

Bahrain gripped by renewed protests

Jean Shaoul
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There have been continuing demonstrations calling for political reform across Bahrain for the past several days, under conditions of virtual martial law and lockdown.

The authorities broke up demonstrations on August 14 with tear gas and birdshot, arresting at least 13 demonstrators. According to the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, an organisation based in Manama, a large number of foreign mercenaries from Jordan and Pakistan aided government troops, firing tear gas and pepper spray indiscriminately.

The protests testify to the socially explosive tensions, not just in Bahrain but throughout the Gulf petromonarchies in the wake of the Egyptian revolution.

It can hardly be a coincidence that the extraordinary measures taken by Bahrain's ruling family occurred at the same time as the massacre carried out by the military junta in Egypt. They were clearly born out of great fear and a sense of vulnerability about the prospects for the very survival of the Gulf States in the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. There is evidence that the repression was coordinated through the Gulf Cooperation Council—made up of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman—with input from Washington.

On Friday, Bahraini security forces attacked prisoners in the Dry Docks Prison, using batons, tear gas, pepper spray and stun grenades, injuring at least 40 inmates. Most of the inmates are anti-regime protesters charged with fraudulent terrorism offences, who face harsh conditions.

The small Persian Gulf island nation, home to 1.35 million people, hosts the United States Fifth fleet, which serves to protect the Gulf States' rulers and provide a launching pad in support of Washington's predatory interests in the oil rich region. Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa joined Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates in welcoming the military coup in Egypt.

Various groups of young activists formed a loose coalition named the Bahrain Tamarod (rebellion) on July 3, taking their name from the Egyptian movement that

supported the military overthrow of Mohamed Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood-led government. Tamarod used social media web sites to organise a series of peaceful anti-government demonstrations starting August 14. It called for a campaign of civil disobedience to push for a "free and democratic Bahrain," including for businesses to close and rallies and demonstrations in the Seef district in the capital Manama and the impoverished villages that are home to Bahrain's Shia population, which makes up 70 percent of Bahrain's citizenry.

Unlike its Egyptian counterpart, however, Bahrain's Tamarod does not enjoy the backing of the military nor a tacit endorsement for regime change from the United States.

One of the protests was planned near the US embassy in order to call on Washington to use its influence to prevent a government crackdown and protect demonstrations. But Bahrain and its ruling elite are, like the larger Gulf states, considered to be a key ally of Washington.

It is of some significance that the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier, one of the largest warships in the world, moved into Bahrain, with the USS Truman close by, ostensibly as part of its new nine-month deployment to the Persian Gulf, just days ahead of August 14.

While Bahrain's Shi'ite-majority have long suffered discrimination and more impoverished conditions, the February 2011 protests were not primarily based on sectarian, but rather social grievances. However, the Bahraini authorities, and their counterparts in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, where similarly impoverished Shi'ites predominate in the oil-producing eastern region, stoked up sectarian tensions in order to prevent a unified working class opposition to the ruling clique. They asserted—without producing any evidence—that Iran was playing a critical role in promoting the dissent in order to undermine popular support for domestic protest. Heightened tensions with Iran also serve to secure the backing of their patrons, Washington and Riyadh.

At the end of July, King Hamad responded to Tamarod's calls for protests by issuing decrees,

recommended by the government-dominated parliament:

- * banning almost all “demonstrations, marches, assemblies and sit-ins” in the capital;

- * imposing tougher penalties for “terrorism,” the term the government—like the military junta in Egypt—uses for all forms of political dissent;

- * threatening parents with being jailed if their children participate in protests;

- * enabling the revocation of Bahraini citizenship from anyone who “commits or incites an act of terrorism” and freezing his or her bank account, a measure aimed at intimidating protesters’ families;

- * stiffer penalties for anyone “propagating false information about Bahrain in social media network” and finally;

- * taking “all possible measures to impose peace and security, even if it means imposing a state of national state of emergency.”

Many of these measures have already been in place for some time, with 31 Bahrainis stripped of their citizenship in November 2012 and a de facto ban on demonstrations having been imposed in the capital.

The government escalated its crackdown, arresting photographers and journalists, denying visas to foreign journalists wanting to cover the August 14 demonstrations, entry into the country to political activists, and deporting an American teacher due to her “radical writing”. More than 100 house raids and arrests of up to 500 activists have been carried out in the last month alone.

Following several small anti-government protests on August 12 when security forces fired tear gas and stun grenades and arrested nine demonstrators, Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, a member of the ruling family, said, “The government will forcefully confront the suspicious calls to violate law and order and those who stand behind them”. He was as good as his word.

The government installed barbed wire in a number of districts where protests were expected, turning them into vast cages for their inhabitants, and deployed armoured vehicles at major intersections to prevent protesters reaching Manama.

All this was done in consultation with the other Gulf States, with Bahrain’s state-controlled news agency reporting that talks had been held with the commander of Peninsula Shield Force, the military arm of the Gulf Cooperation Council that suppressed the 2011 protests.

August 14 was chosen as the start of a series of protests because it marked the anniversary of Bahrain’s

independence from Britain in 1971 and two-and-a-half years since the uprising that began in the capital Manama’s Pearl Roundabout against the ruling al-Khalifa Sunni dynasty.

Those protests were brutally suppressed by Bahraini security forces, which cleared the roundabout and sent in tanks after just three days. When the demonstrators returned and continued a peaceful occupation, the ruling clique turned for support to the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose troops poured across the causeway from Saudi Arabia. The encampment was bulldozed and its tents set on fire, while the iconic monument at the roundabout’s centre was torn down.

Since February 2011, at least 80 people have been killed by security forces, while hundreds more have been arrested, subjected to torture and military trials and then imprisoned for opposing the regime. The prisoners include doctors and nurses who were punished solely for treating those wounded by the security forces in the crushing of the Pearl Roundabout protests. Hundreds of people who took part in the protests were sacked and replaced by expatriate workers.

Earlier this year, Bahrain’s high court upheld sentences handed down by military tribunals against 13 leaders of the 2011 movement, some of whom were given life in prison. Since then, tensions have continued to simmer, with regular demonstrations in the impoverished Shi’ite villages.



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