

# Bahrain tries 21 activists on trumped-up charges

Niall Green  
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On Sunday, authorities began the trial of 21 people involved in the recent anti-government protests in the tiny Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain.

From February until mid-March, the island kingdom was rocked by massive protests and strikes involving hundreds of thousands of workers and youth. Many of the protesters were Shiite Muslims, who make up the majority of Bahrain's citizens but are discriminated against by the Sunni Muslim royal family and government.

On March 15 Bahrain's King Hamad al-Khalifa declared a state of emergency and imposed martial law. Backed by hundreds of troops from the neighboring Sunni kingdoms of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Bahraini security forces unleashed a wave of violent repression against protesters.

In the following weeks an estimated 800 have been arrested for allegedly taking part in or organizing protests. Many of those detained are being held incommunicado, with families uncertain if they are alive or dead. So far, four opposition activists are known have been tortured to death in police custody.

While the state of emergency was officially lifted last week, police and pro-regime gangs still roam working-class Shiite neighborhoods to terrorize the population. Meanwhile, opposition political groups and media outlets have either been banned or prevented from freely operating. Over 1,000 government workers have been fired for taking part in street demonstrations.

The trial of the 21 activists—seven are being tried in absentia—is part of this campaign of fear and intimidation by the Bahraini state. They face trumped-up charges of plotting to overthrow the monarchy as part of a conspiracy concocted by “a terrorist organization abroad working for a foreign country.”

These charges are an attempt by the Bahraini

authorities, and their principal regional backers in Saudi Arabia, to blame the mass protests on neighboring Iran.

The Shiite clerical regime in Tehran is seen as the main rival of the Saudi monarchy in the Persian Gulf. Seeking to portray itself as the defender of Shiites in the Persian Gulf region, the Iranian foreign ministry issued a statement this week warning against “adverse and negative” consequences of the crackdown on Bahraini protesters. However, Tehran has denied any involvement in the Bahraini protests.

An Iranian pro-regime organization announced on Tuesday that it plans to send a convoy of aid to Bahrain as an act of “solidarity” with the protesters. The chief of Iran's Association of Islamic Revolution Followers, Mehdi Eghrarian, told a press conference in Tehran that the convoy would leave the Iranian port of Bushehr on May 16.

While Bahraini and Saudi monarchs are seizing on their long-standing rivalry with Iran to justify repressing the protests, the uprising in Bahrain—as in the other Arab nations—was a product of deep social inequality and dictatorial rule.

Bahrain's royal family and a thin layer of its associates monopolize political power and the country's oil wealth at the expense of the working class—be they Sunni, Shiite, native-born or immigrant. Decades of sectarian discrimination against Bahrain's Shiite majority, who are barred from many government jobs and often face obstacles getting housing and services, only exacerbated social tensions.

The mass protests, moreover, were non-sectarian. Demonstrators in the capital, Manama, routinely chanted, “Not Sunni, not Shiite, only Bahraini,” and appealed for support across the religious divide. It was the al-Khalifa monarchy that sought to whip up

sectarian divisions, encouraging gangs of better-off Sunnis and plainclothes police officers to attack Shiite businesses and neighborhoods.

Deepening its offensive against the Shiite majority, the government has demolished some Shiite mosques that authorities claim are centers of opposition to the al-Khalifa regime.

The 21 people on trial have been denied access to lawyers throughout their incarceration. “Lawyers were called less than 24 hours before the trial started,” said Nabeel Rajab of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. “They did not have time to prepare.”

There are also reports that some defendants have been tortured while awaiting trial. US-based Human Rights Watch reported last week that one of the accused had been hospitalized after being beaten in custody.

The trial is being held before a special military-civilian “hybrid” court, with military prosecutors and a panel of two civilian judges and one military judge. The defendants could face the death penalty under Bahrain’s draconian anti-terrorism laws.

Among those accused by the Bahraini regime are Hassan Mushaimaa, the leader of the Haq Shiite organization, who only returned from exile in London in February. Also standing trial are Ebrahim Shareef, the leader of the liberal Sunni-based Waad party, as well as Shiite clerics, human rights activists, and Internet bloggers.

The US government has backed its ally in Manama throughout the weeks of brutal repression against protesters. The White House and the State Department in Washington have only issued the most tepid calls for “restraint” and “respect for fundamental rights” in Bahrain.

Bahrain is home to the US Navy Fifth Fleet, which patrols the Persian Gulf, and the country is seen as a critical beachhead for US imperialism in the oil-rich region. This was confirmed by recent visits to Bahrain by the US Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who last month declared the al-Khalifa monarchy to be an ally that was “serious about real reform.”

So muted has the Obama administration been on the crackdown in Bahrain, that even the nominally liberal *Washington Post* newspaper felt compelled to editorialize on Monday that US interests were being damaged. The editors of the *Post*, one of the main

organs of American imperialism, are concerned that blatant US double standards in the region—staying silent on the abuses in Bahrain while waging a war against Libya on the bogus grounds that it is trying to protect civilians—exposes the fraudulent character of Obama’s “humanitarian” rhetoric.

After excusing the Obama administration for focusing its efforts on Libya, the *Post* stated that, “Bahrain could prove crucial to the outcome of this year’s Arab uprisings—and to whether it advances or damages the strategic interests of the United States.”

The paper counsels that “tolerating the repression” in Bahrain may endanger “long-term US interests, since the crackdown is likely to boomerang, sooner or later, against the Bahraini and Saudi ruling families.” To make matters worse for Washington, the *Post* warns that the Bahraini regime’s “crude political strategy” of blaming the Iranians for the protests “has had the effect of polarizing the country along sectarian lines,” a development that might strengthen Iran’s hand in the region.

The Obama administration has shown no sign of criticizing its allies in Bahrain, however. Even if Washington did voice token criticisms of the crackdown in Bahrain, it would, in the language of the *Washington Post*, only be in order to advance US “strategic interests.”



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