

Protests continue against US-backed Bahraini dictatorship

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Six months after the US-backed regime in the Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain brutally suppressed a mass uprising of workers, the repression of the population continues.

Two activists went on hunger strike in a Bahraini prison last week to protest their politically motivated imprisonment and abuses they have endured in detention.

Human rights advocate Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Abduljalil al-Singace, a member of the opposition Haq party, were sentenced to life in prison in June. They are among dozens of opposition figures imprisoned by the Bahraini regime since the outbreak of anti-monarchy protests in February.

Zainab al-Khawaja, the daughter of a hunger striker, claimed that her father was beaten while in custody. “His jaw was broken,” she told the AFP news agency on Saturday. “They also beat him repeatedly on his jaw in court. The doctor had told him to eat well for his health to improve but he has already lost too much weight in prison and yesterday he called me to say his blood sugar level has dropped.”

Meanwhile, there are signs of renewed opposition to Bahrain’s al-Khalifa monarchy.

An anti-regime protest of over 10,000 people broke out in the working class village of Sitra on the night on August 31. The demonstration, the largest in Bahrain since June, was in response to the killing of a 14-year-old boy by police during an earlier protest against the regime.

Ali Jawad Ahmed was apparently struck in the face by a teargas canister fired at close range by police into the crowd in Sitra. He died shortly afterward in nearby health center.

“They are supposed to lob the canisters of gas, not shoot them at people,” said Isa Hassan, the dead boy’s uncle. “Police use it as a weapon.”

A police official told the state-owned Bahraini news agency BNA that there had been no police action in Sitra

at the time of Ali’s death. Government spokesman Saeed Mohamed al-Fayhani also denied that the police had intervened in the protest, but stated that an inquiry into the death would be launched.

From February to March this year, hundreds of thousands of workers and youth—in a country with fewer than 1 million citizens—protested against the dictatorial rule of King Hamad al-Khalifa.

Inspired by revolutionary developments in Tunisia and Egypt, working people and students demanded democratic and social rights. Faced with intransigence and brutality from the state, the demonstrations grew more militant, demanding the ouster of the al-Khalifa royal family and the thin layer of its hangers-on that dominates the country’s political life.

Bahraini workers, especially the youth, face unemployment, poverty and a lack of access to housing, despite the Persian Gulf island nation’s huge oil wealth. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in Bahrain live in poor conditions, denied employment and frequently subjected to abuses and threats of deportation.

Adding to the tensions, the Sunni Muslim ruling family and political elite maintain a regime that discriminates against the Shiite majority, who make up around 70 percent of the population. The anti-government demonstrations demanded an end to this sectarian bias, as well as democratic elections and an equitable distribution of the country’s oil wealth.

The al-Khalifas held on to power in the face of this overwhelming show of mass opposition only thanks to the support they received from their principal foreign backers, the United States and Saudi Arabia.

In a move that could only have taken place with the blessing of Washington, which maintains a large military base in Bahrain, the Saudi regime sent over 1,200 troops with tanks on March 14 to crush demonstrations in the streets of the capital, Manama.

The Bahraini government also received military and police reinforcements from Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, under the aegis of the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council.

Over 30 protesters were killed in the crackdown, while hundreds more were arrested, beaten, or tortured. More are suspected to have died in subsequent months, at the hands of police or pro-monarchy gangs.

Some 2,000 public sector workers, including teachers, medical workers and civil servants, have lost their jobs for taking part in the demonstrations.

Thirty Shiite mosques have been demolished by the regime in retribution for the demonstrations, as was the monument in central Manama's Pearl Square, which had become a focal point of the opposition rallies.

Since the March crackdown, those accused of opposing Bahrain's al-Khalifa monarchy have faced trial in special military courts, which have been condemned by Bahraini and international human rights groups. Detainees have received only limited access to legal counsel and have been tortured by security forces.

As well as political opponents, sentenced by these kangaroo courts to death or long periods in prison, the Bahraini regime is vindictively prosecuting dozens of doctors and nurses who treated injured demonstrators during the uprising.

The ongoing trial of 47 medical workers before a military court began in June. One of those accused, Ali al-Ekri, a senior surgeon at Salmaniya hospital in Manama, declared in court that the "confessions" extracted from him and the other medics of plotting against the regime had been obtained through torture.

This legal travesty is only the latest attack on medical personnel, whose only crime was treating people suffering from injuries caused by the bullets and batons of the security forces. During the March repression, Bahraini police and soldiers rampaged through Manama hospital wards in search of injured protesters, terrorizing medical staff and patients. Ambulances carrying away people injured at demonstrations were shot at and prevented from reaching those in need of help.

In March, *Medicins sans frontieres* (MSF) issued a report stating that Bahrain's hospitals had become "places to be feared" as the regime's forces and masked pro-monarchy thugs routinely assaulted and abducted patients suspected of being opponents of the government.

Masked attackers similar to those referred to in the MSF report have also terrorized working class Shiite suburbs of Manama. Especially in the weeks following the Saudi-led

military intervention, residents of these neighborhoods lived in fear of night raids by masked men, believed to be police or military personnel patrolling the streets in unmarked cars.

Majority-Shiite suburban villages such as Sitra have been centers of opposition to the Bahraini government for years. Frequent protests against the monarchy have taken place in these working class neighborhoods since 2009, and regular clashes between locals and the security forces continue.

Throughout all this, the Bahraini regime has received the full backing of the United States and the European powers. While the imperialist powers shed crocodile tears for human rights abuses in Libya, to justify the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi through a military takeover of the oil-rich North African nation, no such concerns were voiced over the al-Khalifas' brutality in Bahrain.

A long-standing ally of Washington—the US Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain—the al-Khalifa ruling family received visits from Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen earlier this year, as protesters were being beaten, shot and kidnapped on the streets of Manama.

The Obama administration, which also supported dictators like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, until they were forced out by the working class, issued cynical and perfunctory statements on the abuses meted out to Bahraini protesters. They requested that the monarchy "respect universal rights."

Since then, the Bahraini crown prince has been an honored guest in Washington. A White House statement issued in June, on the occasion of Prince Salman al-Kalifah's visit, praised the regime's commitment to "reform."

The US Department of State web site's official summary of the political situation in Bahrain merely records that "Bahraini security forces moved quickly to restore order" in February and March. It gives an honorable mention to the phony "National Dialogue" instituted by King Hamad after the crackdown.



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