and the killing of protestors investigated.

In an effort to appease the opposition, the Bahraini government yesterday released about 250 political prisoners. Protesters in Pearl Square, who have dubbed it "Martyrs' Square" in honor of those slain by the police, were unimpressed by the monarchy's concession.

"Our most important demand is that the killers be put on trial," one unemployed man told the AFP news agency on Wednesday. Another protester camped out in the square, retired municipal worker Sabah Abadi, said, "Even if they put a gun in my mouth and order me to leave, I will not. I am here day and night."

The main bulwark of support for the ruling family in Bahrain is US imperialism. The island nation has been home to a US Navy base since 1947, with the US Fifth

Fleet based there since 1995. One of Washington's most important military outposts, this base has expanded since 2001, and plays a crucial role in the US occupation of Iraq.

The US military presence in Bahrain is a vital component of Washington's attempt to dominate the entire Middle East region. Located in the Persian Gulf, from where much of the world's oil is shipped, and next to Saudi Arabia's vast eastern oil fields, the Fifth Fleet base also provides a bulwark and possible base of attack against Iran.

The US also views the demonstrations in Bahrain as a threat to its key ally, the Al-Saud monarchs of Saudi Arabia. Though protests have not yet broken out there, support for the uprisings across the Arab world has manifested itself on the Internet. One Facebook page created by Saudi supporters of the protests in Bahrain states, "We Saudis are standing with our brothers in Bahrain in their peaceful reform demands. We also condemn all types of violence facing the peaceful protesters and unarmed demonstrators." The page supports the Bahraini demonstrators' call for the unity of Sunnis and Shiites.

Another Facebook page has called for a "Day of Rage" on March 11 across Saudi Arabia, to demand an elected government, greater freedom for women and the release of political prisoners.

The Saudi monarchy views protests in Bahrain and other Arab states with hostility and alarm. Saudi Arabian forces invaded Bahrain in 1996 to prop up the regime in Manama, and Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz al Saud recently threatened to intervene again if the mass movement in Bahrain "gets out of hand."

Clearly concerned by events across the Arab world, the Saudi monarchy yesterday announced a \$37 billion aid package to provide additional medical services and benefits. The announcement came as the monarch, King Abdullah, returned to Saudi Arabia for the first time in three months, after undergoing back surgery in the US. One of the dignitaries present to greet the Saudi monarch was King Hamad of Bahrain, who is expected to have talks with the regime in Riyadh on how to suppress the mass opposition.

An article in the *New York Times* on Monday recorded the US military's long efforts to maintain the autocratic rule of the al Khalifas. The newspaper quoted Gwennyth Todd, a former political adviser to the US Navy in Bahrain from 2004 to 2007, who also served as an adviser on Middle East and North Africa affairs to the Pentagon

and the White House. "The problem has been that we have been doing everything we can to cuddle up to the Khalifas and have been consciously ignoring, at best, the situation of Bahraini Shiites," Todd told the newspaper.

Nabil Rajab of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights has complained of the US military's refusal to acknowledge the scale of state discrimination against Shiites in Bahrain. "Rajab said that he was invited to speak in Washington and was told by two senators that the military encouraged them not to meet with him, or even to host him," the *Times* reported.

"The [US] military here always took a position against the human rights community," Rajab added. "The US did not build up any good relations with the opposition. They always categorize them as fundamentalist or extremist in their reports, in order to justify their political position in support of the government."

The US Embassy in Manama is reportedly working with the regime and some Shiite opposition groups to end anti-government protests. In particular, the US is looking to the opposition party Al Wefaq, one of the Shiite groups permitted to sit in Bahrain's largely powerless parliament. Welcoming Washington's role in Bahrain, party spokesman Khalil Ebrahim al-Marzooq called on the US to "assertively emphasize that Bahrain Shiites should get their rights."

An accommodation by Washington and the Bahraini monarchy with Shiite bourgeois parties would be aimed at winding down the protests in Manama and maintaining the oppression of the masses across the region.



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