

US-backed Bahrain regime stages military trial of doctors and nurses

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The US-backed dictatorship of the al-Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain proceeded this week with the military trial of 47 doctors and nurses rounded up during mass protests last March.

This judicial travesty, which is emblematic of the ferocious repression unleashed by the regime of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa against the demonstrations that swept the country last February and March, has elicited no word of protest from Washington.

While the Obama administration has daily demanded “regime-change” in Libya and questioned the “legitimacy” of the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, it last week welcomed a Bahraini crown prince to the White House and praised the regime for its commitment to “reform” and “dialogue.”

Bahrain is the site of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet headquarters and is a close ally of Saudi Arabia, which sent troops to assist in the crackdown against the protests.

The hearing in the military court in the Bahraini capital of Manama had to be adjourned Monday after defendants rose to denounce the fact that they had been tortured during the 90 days they were held without trial.

While a state of emergency, akin to martial law, was formally lifted by the Bahraini regime at the beginning of this month, the military tribunals that it established remain in operation.

The *Times* of London, the only foreign newspaper allowed into the court, reported: “When asked to confirm his name, Ali al-Ekri, a senior surgeon at Salmaniya hospital in Manama, attempted to make a statement. ‘I want the court to know that all our confessions were obtained through torture,’ he said before the judge cut him off.”

The newspaper reported that the male prisoners “had their heads shaved and several looked gaunt and tired ... The women also looked drawn.”

McClatchy newspapers reported that one after another of the doctors and nurses—some of them weeping—attempted to make the same charge.

“Dr. Ali al Ekri, an orthopedic surgeon, and Rula al Saffar, the head of the nursing society, said their confessions were extracted after they’d been tortured,” McClatchy reported. “They said they had to sign the papers while blindfolded.”

In response, a military officer serving as judge demanded that the defendant say nothing outside of pleading “guilty” or “not

guilty.”

“When Dr. Zahra al Sammak, an anesthesiologist, insisted on describing the torture to which she’d been subjected, she was ordered escorted from the hearing,” according to McClatchy.

Several defense attorneys also charged that their clients had been tortured and demanded that they be granted an independent medical examination to corroborate their testimony. The military judge responded by saying that he would have the defendants examined by a military doctor.

The case was adjourned until June 20 for those charged with felonies, and June 27 for those accused of misdemeanors.

“They were not given the chance to tell the court what has happened to them in custody,” one of the defense attorneys told the *Times* after the hearing. “They were referred to a military doctor so there is no chance of an impartial examination.”

Amnesty International issued a report last week citing relatives who reported that the security forces had “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.” They also said that the prisoners had been held in groups of 10 in cells measuring no more than six meters square.

The charges against the medical professionals range from the preposterous—that they stockpiled weapons and stole medicine—to the patently political—that they acted, as the official Bahraini news agency put it, to “distort the image of Bahrain within the international community,” presumably by reporting how many men, women and children killed and wounded by the security forces had been brought to Salmaniya hospital, which received the bulk of the casualties during the repression last February and March.

The most pernicious and unfounded charge is that the accused refused to treat patients “based on their sect affiliations.”

This is in line with the regime’s official story that the mass demonstrations that erupted earlier this year were motivated by sectarian hatred. The defendants are mostly Shiite, as is 70 percent the population of Bahrain, which is ruled by a Sunni royal dynasty that systematically discriminates on the basis of religion.

The only “crime” committed by these medical professionals was to attempt to treat patients shot, beaten and gassed by the

regime's security forces in a hospital that was itself subjected to repeated brutal assaults.

The scurrilous character of the charges against the doctors and nurses was underscored by a report published Tuesday in the Bahraini pro-government newspaper *Gulf Daily News* which claimed that "a four-year-old boy died because of negligence by paramedics when Bahrain's main hospital was taken over by anti-government protesters."

It then quoted the father of the child, who said that he had called an ambulance on March 10, during the height of the protests and repression in Manama, after his son, who suffered congenital heart disease, fell ill. According to the father, the call was made at 10 a.m. and the boy had died by 10:30 a.m., before an ambulance had arrived. The father himself is quoted as saying that "it was difficult to drive around during the unrest," while at the same time demanding that the medical staff "face action."

The trial of the doctors and nurses is one of a growing number of drumhead proceedings being carried out before Bahrain's military tribunals.

On Sunday, a 20-year-old university student and poet, Ayat al-Qarmez, was sentenced to a year in prison for reading aloud a poem criticizing the Bahraini king. Held incommunicado for 15 days after his arrest, Ayat al-Qarmez recounts that she was beaten and tortured with electric shocks. Her family has been allowed to see her only after each of the three sessions in which she has been dragged before the military tribunal.

The poem, which she read to a rally demanding democratic rights last February, included the lines, addressed to the king: "We are the people who will kill humiliation and assassinate misery/ Don't you hear their cries, don't you hear their screams?"

According to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Ayat al-Qarmez "was forced to turn herself over to the authorities on 30 March after masked members of the security forces raided her parents' house on at least two occasions and reportedly threatened to kill her brothers unless she did so."

Brought before military courts on Sunday were Jawad Fairouz and Mattar Ebrahim Mattar, two former members of parliament for Al Wifaq, the Shiite opposition party, who resigned in protest over the repression. They are charged by the regime with "publicly inciting hatred" against the regime, "deliberately spreading rumors" and "taking part in illegal gatherings."

The military prosecutors said that they needed no witnesses to convict them as intelligence and interrogation reports would suffice. This points in all probability to confessions extracted under torture.

The charges themselves are illegal as both men enjoyed parliamentary immunity at the time of their alleged offenses.

Also brought into court June 12 was Mohammed al-Tajer, a prominent human rights lawyer who had been held incommunicado since his arrest April 15. He has also been

charged with "spreading rumors" and "inciting hatred" for the regime.

Meanwhile, a military court adjourned to September the appeal by two Bahrainis, Ali Abdulla Hassan Al Singees and Abdulaziz Abdulredha Ibrahim Hussain, who were sentenced to death in April for allegedly killing two policemen during the protests and repression.

Alongside the trials and jailings, the regime has dismissed or suspended some 2,000 people from their jobs and schools for political opposition. This week, Bahrain's Polytechnic University dismissed nearly 50 students for making political statements on Twitter and Facebook.

This is the real political context in which the Al-Khalifa dynasty has cynically claimed—with Washington's praise—that it is seeking a national "dialogue" and "reform." Reconciliation talks are supposedly to begin on July 1 under the guidance of the speaker of Bahrain's lower house, Khalifa bin Ahmed al Dharani, a member of the ruling dynasty.

The Wifaq party, which staged a demonstration of over 10,000 in the town of Sar on Saturday, has denounced the acts of the regime as provocations and charged it with promoting the "big lie" that the Shia population is seeking a theocratic state with the aid of Iran. The protest was met with teargas by security forces.

As the repression continues, a newly released State Department report underscores the role played by Washington in the violence that has been unleashed against the people of Bahrain.

An annual report detailing US-authorized arms sales agreements to governments around the world shows that the Obama administration authorized a more than doubling of the amount of military sales to Bahrain last year as compared to 2009. While the government had approved \$88 million in military hardware for the al-Khalifa regime in 2009, by 2010 this figure had risen to \$200 million.

Included in this amount was \$760,000 worth of rifles, shotguns, assault weapons and ammunition, which undoubtedly was utilized by the Bahraini security forces in the bloody suppression of the demonstrations against social inequality and for democratic rights.



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