

Massive anti-government protest in Bahrain

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Tens of thousands of Bahrainis demonstrated near the capital city of Manama against the country's pro-US monarchist regime on Friday. The demonstration comes one year after a series of protests in the small Gulf sheikdom were ruthlessly crushed by the government, backed by forces from neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Demonstrators, largely drawn from the nation's majority Shia population, demanded an end to religious discrimination, the release of political prisoners from last year's protests, and the downfall of the Al Khalifa family dictatorship. They chanted "Down, down Hamad," referring to King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, and carried signs in English and French appealing for international support.

The royal family is Sunni and has sought to create a social constituency for its rule by favoring the nation's minority Sunni population, elements of which launched small counter-demonstrations Friday.

Bahrain, a major oil and gas producer, is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. On the southwestern flank of the Persian Gulf, the base would be critical for any US military operation against Iran.

A Reuters photographer told Al Jazeera that the demonstration, which stretched for miles on a central road leading to Manama, "could be over 100,000." If so, the protest would involve nearly 10 percent of the country's population of 1.2 million. Organizers said they expected as many as 200,000 to participate.

The regime mobilized thousands of security forces to shut down roads leading to the demonstration and government forces fired tear gas on smaller groups of protesters trying to reach the central square in Manama, where last year's demonstrations were centered. Pearl Square is now ringed by razor wire and under 24-hour police surveillance.

Friday's demonstration was officially called by a leading Shiite cleric, Sheikh Isa Qass, and the Shiite group al Wefaq, which favors compromise with the

regime and, according to one account, "wants to show that it still dominated the opposition." However, a different mood among the masses was illustrated by the demonstration's chants and banners, which included prominently the slogan "No dialogue with the killers!"

Solidarity demonstrations took place in Iraq, where thousands of Shiites rallied in Baghdad, Najaf, Basra, Nasiriyah, Hilla, Amara and Diwaniyah.

The February, 2011 demonstrations in Bahrain were inspired by the mass movements in Tunisia and Egypt that led to the collapse of the US-allied Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes, respectively.

With the backing of the US, the Al Khalifa regime called in forces from neighboring Saudi Arabia, which is connected to the Bahraini archipelago by a causeway. In the crackdown that ensued the government killed dozens and arrested thousands. A government-sponsored inquiry conducted by Egyptian human rights expert Cherif Bassiouni found that there had been widespread torture of detainees.

The crushing of the Bahraini protests proved to be the first step in an imperialist counter-offensive against the Middle Eastern working class, spearheaded by the US, the United Kingdom, France and the Gulf States. It was quickly followed by the engineering of a civil war in Libya, led by Islamist, tribal and monarchist forces that resulted in the toppling of the Gaddafi regime.

A similar stage-managed revolt and civil war has been launched in Syria, designed to oust the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad. The imperialist powers cite government brutality against demonstrators to justify the arming of right-wing, Western-backed anti-government forces. But the propagandists of intervention in Syria, including much of the so-called "left" in Europe and the US, remain largely silent over the abuses of US allies such as Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

On Friday, Amnesty International issued a complaint

against Saudi Arabia noting that at least six men remain imprisoned there for merely planning to take part in anti-regime protests one year ago. At least one of the men has been tortured.

“[H]olding people for a year merely for intending to protest is completely unconscionable,” said Philip Luther, the Amnesty International director for the Middle East. “It is time for the authorities to come clean about who is being held for acts of protest and on what basis.” Saudi Arabia has killed at least five protesters since November.

Syria has been banned from the Arab League for its crackdown. US allies Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia have not. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are playing the leading roles in funding the Syrian opposition.

The movement against the Al Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain is a genuine mass movement, as were the revolutions that led to the demise of Ben Ali and Mubarak. In addition to the nepotism of the regime and anti-democratic abuses, there are widespread social grievances, especially among the youth. According to the CIA World Fact Book, Bahrain had a youth unemployment rate of over 20 percent in 2011.

Without providing any credible evidence, the Al Khalifa regime accuses Iran, which is ruled by a Shiite theocracy, of stirring up discontent among Bahrain’s largely Shiite working class. This appears to be part of a larger US-led strategy to inflame sectarian tensions throughout the Middle East and isolate Syria, whose government is dominated by the Shiite Alawite minority, and Iran.

The tragic consequences of sectarianism in the Middle East have already been made clear in Iraq, where after its 2003 invasion the US stoked up tensions between that country’s Shiite and Sunni populations as a means of defeating a popular insurgency against the occupation. The American occupation combined with the US-fueled civil war killed upwards of 1 million Iraqis, leaving a country that remains devastated and fraught with sectarian tensions.



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