

Bahrain protests demand political change

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Anti-government protests are continuing in the Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. Demonstrators blockaded the National Assembly, Bahrain's rubber-stamp parliament, on Monday. Crowds of thousands are still occupying Pearl Square, the focus for demonstrators in the capital city, Manama.

Thousands of protesters also gathered on Monday in front of the Interior Ministry, home of Bahrain's hated security forces, to demand the release of all political prisoners. A crowd of several hundred also gathered outside the headquarters of the state broadcaster yesterday, voicing their opposition to pro-government bias in its reporting.

Protesters in Pearl Square and throughout Manama demanded the resignation of the government, democratic parliamentary elections and a new constitution.

Thousands of demonstrators gathered outside the National Assembly as its 40-member upper chamber, appointed by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, convened to discuss the protests that have gripped Bahrain for over two weeks. They blockaded the building for several hours.

Several thousand people have occupied Pearl Square since the army and police attacked protesters there February 18.

Eight demonstrators are believed to have been killed in Bahrain since the protests began February 14, the first mass street demonstrations in the Gulf sheikdoms since the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. An estimated 3,000 protesters have been injured and hundreds of opposition figures imprisoned by Bahraini authorities.

A colony of Britain until 1971, Bahrain has for decades been a key ally of the United States in the Middle East. Home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet since 1995 and the site of an American military base since 1947, the imperialist powers have long backed Bahrain's al-Khalifa monarchy as part of their effort to dominate the Persian Gulf, the world's foremost oil-producing region.

Protests in the region have spread to Oman, and numerous Internet postings suggest that a "Day of Rage"

is being planned for March 11 in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's much larger neighbor and the regional protector of the Al-Khalifa monarchy. The Saudi monarchy is terrified that calls for reform or the ouster of the monarchy could spread from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia, which is also a linchpin of world oil markets.

The Saudi monarchy may try to intervene militarily in Bahrain to crack down on the protests—a decision it has already taken once, after popular protests in 1996. Based on eyewitness reports, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* stated yesterday that 15 tank carriers transporting a total of 30 tanks were traveling towards Bahrain on the King Fahd causeway connecting Bahrain to Saudi Arabia.

Al-Masry Al-Youm noted reports that Saudi authorities told Washington they were "prepared to intervene" in Bahrain last Wednesday.

In an attempt to defuse the protests, Bahrain's monarchy has attempted to strike a deal with the bourgeois opposition. Last week the regime released scores of political prisoners and offered to engage in dialogue with some representatives of Shiite political parties.

Though they make up the majority of people living in Bahrain, the Shiite Muslim population is barred from many government jobs, including the army and police, by the Sunni Muslim monarchy. Many working-class Shiites also face discrimination in housing and the receipt of government benefits.

On Saturday a leading Shiite opposition leader, Hassan Mushaimaa, returned to Bahrain from exile in London. The leader of the Haq movement, Mushaimaa had been convicted in absentia for an alleged coup plot against the regime, but received a royal pardon last week. A spokesman for the government said that Mushaimaa would be part of the "national dialogue."

Upon his return to Manama, Al-Jazeera news reported that Mushaimaa said he wanted to see if the Bahraini government "was serious about dialogue or not."

Faced with ongoing protests, on Sunday King Hamad fired four cabinet ministers, including two members of the

royal family. The move is entirely cosmetic, however. The regime's key security personnel responsible for the crackdown against protesters remain in place—including the hated prime minister, Sheik Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the king's uncle, who has headed the government since 1971.

US President Barack Obama gave his full backing to the Bahraini monarchy over the weekend. "I welcome the announcement of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa about making important changes to the cabinet and restating his commitment to reform," the president said in a statement issued on Sunday.

Obama praised the despotic regime as a "long-standing partner," repeating the assurance given to the al-Khalifa dynasty by Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen. He visited Bahrain on Friday and described the country as a "critical ally."

Obama claimed there was an "opportunity for meaningful reform" through talks between the king's son, Crown Prince Salman, and some opposition groups. In particular, the monarchy is hoping that the Haq movement and the al-Wefaq Shiite political party, which holds 18 seats in the parliament, will strike a deal to wind down the mass protests.

Responding to the cabinet reshuffle and the regime's offer of talks, the anti-government crowds launched a mass march on Sunday through Manama. Thousands of demonstrators chanted "Down with the king" and held images of the monarch with lines scored across his face.

Confronted by growing opposition to the monarchy, al-Wefaq resigned from its seats in parliament on Sunday and pulled back from open dialogue with the crown prince.

In a move that will be met with consternation by the Bahraini monarchy and in Washington, protesters are reportedly calling for a general strike to be held on Sunday, March 6.



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