

Mass protests in Bahrain in advance of Grand Prix auto race

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In advance of Sunday's Grand Prix auto race, tens of thousands of protesters took to a major highway in Bahrain Friday to demand democratic rights and the downfall of the country's autocratic regime.

In the face of harsh security measures taken by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, demonstrators chanted, "The people want to topple the regime" and "Down Hamad," referring to the hated monarch.

The February 14 Youth Movement had called on social networking sites for "three days of rage" to coincide with the auto race.

On Friday, thousands of protesters walked along the roadway from Budaiya, to the west of Manama, the capital. The authorities had banned protests in Manama, the site of the Formula One race. (See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KILfW2beMmk>)

When a portion of the crowd headed for Pearl Square, the roundabout that was the center of last year's protests, police attacked them with teargas and stun grenades. Witnesses also told the media that the security forces fired buckshot to disperse the protesters, wounding dozens.

An activist, Sayed Yousif al-Muhafda, told Reuters by telephone, "They are trying to go to Pearl Square, police are firing teargas and sound bombs. I can see hundreds, they are still fighting." Another told the wire service, "There was teargas everywhere ... A couple of hundred people took refuge in the mall ... kids, grown-ups, women. Some had gas masks, some were choking, some were screaming 'Allahu akbar' (God is great)."

A witness told the BBC that "a toxic, yellow powdered gas was also fired at the group, which she said was suffocating and paralysing, and that it had caused her to fall over. She said her face was burning."

Youth responded by throwing stones and petrol bombs at police. Khalifa opponents allege that riot

police have been attempting to restrict Shiites to their villages to prevent them from joining protests. According to these forces, the government has arrested 102 protest organizers in night raids over the past week and police have wounded 54 people in recent clashes, with their use of birdshot. The official opposition party, Al-Wefaq, reported that 70 people had been injured and 80 others arrested in this week's protests so far.

Protesters on Friday also carried pictures of jailed hunger striker Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, a prominent human rights activist. After his arrest in April 2011, at the time of the brutal crackdown on opposition carried out by the Khalifa regime, Khawaja was tortured and charged, along with other opposition figures, with setting up "terrorist gangs."

Khawaja has been on his hunger strike for more than 70 days in protest against the life sentence he received at the hands of a military tribunal last June. He stopped drinking water on Thursday and requested a lawyer write his will, according to his daughter.

Bahrain's Grand Prix was cancelled in 2011, due to the popular unrest. Formula One races have an estimated television audience of 500 million people. According to media reports, when Bahraini authorities were obliged to cancel the event, the country lost between \$480 million and \$800 million.

The regime scheduled the race this year as part of an effort to show that life had returned to normal in the tiny Persian Gulf nation. Racing officials have been only too happy to oblige. Bernie Ecclestone, the British billionaire and arch-reactionary who runs Formula One racing (he once praised Hitler as someone who "could ... get things done," and was friends for 40 years with Max Mosley, the son of British fascist leader Oswald Mosley), expressed his complete lack of interest in the Bahraini government's repression.

Ecclestone told the media, “I can’t call this race off. Nothing to do with us. We’ve an agreement to be here, and we’re here.... Political things go on like in so many countries. These things happen, but we’re not here to get involved in the politics.... There are other countries much higher up the priority list you should be writing about. Go to Syria and write about those things there because it’s more important than here.”

The latter argument was echoed by British Prime Minister David Cameron, who told the BBC that Bahrain could not be compared with Syria. Cameron declared, “We always stand up for human rights and it’s important that peaceful protests are allowed to go ahead ... I think we should be clear Bahrain is not Syria, there is a process of reform under way and this government backs that reform and wants to help promote that reform.”

This is outright lying. The protests in Bahrain, with only 1.2 million people, have involved a far larger portion of the population than those in Syria and the regime has responded to protests with beatings, jailings and torture. The higher death toll in Syria has far more to do with the fact that the Western powers, including Cameron’s government, are financing, inciting and arming the opposition there.

The foul Bahraini royal family is considered vital by the US and the other great powers, as well as its neighbor Saudi Arabia, as a bulwark against social upheaval in the region and against Iran, across the Persian Gulf. The US base at Juffair is home to the US Fifth Fleet and about 1,500 US and allied military personnel.

Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, to the surprise of no one, also expressed support Friday for the Grand Prix race going ahead. The prince told the media, “I think this race should continue because it is indeed a very big event for this country, important economically, socially. Political parties from the whole spectrum, both conservative and opposition, have welcomed the race.... I also think cancelling the race just empowers extremists.”

The Bahraini regime attempted to prevent coverage of the protests this weekend by refusing visas to non-sports reporters. The *Guardian* noted, “Bahrain has denied entry to a number of journalists from news organisations including Sky, which holds the UK TV rights to broadcast this weekend’s controversial

Formula One grand prix from the Gulf state, as the regime attempts to stifle coverage of political protests.”

Robert Mahoney, deputy director of the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York, commented, “Bahrain wants the international attention brought by hosting a Grand Prix but doesn’t want foreign journalists to wander from the race track where they might see political protests.”



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