

Bahrain declares state of emergency

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The government of King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa has declared a three-month state of emergency in the Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. Protests against the royal regime have grown since Friday, with large parts of the capital, Manama, held by anti-government demonstrators.

The order from the king “authorized the commander of Bahrain’s defense forces to take all necessary measures to protect the safety of the country and its citizens,” according to a statement read out on television news on Tuesday.

The decree comes just one day after forces from the neighboring monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) entered the small island nation. Over a thousand Saudi soldiers and 150 armored personnel carriers crossed the causeway connecting Bahrain with eastern Saudi Arabia on Monday. An estimated 500 UAE police have also been sent to bolster the Bahraini regime’s security forces.

The neighboring Gulf sheikdom of Qatar, which already has some forces in the country, warned that it was considering sending additional security personnel to Bahrain to aid the Saudi-led intervention.

The state of martial law allows the government of Bahrain to increase its repression of the mass protests. At least ten people have been killed by police and pro-monarchy thugs since demonstrations broke out in February, while hundreds of demonstrators have been wounded or treated for teargas inhalation. An estimated 50 protesters remain in hospital with serious injuries inflicted during the demonstrations, according to the *Alwasatnews* web site.

Another two people were killed in clashes between protesters and police, backed by armed supporters of the regime, in the Manama suburb of Sitra on Tuesday. *Al-Jazeera* reported one area resident, Abdullah al-Hubaaishi, saying there were many wounded protesters on the streets of Sitra, a predominantly Shiite

neighborhood. The monarchy and the security forces are Sunni Muslim, and the Shiite majority of the population of Bahrain faces discrimination and a lack of economic opportunities.

“Most of them have been shot,” al-Hubaaishi told the news agency, adding that if security forces see “anybody in the road they will shoot them. If there is anybody in the road they will enter the houses.”

Hundreds more demonstrators were reportedly injured in other parts of Manama on Tuesday, as police fired teargas and rubber bullets into the crowds.

Abdel al-Mowada, a pro-regime member of Bahrain’s parliament, warned that the Saudi troops could join in the attacks on protesters. “I don’t know if they [the Saudi forces] are going to be in the streets or save certain areas,” he told *al-Jazeera*. “The government is willing to get together and make changes needed, but when the situation is like this, you cannot talk.”

Tens of thousands of protesters have massed outside the Saudi Arabian embassy in Manama to oppose the intervention by Saudi forces and to condemn the actions of King Hamad. “Saudi Arabia has no right to come to Bahrain. Our problem is with the government, not Saudi Arabia,” demonstrator Ali Mansour told the AFP news agency.

On Monday, protesters blocked access to large sections of Manama’s financial district. Police initially repelled several hundred demonstrators who were blockading office buildings, but thousands more protesters overwhelmed police later in the day to set up a series of roadblocks along the main road leading through the area.

The BBC reported that barricades had been erected around the financial district on Tuesday, and that thousands of anti-government protesters, many wearing masks to protect themselves from teargas, were occupying the area.

Doctors in one hospital in Manama told the *Wall Street Journal* that they have treated scores of people injured by police in the fight for control over the financial district. “We are seeing injuries due to beating from heavy objects but also swords, knives and rubber bullets,” Ahmed Jamal, a surgeon at Salmaniya hospital, told the *Journal*. “There are hundreds of minor injuries, and we have seen two fractured skulls” as well as people suffering from gas inhalation, Jamal added.

Pro-government thugs have stepped up a campaign of violence against the protesters. A group of armed men attacked the printing presses of Bahrain’s only opposition newspaper on Tuesday, and there are reports of demonstrators being attacked by supporters of the monarchy wielding clubs and swords.

The government in Iran has denounced the intervention of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are operating under the aegis of the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as “unacceptable” and “complicating” the situation in Bahrain. Tehran also demanded that Bahraini leaders avoid “violence and force against the population,” adding that the regime in Manama should respond to “the demands of protesters and respect their rights.”

Iran and the Saudi regime, backed by Washington, are the main regional powers in the Gulf. The Saudi monarchy has warned that Tehran could increase its influence in Bahrain should the al-Khalifa regime fall; however, the principal concern in Riyadh and the other sheikdoms of the GCC is that the mass uprising in Bahrain be put down in order to prevent the spread of anti-government demonstrations across the region.

The United States government is also fearful of the fall of the Bahraini monarchy. Washington has backed the al-Khalifas for decades, with the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet based in the country since 1995, and is concerned that the fall of the regime as a result of a mass movement of the working class could threaten this vital military base. In addition, Washington fears the spread of revolt to Saudi Arabia, its key ally in the Gulf and the world’s biggest oil exporter.

The Obama administration, while voicing cynical appeals for the Bahrain monarchy to show “restraint,” is now blaming the protesters for the violence. “The US also believes that hard-line members of the opposition have a responsibility to refrain from intimidating

violence, and that the broader opposition needs to respond to efforts to begin a dialogue,” read a White House statement issued on Monday.

Washington’s efforts to attribute the bloodshed to elements in the opposition gives the Bahraini authorities, backed by the forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, a green light to further crack down on demonstrators in the name of “law and order.”

While elements of the bourgeois opposition have signaled they are willing to strike a deal with the al-Khalifa dynasty, the mood on the streets is increasingly hostile to the monarchy. Faced with mass outrage at the killing and beating of protesters, the main Shiite opposition party, al-Wefaq, has stated that it cannot re-enter talks with the regime.

“When all we see is the language of force, and with the government showing no response to political demands since the Crown Prince talked about dialogue, it puts more pressure on al-Wefaq to change their demands,” said Abdul Khalil, a leader of the al-Wefaq party, which served in Bahrain’s rubber-stamp parliament before resigning in protest at the slaying of demonstrators last month.

Al-Wefaq is calling for a new constitution, a more powerful parliament and a constitutional monarchy. However, the mood among the anti-regime protesters in Bahrain is becoming more militant by the day, with crowds calling for the fall of the royal family and more equal distribution of the country’s oil wealth.



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