

Protests, repression continue in Bahrain and Yemen

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4 April 2011

Even as Washington and the European powers bomb Libya on supposed “humanitarian” grounds, the US-backed regimes in Yemen and Bahrain are continuing their brutal crackdown on protesters.

On Friday, Bahrain’s largest opposition party claimed that the government was intensifying its arrests of protesters and opposition activists. The al-Wefaq party claimed that Bahraini security forces had arrested over 300 people since March 16, and that 24 people remain missing.

One of the opposition activists who has “disappeared” is Mahmoud al-Youssef, a prominent Internet blogger who has been highly critical of the al-Khalifa royal family that rules Bahrain. Human rights groups claim al-Youssef was taken into custody on Wednesday, but they are unable to obtain any information about his status or whereabouts.

Tanks are stationed near prominent buildings in the Bahraini capital, Manama, and there are police checkpoints located throughout the country. There are reports of nighttime raids by unidentified gangs, believed to be plainclothes security agents or backers of the government, on homes in poor Shiite neighborhoods. Residents have reported being assaulted and that their possessions have been destroyed.

Nabeel Rajab, the chief of the Bahrain Human Rights Center, described how several dozen masked men raided his home two weeks ago. “They threatened to rape me and one man was touching my body. They hit me with shoes and punched me with fists. They were insulting me, saying things like, ‘You’re Shiite so go back to Iran.’”

Rajab was blindfolded and taken from his home, which he shares with his 8-year old daughter, then beaten for two hours before being returned. Another gang of masked men armed with guns returned to his house on Wednesday to threaten him and a group of journalists he was speaking with.

For now, such measures have quelled the protests and strikes in Bahrain. But mass opposition to the al-Khalifa regime remains. “We cannot stop,” one protester told the Associated Press on Friday. “We might go quiet for a bit to mourn the dead and treat the injured and see those in jail, but then we will rise up again,” said the man, who had been fired from his teaching job for participating in a demonstration.

In a further sign that the regime is tightening its grip on power, the country’s only opposition newspaper, *Al-Wasat*, was shut down on Sunday. The official Bahrain News Agency accused the newspaper of “unethical” coverage of the ruling family and the mass protests against it.

The most widely-read publication in Bahrain, *Al-Wasat* was shut down pursuant to the emergency powers asserted by King Hamad last month. The royal decree allows the authorities to take any action deemed necessary to put down signs of opposition.

Mansoor al-Jamri, editor-in-chief and co-owner of *Al-Wasat*, issued a statement saying that the move was an attempt to “silence independent news in Bahrain.”

“There is now no other voice but that of the state. The news blackout is so intense,” added al-Jamri. The online edition of *Al-Wasat* was also shut

down, part of wider moves by the Bahraini government to restrict access to web sites.

Mass protests and strikes have rocked the small island kingdom in the Persian Gulf since February. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of the capital, occupying the main traffic roundabout at Pearl Square as well as sections of the city’s financial district.

However, Bahraini security forces, backed by 1,500 police and troops from the neighboring monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), violently cleared protesters from Pearl Square on March 16. At least six people died, mainly from gunshot wounds, and hundreds were seriously injured that day.

The US Navy Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, and the country is considered a key strategic ally in the region. Washington has fully backed the al-Khalifa regime throughout the protests, and gave its blessing to the Saudi-UAE intervention force whose presence gave the Bahraini authorities the firepower needed to crush the anti-government crowds across Manama.

Bahrain’s interior ministry acknowledged last week that 24 protesters had been killed since February. Given the source of this information, and the fact that many prisoners remain unaccounted for, the real number killed by the al-Khalifa regime could be even higher.

There are reports that Bahraini police opened fire on a group of youth in the working class village of Sar on Wednesday, killing a 15-year old boy. Since the Saudi-backed crackdown last month, Bahraini police and armed pro-regime thugs have been patrolling and intimidating the mainly Shiite Muslim neighborhoods where opposition to the monarchy is greatest.

Some 70 percent of Bahrain’s citizens are of the Shiite religious group, but the royal family, its security forces, and most of the government are Sunni Muslims. The Shiite majority has long faced sectarian discrimination, compounding the enormous social inequality between workers and the ruling elite in the oil-rich country.

While the mass protests against the Bahraini regime have taken a non-sectarian character, with the demonstrators repeatedly calling for the unity of Sunnis and Shiites, the monarchy and its backers in Riyadh and Washington have sought to whip up anti-Shiite bigotry.

As well as the presence of pro-government Sunni mobs, backed by police, in Shiite suburbs, the regime has sought to portray the protests as the work of foreign Shiite groups. Last week, Bahraini Foreign Minister Sheik Khaled al-Khalifa accused the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah of training opposition activists in Bahrain.

Without providing any evidence, the al-Khalifas and the Saudi Arabian government have also accused the Shiite clerical regime in Iran of fomenting the protests in Bahrain. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, speaking after talks with the Bahraini monarchy just days before the March 16 crackdown, made the unsubstantiated assertion that Tehran was seeking to take advantage of the protests in Bahrain to expand their influence in the country.

Whatever their concerns about “Iranian influence,” the primary focus of

the ruling elites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and their longtime sponsor in Washington, is to put down any movement of the working class in Bahrain and across the Middle East that threatens the rule of the local capitalists and the interests of imperialism.

The Persian Gulf is the main oil-producing region in the world, and the social and democratic demands of the masses expressed in the Bahraini demonstrations and strikes—for democratic rights, secure and decent employment, and a more equitable distribution of oil wealth—cut directly across the interests of Washington, which for decades has utilized the puppet Gulf monarchies in order to exploit these vast natural resources.

Similar motives lay behind Washington's continuing support for the Saleh dictatorship in Yemen.

Mass protests have taken place in Yemen, located in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula, since January. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets of the capital, Sanaa, and other cities to demand the ouster of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been in power since 1978.

Though Yemen has few natural resources, it shares a long border with Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil producer, and oil-rich Oman. Additionally, much of the shipping from the Persian Gulf to Europe passes long the Yemeni coastline.

The Saleh regime has launched murderous assaults against protesters for the past six weeks, with the bloodiest incident coming on March 18, when police and pro-Saleh gangs killed an estimated 49 people camped near the university in Sanaa. Police snipers located on rooftops killed many of the unarmed demonstrators, and police attacked ambulances and hospitals attempting to treat the wounded.

Defying the crackdown, hundreds of thousands flocked onto the streets of Sanaa for the next several days, backed by thousands of tribesmen who came into the capital from the surrounding countryside. Faced with a mass insurrection that was threatening the interests of the entire Yemeni elite, sections of the regime began to split from President Saleh.

Proclaiming their support for the "youth revolution," powerful military figures and members of the government have attempted to strike a deal with Saleh. This deal, modeled on the recent maneuvers in Egypt and Tunisia, will see Saleh step down but will leave the repressive state apparatus and most of the old regime personnel in place.

With a fractured government, little power outside Sanaa, and limited authority even within the capital, Saleh has only been able to maintain his grip on the presidency thanks to ongoing support from the US government. Washington has offered only token criticism of the regime's killing of protesters, while its ambassador in Sanaa has brokered talks between Saleh and some opposition leaders.

Saleh has so far refused to meet the opposition's demand that he step down, insisting that he will stay in office until early elections can be held, possibly later this year.

On Saturday, the Joint Meeting of Parties, an umbrella group of six Yemeni opposition groups, called for Saleh to step aside in favor of his vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, who has represented the regime in recent talks.

Nothing could more clearly show the servility of the bourgeois opposition to the Yemeni regime and its US backers. Al-Hadi has been vice president of Yemen since 1994 and is entirely complicit in the crimes of the Saleh government, including its active collaboration with US imperialism's so-called "war on terror."

The JMP includes the Islah group, an Islamist party based on support from tribes in the country's north, and the Yemeni Socialist Party, the successor to the ruling party of South Yemen. There remains a strong secessionist movement in Yemen's south, which until 1990 was a separate state backed by the Soviet Union. Saleh ruled US-backed North Yemen, taking over the unified country amid bitter fighting that lasted into the mid-1990s.

Responding to the opposition's demands, Saleh's spokesman Ahmed al-Sufi reiterated that the president was "ready to discuss the peaceful handover of power according to the constitution." Saleh has promised not to run in the next presidential election, scheduled for 2013 at the latest.

Speaking to a group of Muslim clerics on Sunday, Saleh said he would not step down before elections were called and demanded that JMP halt all protests, according to a report by the state SABA news agency.

While the opposition leaders carry out talks with the hated regime, the mood on the streets is one of implacable opposition to Saleh. Tens of thousands marched in Sanaa on Saturday, while police and army personnel have clashed with anti-government groups across the country.

The US embassy in Sanaa issued a statement on March 30 insinuating that the protesters themselves were responsible for the violence in country. "Such demonstrations in recent weeks have led to violence, confrontation, and casualties," the US officials claimed. US Ambassador Gerald Feierstein has already stated that his government opposes the mass protests, stating, "we don't believe demonstrations are the place where Yemen's problems will be solved."

With this backing from Washington, Saleh is emboldened to continue to attack on demonstrators. Police in the city of Taiz fired live ammunition at anti-government protesters on Sunday. Medical personnel in the city reported that one person was killed and three others seriously injured by gunshot wounds. Another 400 were treated for tear gas inhalation.

In addition, a group of female protesters in Taiz was attacked by police with sticks and rocks. The women had been marching down a street in the city, located in the south of the country, when they were set upon by Saleh's forces.

The president's senior commander in Taiz, Abdullah Qiran, had previously been stationed in the major southern port city of Aden. There, security forces under Qiran's command are accused of killing 48 anti-government demonstrators since January.

There are signs that Saleh is using claims of Al Qaeda influence in Yemen to secure US support for a new military offensive against rebellious provinces, especially in the south of the country. On Friday, a Yemeni government official told Fox News that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as well as another Islamist militant organization, the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, had seized control of the southern town of Jaar.

Fox reported that the area has "been a focus of US and Yemeni government counterterrorism activities" in recent years. There are reports that Yemeni armed forces—backed and trained by the Pentagon—had moved troops closer to the town.

The hypocrisy of Washington's position in the region is staggering. While the Obama administration justifies its backing for Saleh on the grounds of the fight against Al Qaeda in Yemen, the US is providing military support for the Libyan "rebels" of the Interim Transitional Council based in Benghazi. This collection of forces allegedly includes Islamists linked to Al Qaeda.



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