

Amid savage crackdown on protest, Obama welcomes Bahrain prince

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Bahrain's crown prince, Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, visited Washington this week and met with President Barack Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. During their various encounters with the crown prince, American officials stressed the importance of US relations with Bahrain and Washington's continued backing for the reactionary regime of King Hamad al-Khalifa.

Bahraini authorities, with the collaboration of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, have carried out mass repression since the middle of March, detaining thousands of opponents and critics, beating and torturing many. According to human rights activists in Bahrain, there are two political prisoners for every one thousand citizens. Four such prisoners have died in custody, with obvious signs of abuse on their corpses. Several dozen are simply reported as missing.

On Monday, the day before the crown prince met with Obama in the Oval Office, 47 Bahraini doctors and nurses were charged by a special military court with attempting to overthrow the country's monarchy. They face years in prison. The 23 doctors and 24 nurses have been detained since March. Their real crime is that they witnessed and, in some cases, documented the horrific brutality meted out against protesters in the enormous demonstrations that erupted in Bahrain in February.

The cynical hypocrisy of Obama's chatting with a representative of the Bahraini royal family, even as he issues pronouncements in favor of the "Arab Spring" and wages war on the Gaddafi regime in Libya, put the White House in something of a bind. The administration found its usual cowardly and unprincipled solution to the problem. It held a meeting that was officially *not* a meeting.

The *Wall Street Journal*, noting how "skittish" the administration was about "appearing too close" to the Bahraini monarchy, explained that no photographs of the

encounter were released (although the Bahrain News Agency appears to have obtained or taken one) "and the White House offered no platform for Mr. Obama or Prince Salman to deliver remarks. U.S. officials were so concerned about keeping Mr. Obama at a distance from the crown prince that the meeting was not even on the president's daily public schedule ...

"Instead an administration official characterized their discussion as a 'drop by' Mr. Obama made at the end of Prince Salman's meeting with National Security Advisor Tom Donilon."

The only proof that the president actually met with the Bahraini crown prince took the form of a statement June 7 from the office of the White Press press secretary summarizing the discussion.

It might be useful to contrast the statements of American government officials with the reality in the geopolitically significant island nation, home to the US Fifth Fleet and close ally of oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

Tuesday's White House statement read, in part: "The President reaffirmed the strong commitment of the United States to Bahrain. He welcomed King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa's decision to end the State of National Safety [state of emergency] early and the announcement that the national dialogue on reform would begin in July. He also expressed strong support for the Crown Prince's ongoing efforts to initiate the national dialogue and said that both the opposition and the government must compromise to forge a just future for all Bahrainis."

In a press release issued the same day, Amnesty International reported on "fresh claims that dozens of doctors and nurses on trial before a military court were tortured in detention and made to sign false confessions...

"Relatives of the accused have alleged to Amnesty International that security officials at Bahrain's Criminal Investigations Directorate forced detainees to stand for long periods, deprived them of sleep, beat them with

rubber hoses and wooden boards containing nails, and made them sign papers while blindfolded.”

The White House press release continued: “To create the conditions for a successful dialogue, the President emphasized the importance of following through on the government’s commitment to ensuring that those responsible for human rights abuses will be held accountable. The President noted that, as a long-standing partner of Bahrain, the United States believes that the stability of Bahrain depends upon respect for the universal rights of the people of Bahrain, including the right to free speech and peaceful assembly, and a process of meaningful reform that is responsive to the aspirations of all.”

Amnesty International noted that “One of the detainees, who was bailed last month, was slapped in the face while blindfolded, insulted and threatened: ‘if you don’t confess I’ll take you to someone who will make you confess’.

“The same detainee was forced to remain standing for hours, denied sleep and placed in front of a cold air conditioning unit all night and then interrogated again the next morning while still blindfolded.

“I was so tired that I kept quiet and only answered yes or no,” he told Amnesty International.

“After a while he gave me some papers and made me sign them while I was still blindfolded. I did not see what I signed, but I signed on eight or nine papers.”

Later on Tuesday, Prince Salman met with Secretary of State Clinton. In her comments, Clinton remarked that it was very significant “to hear directly from the Crown Prince about the plans that Bahrain is pursuing with respect to dealing with the issues that it currently is considering at home, and to create the conditions for political and economic reform.”

Mohammed Maskati, president of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, told the Los Angeles Times in May about the Bahraini authorities’ methods of dealing with the issue of political opposition. He described the electroshock used on detainees: “You know an electric shaver? It looks like that but it is for electroshock. What was explained to us, it is the same size, the same style, but it shocks. ... They say they put it for 10 seconds, then they take it [away]. Some of them, they say, they say they put it on sensitive places. ... On the back, on the head. Some of them they put it down in their private parts. But they don’t put it more than 10 seconds.”

Clinton concluded her brief remarks Tuesday with this comment: “Bahrain is a partner, and a very important one,

to the United States, and we are supportive of a national dialogue and the kinds of important work that the Crown Prince has been doing in his nation, and we look forward to it continuing.”

Maskati told the LA Times that torture was not used directly on female detainees. “They have different things for women. Some of the women said they showed them torturing a man in front of them. Some of the women, they only let them hear the shouting of a man in another room and they told them if you will not confess, you will face the same thing.”

Prince Salman met with Vice President Joseph Biden during his Washington visit as well. While the White House was again coy about the meeting, the Bahrain News Agency (BNA) boasted that the “US Administration has today reaffirmed its support for Bahrain’s stability. US Vice President Joe Biden voiced his country’s supportive stance as he received at the White House His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander.”

Nabeel Rajab, president of Bahrain’s Center for Human Rights, told Democracy Now! June 9, “Troops—Saudi troops, Jordanian troops, Bahraini troops—are arresting people ... and humiliating ... everybody. As you know, doctors [are] being referred to military trial, most of them—or if it is not all—being systematically tortured, sexually harassed, electrocuted, hanged and beaten. And this applies to most of the people who have been arrested.”

In his meeting with the US vice president, observes the BNA, the crown prince “renewed an invitation to Mr. Biden to visit the Kingdom of Bahrain, hoping the visit would be soon. The two leaders discussed [the] historic friendship bonding the Kingdom of Bahrain and the US. They also spotlighted key regional and international issues, stressing the importance of consolidating security and stability in the region.”



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