

Bahraini regime pursues savage repression

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The regime of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Bahrain is continuing its reign of terror against political opponents. According to human rights organizations, nearly 1,000 people have been arrested or are missing in the recent crackdown on popular opposition to the autocratic regime that began in mid-March.

Dozens of protesters have died in clashes with security forces since the declaration of martial law in the small island nation March 15, an action backed up by the introduction of 2,000 Saudi troops.

Bahraini authorities are resorting to abuse and torture of detainees. This has resulted in the deaths already of numerous critics of the government while in custody, allegedly including one female student. In several of the cases, photographs of the corpses have surfaced revealing the results of brutal beatings or whippings.

In regard to the death of the young woman, as yet unnamed, the *Guardian* reports that she died after being “beaten up last month by government supporters at Bahrain University,” adding, “A family member confirmed her death but the circumstances remained unclear.”

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) issued a statement April 19 urging an “independent investigation” into the death of 49-year-old Karim Fakhrawi, one of the founders of *Al Wasat*, an independent newspaper, who died in custody on April 12. The organization declared that it was “outraged” to learn of Fakhrawi’s death, one week after his arrest, demanding, “Those responsible must be arrested and tried.” The Bahraini authorities claim that the businessman died of kidney failure, although his relatives report that he was healthy at the time of his detention.

Earlier in April, a member of an Amnesty International fact-finding team in Bahrain noted that in the deaths of protesters “there has been a lot of use of excessive force by the security forces, and some of the deaths—in fact, most of the deaths—have been caused by

the use of shotguns—sometimes at a very close range.”

The Bahraini government has attempted to silence all opposition, including parties and individuals who have long demonstrated subservience to the reactionary Khalifa royal family. The quite moderate *Al Wasat* has been targeted, with several of its leading figures incarcerated. The regime has also threatened to suppress Bahrain’s largest opposition bloc and the biggest political party in the country, Al Wafaq. The justice ministry accused the latter of “undertaking activities that harmed social peace, national unity, and inciting disrespect for constitutional institutions.”

Anti-government activists report that doctors and medical personnel are being rounded up, most of them Shiites. They are suspected of having participated in last month’s protests, or having treated victims of police and military violence.

A Wafaq politician, Mattar Ibrahim Mattar, alleged that security forces arrived at two medical centers, Ibn Sina and al-Razi, “and detained an unknown number of people,” according to Reuters. He told the news agency, “They detained doctors, nurses and other staff and brought them to an unknown location. We are worried what happened to them.” “I cannot reach by phone my brother who works in Razi,” he added.

An activist who works for the government told Reuters he saw more than a dozen members of the security forces surrounding al-Razi medical center while arrests were made inside.

According to *Time* magazine, “those who have been arrested at gunpoint and let go tell of being bound by their hands and feet with cables tied so tight blood circulation is cut off; they described being gagged and blindfolded for days.” Detainees in Bahrain in the past, reports Human Rights Watch, have been subjected to electro-shock devices, including cattle prods and stun guns.

Time continues, “Once the torture ends, jailhouse

conditions are still brutal. One leading activist spent six months in prison, in a cell he described as being ‘not much wider’ than a bath towel.”

Evidence is emerging that the Saudi forces, writes the *Guardian*, “have been involved in violence against the opposition in the mainly Shia villages and suburbs around Manama [Bahrain’s capital]. In a graphic eyewitness account of the repression given to the *Observer*, a Bahraini who has been caught up in the violence claimed that officers with Saudi accents, in plainclothes but armed with automatic weapons, had led attacks on members of the Shia opposition on several occasions over the past month.”

Human Rights Watch has accused the regime of creating a “climate of fear,” especially in Shia neighborhoods and villages “where night-time raids appear designed mainly to instil terror among the mostly poor residents” (Inter Press Service).

The repression has extended beyond Bahrain’s borders. The regime has already taken reprisals against Bahraini students at numerous British universities who participated in recent protests against their government’s policies. The students were informed that their scholarships were cancelled, and they were ominously ordered home, where they face the danger of arrest and torture.

The US government, along with the American media, has been largely silent about the repression, as the Bahraini regime, and its backer, Saudi Arabia, are key allies and critical to the pursuit of American geopolitical interests in the region. Bahrain is home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, a critical component of the American presence in the Persian Gulf.

In December 2010, two months before the mass protests erupted, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton visited Bahrain and hailed it in a press conference as a “model partner.” She also noted at a town hall meeting that she was “very impressed by the progress that Bahrain is making on all fronts—economically, politically, socially. There is a very comprehensive vision of where the people and the Government of Bahrain are headed.” Clinton went on to praise the regime’s “strong broadly-held commitment to democracy.”

In a speech that same night, the secretary of state forcefully asserted, “The United States is proud of our partnership with Bahrain, which has flourished for

many years.... The starting point for the United States is our profound commitment to the security, stability and development of the region. We have enduring stakes here. We have historical friendships here. We have invested blood and treasure to protect those stakes, those friendships and those vital national security interests. We have acted to reverse aggression and no one should mistake our resolve in standing by our friends.”

Clinton made one passing reference to oil in her Bahrain speech. Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a major establishment think tank, can afford to be more frank. In an April 14 comment, “U.S. Strategy in the Gulf,” Cordesman writes, “US strategy must be based on the security of global energy exports and they are driven by exports from the Gulf. Unless the Executive Branch and Congress accept this reality, they may never be able to agree on giving the region the priority and funding that vital US security interests require.”

Cordesman goes on: “The US must assure its partners in the Southern Gulf that it will stay in the region, and maintain a strong and active presence in the bases and facilities the US is allowed to use in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman.” He concludes, “Iran cannot be allowed to dominate the region, and the continued safety of energy exports from the Gulf is a core US National Security priority. Afghanistan is a war of choice—defending the Persian Gulf is a necessity.”



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