

Saudi protests against Bahrain invasion, repression

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Hundreds protested in Saudi Arabia Friday demanding an end to the Saudi occupation of Bahrain and the release of the dictatorial kingdom's political prisoners.

It was the second day of mass protests, which have been concentrated in the predominantly Shiite eastern region of the country, the center of Saudi Arabia's oilfields and refineries.

Friday's demonstrations also saw protesters rally outside the interior ministry in Riyadh in support of individuals they referred to as the "forgotten political prisoners," who in some cases have been imprisoned for as long as 16 years without charges or trials for daring to demand political rights.

The larger demonstrations took place in the eastern city of Qatif and nearby villages, where demonstrators marched through the streets carrying banners and candles to denounce the Saudi military's intervention in neighboring Bahrain and to demand the release of over 100 people, including children, who have been arrested in the area during protests over the last month.

In the village of Awwamiya, near Qatif, scores of women demonstrated, chanting for the release of political prisoners and denouncing the regime's suppression of women's rights. The monarchy has rejected widespread demands that women be allowed to vote and run in municipal elections set for next September.

While massed security forces closed in on the demonstrators, there were no reported clashes.

"Bahrain, we will respond to your call," the demonstrators chanted in solidarity with Bahrain's predominantly Shia population, which is facing intense repression, with scores having been killed, at least 800 imprisoned, and several detainees tortured to death. The ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa monarchy has seized the only opposition newspaper and on Thursday moved to outlaw the largest political group in the country, Al Wefaq, together with another Shiite political formation.

After a tepid declaration by the State Department that Washington would "welcome" the Bahraini regime not outlawing the two organizations, the announcement of the ban was removed from the web site of the official Bahraini news agency. Members of the groups, however, say that the repression against them continues.

The Obama administration's concerns over the internal situation in Saudi Arabia and the growing crisis throughout the region were underscored this week with the visit to Riyadh by National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, who held talks with Saudi King Abdullah Wednesday. The discussion followed by barely a week a similar visit to the Saudi capital by Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

"The discussions highlighted the importance of the US-Saudi partnership rooted in strong historical ties and shared interests," an administration spokesman said. The statement included not a word about the Saudi participation in the crushing of the popular protests in Bahrain, much less about the internal repression in Saudi Arabia itself.

While loudly declaring its "humanitarian" concerns as it and its NATO allies pursue regime change in Libya by military means, the administration has issued no condemnation since the Saudi army rolled across the 16-mile causeway linking the oil-rich kingdom to Bahrain on March 14, initiating the brutal crackdown.

Speaking this week at the US-Islamic World Forum in Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that "a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't make sense in such a diverse region at such a fluid time." She mentioned Bahrain only briefly, celebrating "a decades-long friendship with Bahrain that we expect to continue long into the future."

As in Libya, it is strategic interests, not human rights, that drive US policy. Bahrain is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, providing a principal platform for the

projection of Washington's military power in the Persian Gulf. For its part, Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy has long been a strategic ally of US imperialism and, as the world's largest oil exporter, is the one country capable of boosting production to make up for crises elsewhere and thereby prevent an uncontrolled spiraling of fuel prices.

Washington also sees Saudi Arabia as a bulwark against Iranian influence in the region. Thus it loudly condemns human rights violations in Iran, while turning a blind eye to the merciless repression carried out by the Saudi monarchy.

These interests also dictate the agenda of the mass media, which has largely blacked out the protests in Saudi Arabia as well as the brutal crackdown in Bahrain.

The Saudi monarchy has sought to defuse social and political tensions by extending a multibillion-dollar social aid pact and by intensifying repression. In February, King Abdullah pledged \$36 billion in benefits, including a 15 percent pay hike for public employees and increased aid for students and the unemployed. This was followed by the promise of another \$58 billion for education, health care and infrastructure.

The systemic discrimination against the Shia minority is a major catalyst for unrest in the eastern province. And the attempt by Bahrain's ruling dynasty to falsely cast the mass protests as a sectarian Shiite revolt has deepened tensions.

The country's highest religious figure, the Grand Mufti, has issued a religious edict branding protest as "un-Islamic" and ordered 1.5 million copies of it printed up. The so-called fatwa calls for "strengthening cohesion and affinity."

But there are growing indications that the unrest in Saudi Arabia is being driven by intense social and economic contradictions that affect the Sunni majority as well.

While Saudi Arabia's daily production of some 8.3 million barrels of crude supports a GDP per capita of about \$24,000 a year, the overwhelming share of the wealth is monopolized by the House of Saud and its 6,000 princes.

The official unemployment rate is 11 percent, not counting underemployment and not to mention the large numbers of women who are excluded from the labor market. For young people—60 percent of Saudi Arabia's population is under the age of 30—conditions are far worse. The unemployment rate among 20- to 24-year-olds is close to 40 percent.

Large numbers of well-educated graduates cannot find

work, and many of them are closely following the revolutionary upheavals throughout the region.

In a country where all public protests and expressions of dissent are outlawed, there have been increasing reports of workers' protests over jobs and income.

On March 13, over 100 Saudis staged a rare sit-in in front of Saudi Telecom in the capital of Riyadh, demanding salary increases and improved working conditions. The workers demanded the same 15 percent raise that King Abdullah decreed for government employees last month.

And on April 10, scores of unemployed university graduates and literacy teachers carried out protests both in Jeddah and Riyadh. The actions had been organized on Facebook.

In Jeddah, the protest escalated into physical clashes between placard-waving teachers and police at the Ministry of Civil Service's provincial office. The teachers were demanding better wages and that their temporary jobs be made permanent.

Unemployed university graduates gathered outside the Education Ministry's offices in Jeddah and Riyadh to demand jobs. Among them were young men who said they had not been able to find a job since 2003.

Meanwhile, Saudi oppositionists launched a campaign for political prisoners with the posting of a 10-minute YouTube video entitled "Saudis Missing," denouncing the imprisonment of thousands of Saudis for political reasons based on sham trials or no trials at all. The video includes interviews with family members of Saudi activists, some of whom were rounded up in 2007 at a meeting in Jeddah and are still being held without trial.



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