US-backed Bahrain regime tortures, murders critics

David Walsh
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The regime of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Bahrain, which the Obama administration backs to the hilt, is continuing its violent repression of political opposition. The Khalifa regime imposed a state of emergency, after its security forces, backed by troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, violently cleared protesters from Pearl Square in Manama, the kingdom's capital, on March 16.

More than 400 people have been arrested, including human rights activists, doctors, bloggers and oppositionists. Twenty-seven political opponents and protesters are officially reported dead and dozens are missing. A leading newspaper has been shut down and its editors and reporters threatened with imprisonment.

Two Shiite activists have been murdered in prison, according to human rights organizations and the families of the victims. The Bahraini interior ministry claimed that Ali Issa Saqer, 31, died when guards tried to restrain him for "causing chaos." According to news reports, however, Saqer's corpse showed telltale signs of torture and abuse.

The BBC reports that "Photos taken before his burial showed criss-cross purple lash marks all over his [Saqer's] back. His legs were also badly bruised, and his toes and feet were covered in purple bruises.

"There was a big bruise on the left side of his head and possible burn marks on his ankles and wrists, said Daniel Williams, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch (HRW), who viewed the body as it was being prepared for burial.

"'This looked much worse than anything I've seen,' Mr Williams said, referring to other cases in Bahrain of apparent lash marks seen on the backs of people detained at checkpoints."

Zakaraya Rashed Hassan, 40, was "found dead" in a jail cell, according to Bahrain's officials. An official postmortem alleged he died of complications from sickle-cell anemia. Hassan's family dismissed the claim. The victim was detained April 2 on charges of "inciting hatred, publishing false news, promoting sectarianism and calling for the overthrow of the regime" on social networking sites.

Williams of Human Rights Watch told the BBC, "It is extremely scary that in all three cases of the deaths last week, the families only heard about their loved ones when they were [already] dead."

Nabeel Rajab of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights told the media, "We believe they [the authorities] killed them in prison." In retaliation, Bahrain's government turned around and accused Rajab of fabricating images and publishing them on the Internet; he was called in for questioning, in an effort to intimidate anyone considering further exposure of the government's crimes.

Rajab told the *Guardian*, "They want to do their crimes in secret. … I am one of the few human rights activists who has not yet been arrested and the government wants to silence me and prevent me from doing my work."

Bahrain's public prosecutor is also questioning three senior journalists, fired from the kingdom's only opposition newspaper, *Al-Wasat* ("The Center"), over accusations they falsified news about the regime's mistreatment of detainees. The newspaper was suspended April 2, but allowed to resume publishing the next day, after the journalists "resigned." The three allege they were set up by the government as part of a disinformation campaign.

Zainab Alkhawaja, the daughter of another prominent human rights activist, Abdulhadi Alkhawaja, launched a hunger strike April 11 to protest the beating and arrest of her father, along with the detention of her husband,

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brother-in-law and uncle.

Alkhawaja alleges that masked men burst into her family's home and beat her father unconscious before the eyes of his family. She posted an angry open letter to President Barack Obama on her blog Monday.

Describing the arrest, she writes that her father never "raised a hand to resist" his assailants, "and the only words he said were 'I can't breathe'. Even after he was unconscious the masked men kept kicking and beating him while cursing and saying that they were going to kill him. This is a very real threat considering that in the past two weeks alone three political prisoners have died in custody. The special forces also beat up and arrested my husband and brother-in-law."

With considerable bitterness, Zainab Alkhawaja directly addresses Obama: "When you were sworn in as president of the United States, I had high hopes. I thought: here is a person who would have never become a president if it were not for the African-American fight for civil liberties; he will understand our fight for freedom. Unfortunately, so far my hopes have been shattered. I might have misunderstood. What was it you meant Mr. President? YES WE CAN… support dictators? YES WE CAN… help oppress pro-democracy protesters? YES WE CAN… turn a blind eye to a people's suffering? …

"I am writing this letter to let you know, that if anything happens to my father, my husband, my uncle, my brother-in-law, or to me, I hold you just as responsible as the AlKhalifa regime. Your support for this monarchy makes your government a partner in crime. I still have hope that you will realize that freedom and human rights mean as much to a Bahraini person as it does to an American, Syrian or a Libyan and that regional and political considerations should not be prioritized over liberty and human rights."

The US remains steadfast in its support for the murderous Khalifa regime, even as Washington blathers on about "democracy" and "human rights" in Libya.

The Bahrain News Agency reported that Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Bahrain's Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander, received Gen. James N. Mattis, chief of the US Central Command, at Riffa Palace on April 6.

The Crown Prince, according to the government news agency, "hailed the US support for Bahrain's security and stability which epitomizes strong ties bonding the two friendly countries. He also stressed the kingdom's keenness to further promote bilateral relations and cooperation mainly in the military and defence field. … Both sides also reviewed regional developments and the need to safeguard regional security and stability." US Deputy Chief of Mission Stephanie Williams also attended the meeting.

A *Washington Post* editorial chastised the Obama administration Monday for its silence on the Bahrain crackdown. The *Post* notes that while the US is intervening in Libya and has been vocal about government violence in Syria, "the president and his administration remain mostly silent about another ugly campaign of repression underway in the Arab world, in the Persian Gulf emirate of Bahrain. The reason is easy to understand: Bahrain hosts an important U.S. naval base, and the wave of arrests, extrajudicial killings and media censorship has been strongly supported—if not ordered—by neighboring Saudi Arabia."

The blatant double standard, the newspaper asserts, is "counterproductive" and likely to come back to haunt the US. The *Post* advises the White House to pressure officials in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and—perhaps most importantly from the point of view of public relations—let "the rest of the region know where it stands."

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