

# Demonstrator shot dead ahead of Bahrain Grand Prix

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Bahrain security forces shot dead an anti-government demonstrator, Salah Abbas Habib Musa, after angry clashes with the police on Friday night.

Rallies and demonstrations, labelled “three days of rage”, had been called across the island country to protest against the government coinciding with the Formula One Grand Prix held over the weekend.

King Hamad backed the race—his son, the Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, owns the commercial rights to the event—as a means of boosting the country’s flagging economy in the wake of last year’s anti-government protests, which led to the cancellation of the F1 event in 2011.

According to the Shi’ite opposition party, al-Wefaq, clashes broke out following a massive protest march in the capital Manama against the ruling Khalifa family. Tens of thousands of demonstrators chanted, “We demand democracy” and “Down, Down Hamad”—a reference to King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa and the ruling clique around him—as they massed on the main road out of Manama.

Police responded with teargas, rubber bullets and stun grenades. In the neighbouring Shi’ite villages they beat up a number of protesters and arrested five people. Musa’s badly beaten body was found on a rooftop in the village of Shakhura.

According to the *New York Times*, Musa’s wife, Mariam Isa Ali Jawad, said that her husband had been attending the daily protests and was one of the leaders in the Shakoura area. She rejected the government’s claims that his group was violent, saying that her husband was opposed to the use of violence. He had had spent five years in prison for his opposition to the government.

Activists say his death takes the total killed to 81, including police killed last year, since the uprising

began on February 14, 2011,

The next day, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to protest Musa’s death and to demand democracy and an end to the crackdown on dissent. The government deployed armoured vehicles, security forces in riot gear and armed with pump-action shotguns, and dogs on Manama’s streets and the main road leading to the racetrack to prevent the demonstrators reaching the Grand Prix.

Some protesters wearing masks hurled petrol bombs at police who fired teargas back, turning the streets into scenes that Reuters described as “a battle zone”.

The last couple of months have seen on-going demonstrations, numerous arrests and detentions, including that of Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a Shi’ite political activist now close to death after a more than a two-month-long hunger strike in protest against a life sentence handed down by a military tribunal last June. His daughter, Zainab al-Khawaja, was among those arrested at the weekend although she was released several hours later.

Al-Wefaq says that in the last week alone more than 100 protest organizers have been arrested in night raids and more than 70 wounded in clashes in which police have fired birdshot directly and live rounds into the air.

The US-based Physicians for Human Rights said that the government has used teargas on a near daily basis, including in crowded urban areas and homes, which could have long-term health consequences including increased rates of miscarriages and birth defects.

Publicly, Victoria Nuland, the US State Department spokesperson, mouthed platitudes such as, “We’re calling for, again, Bahraini government respect for universal human rights and demonstrators’ restraint in ensuring that they are peaceful”.

But as commentators have noted, Washington and

London's criticisms have been muted. Behind the scenes, the Obama administration has given its full backing for the crushing of the mass protests. Backing Bahrain's hosting of the F1 Grand Prix was itself a mark of approval for the ruling family.

The venal Khalifa clique was only able to survive last year's demonstrations, which were bigger relative to the country's 1.2 million population than Syria's, thanks to 1,500 armed troops from Washington's chief ally in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia. The Obama administration provided crucial diplomatic and political cover, as Bahrain is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet and provides a key base for operations against Iran and control of the Persian Gulf, including the Straits of Hormuz.

Bahrain, like the rest of the Gulf monarchies, is utterly subservient to US imperialism. These regimes are not prepared to cede even the most basic democratic rights, let alone an ounce of political power, to their oppressed peoples, particularly the Shi'a who predominate in the vital oil producing regions. In Bahrain, they constitute 70 percent of the population and face government-sanctioned discrimination in their search for jobs and housing.

Opposition parties that do exist, such as the Shi'a Islamist Al-Wefaq, lack widespread support amongst Bahrain's angry youth and impoverished workers. The *Economist* was not alone in commenting that "Bahrain's main opposition parties have lost control of the street [meaning the working class], caught out by the scale of the protests last year."

Dependent on a very narrow social basis and bereft of political alternatives, the Gulf despots' only option is brute force allied with the classic ploy, perfected by the British, the former colonial power, of divide and rule. To this end, they have sought to whip up sectarian divisions and strife, and prevent the oppressed masses from making common cause with the millions of migrant workers from Asia who suffer even harsher treatment at the hands of their venal employers.

At the same time they have claimed, without evidence, that Iran has fomented dissent.

Washington's support for Bahrain is bound up with US vital geo-strategic interests, the region's oil and gas resources and its ongoing efforts to establish its unchallenged global hegemony. The Gulf monarchies are the crucial Sunni axis against Shi'ite Iran and its

allies: Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iraq's powerful Shi'ite parties, which Washington views as a regional threat.

Earlier this month, at least 100 American and 100 Arab Gulf fighter-bombers from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Bahrain took part in the biggest air force exercise ever conducted in the Gulf. According to the Israeli military intelligence web site DEBKAF, the purpose was to simulate war with Iran and the reopening of the strategic Straits of Hormuz if it were closed by Tehran. The US warplanes took off from the USS Enterprise and USS Abraham Lincoln, which are cruising opposite Iranian shores. The Gulf countries used the US base in Bahrain as its centre of operations.

In the last few days, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the island of Abu Musa, arousing the anger of the UAE, which lays claim to the island, and the Gulf States. The Gulf Cooperation Council called his visit "a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of the United Arab Emirates".

Bahrain has thus become of the centre of a much wider political struggle in the Middle East, one currently being played out in Syria, which threatens to develop into a vicious sectarian conflict throughout the region.



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