

US-backed Bahraini regime continues repression

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The government crackdown on protests in Bahrain continued this week, with the violent dispersal of Monday's mass demonstration followed by days of reprisals against working class youth and opposition figures.

The anti-regime demonstration on Monday of over 10,000 people on the outskirts of the capital, Manama, was met with brutal force. Police in riot gear and armored vehicles attacked the protesters with tear gas, rubber bullets, stun grenades and shotguns firing birdshot. At least 30 protesters were arrested and another 120 wounded by the police attacks.

In a particularly vindictive move, local hospitals were ordered to report to the authorities anyone admitted for teargas inhalation. Police and intelligence officers repeatedly raided hospitals and clinics during last year's protests, arresting patients mid-treatment on suspicion of having been present at demonstrations.

It is likely that Monday's police assault injured many more people than hospital records show, as demonstrators sought medical attention in private homes out of fear that they would be arrested in hospitals.

Marchers had hoped to reoccupy Freedom Square (also known as Pearl Roundabout) on Monday. The focal point of demonstrations in February 2011, the square remains heavily guarded by security personnel behind barbed wire fences. The large monument in Freedom Square, which became symbolic of the mass struggle against the regime, has been demolished.

The Bahraini government's chief of public security, Major General Tariq al-Hassan, told public broadcaster Bahrain TV that police would maintain an increased presence in Manama and throughout the kingdom in order to prevent "unlawful or violent acts of sabotage."

Al-Hassan also threatened a new crackdown on social media in Bahrain, criticizing "incitement through social media" as a cause of Monday's protest. Most independent

media outlets were shut down or brought under government control last year.

Riot police swooped into Sitra on Monday night, arresting 15 youths. The town, a center of opposition to the regime, has been under police siege since then, with several more arrests of locals, while two police officers were badly burned after being hit by a petrol bomb.

Since Monday, police and other security personnel have brought the crackdown into the suburbs and villages surrounding Manama. Reports and video footage from largely working class areas such as Bilad al-Qadim, Musalla and Sanabis reveal heavily armed police firing tear gas indiscriminately into homes and shops, while helicopters circle overhead.

Several smaller protests have taken place this week, including an apparent attempt on Wednesday to block one of the country's main roads, the Sheikh Khalifah bin Salman Highway. The following day, police, firing teargas and stun grenades, and youths with stones and Molotov cocktails fought running battles in the district of Sar.

On Friday, riot police again used teargas and stun grenades, this time against a demonstration of women in Manama. Two female pro-democracy activists were arrested and dragged into police vans. Later on Friday, police used water cannon to clear several hundred protesters from the northern Manama suburb of Jidhafs. Across the country, at least another 45 people were arrested between Tuesday and Friday, according to opposition groups.

The super-rich elite of Bahrain, headed by the Sunni monarchy of King Hamad al-Khalifa and his family, sits atop a social power keg. The majority of the country's population is Shiite Muslim, discriminated against on the basis of their religion, while hundreds of thousands of poor migrant workers from across the Middle East and South Asia endure a precarious existence without social

or employment rights.

Monday's protest was called to commemorate the anniversary of the pro-democracy demonstrations in Bahrain. Inspired by the "Arab Spring" uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, Bahrain's mass protests were brutally crushed in March last year by the al-Khalifa regime, with the assistance of troops and police from the neighboring pro-US monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Last year's crackdown by the regime led to the deaths of at least 60 people, as well as hundreds of arrests, in many cases leading to torture and show trials. The al-Khalifa government has also clamped down on independent media and human rights groups on the island.

The al-Khalifa regime has been able to cling to power without granting any concessions to the democratic and social demands of the working class thanks to its status as a client regime of Washington and Riyadh, and due to the political character of the opposition leadership.

The country's main opposition group, al-Wefaq, has repeatedly offered to strike a deal with the regime, including during talks that took place just days before the latest crackdown. A conservative Shiite party, al-Wefaq held 18-seats in Bahrain's rubber-stamp parliament until it resigned en masse last year in protest at the government crackdown.

"We are ready for any dialogue, without limits, with those who have power to bring real changes," al-Wefaq's leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, told the press after talks with the regime last week. "The talks have not yet reached the level of dialogue, which is what we need, not just talks that go nowhere."

The ruling elite in Manama views the opposition leadership as a vital line of defense between it and the masses. Responding to opposition calls for negotiations on a power-sharing coalition, government spokesman Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Mubarak al-Khalifa demanded that al-Wefaq shut down the mass protests and end the popular calls for the ouster of the royal family. "The ball is in their court—the offer for dialogue has always been open, but they need to engage without preconditions, such as calling for the government to resign," the royal spokesman said.

In an effort to discredit its opponents and court favor with the US, the al-Khalifa regime has blamed Iran, Bahrain's neighbor across the Persian Gulf, for fomenting the protests and backing Shiite opposition groups.

The United States government and the Saudi royal family are the main props keeping the House of Khalifah

in power, with Washington maintaining a large military presence in the country and Riyadh ready to send troops across the causeway to Bahrain in order to crush further signs of dissent.

Despite shedding crocodile tears over the death toll in Syria, the United States and its allies in the Middle East and Western Europe are wholly supportive of the repeated crackdowns by the regime in Manama. Washington has jumped to the Bahraini regime's defense, justifying the latest police violence in Manama. While issuing a pro forma call for respect for human rights, US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland insisted that it was the responsibility of Bahraini demonstrators to "stage peaceful protests."

Echoing the line of Washington, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon released a statement on Wednesday expressing concern "about reports of clashes in Bahrain between security forces and demonstrators" and calling for "a genuine, all-inclusive and meaningful dialogue that meets the legitimate aspirations of all Bahrainis."

While the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus is condemned in the Arab League and Western capitals for resisting a US-backed armed insurrection, the al-Khalifas are shielded from any significant criticism of the blood on their hands. On the contrary, during a yearlong crackdown in Bahrain the US and the European powers have continued to sign and fulfill hundreds of millions of dollars worth of arms deals with Manama.

The double standard between the treatment of events in Syria and Bahrain is an expression of the predatory interests behind US policy in the Middle East. The Syrian government is targeted for regime-change because it is an ally of Iran and therefore an impediment to Washington's domination of the energy-rich region, while Bahrain's despots are protected because they provide a home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, which patrols the Persian Gulf and would be one of the Pentagon's principal weapons in a war with Iran.



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