

INTERVIEW

Bahrain and the Arab Spring

Friday 3 February 2012, by [MOHAMMED Ahmed](#), [ZILL Zach](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2012).

The small island nation of Bahrain sits in the Persian Gulf, between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. When the Tunisian and Egyptian uprising toppled U.S.-backed dictators last year, all of the region's dictatorships trembled, including Bahrain. The winds of change inspired Bahrain's downtrodden, and the country's monarchy barely managed to maintain its grip on power.

Ahmed Mohammed, a Bahraini activist visiting the U.S., spoke with Zach Zill about Bahrain's rebellion, and what the future holds.

Zach Zill - CAN YOU talk about how the movement in Bahrain unfolded last February? Why did thousands of people come out to Pearl Square in Bahrain's capital of Manama?

AHMED MOHAMMED - THE PROTESTS had originally aimed to make the government fulfill the promises of the king. These promises were made in a referendum the king put to the people in 2001. The referendum offered us a bargain—turn Bahrain into a kingdom and the emir into a king, and in return, the dreaded state of emergency law would be ended, and a parliament with full legislative powers set up. He basically offered what the opposition had been demanding throughout the uprising of the 1990s. The referendum was widely welcomed and approved.

Then the king reneged on his promise. On February 14, 2002, the king announced a new constitution in which he concentrated power in his own hands. The parliament has virtually no legislative powers.

As the years went by, the regime plotted to permanently disempower the opposition and ensure the regime's power in the long term. It all fell apart as their conspiracies began to leak to the public, just as WikiLeaks did with U.S. embassy cables.

Probably the most scandalous leak of all is a document that reveals a transaction between a businessman and the king's uncle, the prime minister. The latter, who is the world's longest-serving prime minister and a universally hated figure in Bahrain, bought a state-of-the-art financial development project called the Bahrain Financial Harbor for one dinar. That's \$2.65 for skyscrapers in the capital's busiest district.

As all of this became public knowledge, and as it became increasingly clear that the regime had no intentions to reform the rigged political system, a lot of anger and resentment began building up. People within the opposition had been warning that this situation is not tenable, that it would explode at some point.

The departure of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January set Bahraini activists' imagination on fire. A Facebook group was set up to mark the 10th anniversary of the hated constitution with Bahrain's own day of rage. There was about a month-long gap between Ben Ali's departure and February 14. What happened during that period was even more exciting.

EGYPT.

YES, EGYPT. Mubarak fell just days before February 14. The Bahraini regime went into a panic. In a matter of hours after Mubarak's departure, BTV, Bahrain's national television channel, announced that the government would give 1,000 dinars to every household. That's \$2,650! Of course, the stated reason for this sudden act of generosity was the upcoming 10th anniversary celebrations of the "reform era."

WAS THE movement in Pearl Square calling specifically for the end of the monarchy?

NOT IN the beginning. The protesters were calling for a constitutional monarchy, which is what the constitution claims Bahrain is anyway. This entailed giving the parliament full legislative powers and, most importantly, an elected prime minister. As I pointed out earlier, the current prime minister is universally hated in Bahrain and is known for his corruption and ruthlessness. Moreover, he's been in power for 40 years, ever since the country's independence from Britain.

The peaceful protests were met with brutal repression, especially on February 17. By then, the protesters had successfully made their way to the Pearl roundabout and camped there for two nights. I was there on February 17, but fortunately, I left just a few hours before the surprise attack. After attacking the roundabout, the government sent the army to stop people from returning to the roundabout. When some protesters attempted to return the next day, they were sprayed with live ammunition.

Against all odds and despite all the brutality, people still managed to re-occupy the roundabout. By then, the change in slogans was clear. Dispatching the army to mow down peaceful protesters was the last straw for many people. The rejectionists had been vindicated. Everyone realized that this regime is beyond reform.

When the roundabout was recaptured, people just started trickling in slowly. The really dedicated activists made it there first. Slowly, the numbers increased to unprecedented levels. At their peak, the numbers were reported to be a few hundred thousand. Proportionally speaking, this is almost certainly the largest protest among all Arab countries. It's a country of less than a million people, after all.

WAS THERE an economic component to the demands as well?

YES, BUT you can't see it in the slogans. Economic factors certainly underlie many of the grievances. For example, the rising price of housing. This was in large part a result of the royal family's sweeping land-grab schemes. While they were doing this, Bahrain was also opening its markets to foreign capital through a free trade agreement with the United States.

The land-grabbing schemes caused scarcity in commercially available land, and the liberalization of the economy increased demand for whatever was left. The effect of this has been predictable: land and property values exploded. Building or purchasing a home has very quickly become out of reach for the working class.

Also, economic factors break down according to sectarian affiliation. I can tell you for sure that the people who protested were predominately Shia. And the Shia are systematically discriminated

against. The level of unemployment in the Shia villages is proportionately much higher than in their Sunni counterparts. According to the Economist, unemployment in Bahrain's villages is as high as 50 percent. And so I think that's definitely a part of the drive to protest and why people are so angry.

BAHRAIN IS the home of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. What role did the U.S. government and the Saudi government played in crushing the movement?

BAHRAIN IS a U.S. client state, so the role of the U.S. government is very important.

The U.S. government pretended not to know that the Saudis were about to invade. After the fact, the U.S. feigned surprise. We already know that then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was in the country just a few days before the invasion. Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman was in the country while the Saudis were invading. Mike Mullen, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was in Saudi Arabia. There's no doubt that they were aware of every development and every government plan.

I think the bottom line is that there was no way that the U.S. was going to let a democratic transition happen in Bahrain. Such a development would quickly spread to Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, which is just a couple of miles away.

More than geographical proximity, the people of the Eastern Province share a degree of sectarian and cultural affinity with Bahrain. The population there is Shia, and they are also systematically discriminated against, even more so than Bahrainis are. They also have more grievances, more history of protest and a better civil society structure there.

Unlike the rest of Saudi Arabia, people in the Eastern Province have a history of labor activism, which mostly is owed to the early development of the oil industry there. Most importantly, the Eastern Province is the world's richest region in oil. If you have instability on top of America's oil, that's not good.

Once it was publicized that the Bahraini army opened fire on peaceful protesters, the British and French governments, for public relations purposes no doubt, announced that they would stop shipping tear gas and weapons to Bahrain. The U.S. government did not even consider making such a move.

CAN YOU describe the Saudi invasion and how it targeted specific groups? They sent troops into the hospital, right?

THE HOSPITAL was occupied militarily, and they went after the medical staff for treating protesters. The Ministry of Health ordered the medical staff not to treat them, which led the Minister of Health to resign. Ambulances were attacked by police, too. They tortured the medical staff.

By specifically going after Shia doctors and nurses, as well as desecrating and destroying more than 30 Shia mosques, the government has effectively cemented sectarian affinities and antagonisms.

The royal family portrayed themselves to the international press as the protectors of the Sunni community from the Shias. In the words of Bahrain's foreign minister, Bahrain was "at the brink of a sectarian abyss." It's a very cynical position, considering the concerted effort the regime made to "sectarianize" the uprising.

WHAT HAS happened since last March? How has the situation developed?

ACCORDING TO the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, more than 1,000 people were arrested. I don't know what the figure is by now. Thankfully, I wasn't arrested, or anyone else that I know personally.

A larger number of people—thousands—got fired from their jobs. The government simply looked for evidence of any anti-government activity on Facebook and Twitter. That's how a friend of mine got fired, for instance. She was interrogated at work and asked whether she was involved in the protests.

They made it a point to demonstrate that they would not spare anyone. They arrested and tortured various professionals, doctors, professors and athletes.

The U.S. government wants to sell \$53 million worth of arms to Bahrain. International human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, have protested this arms deal. Amnesty, in fact, put out a report describing all of the arms sold to these repressive Arab regimes, including Bahrain.

WHAT ARE the prospects now for renewed struggle against the government? Are people looking to Egypt for a lead? And also, how strong is the sense within Bahrain that this is part of a region-wide movement for democracy, for economic justice?

I THINK it's clear that the government is not serious at all about wanting to resolve this conflict. They seem to be able and willing to live with a less stable environment and a prolonged campaign of repression.

Yet in the face of all the brutality they've faced, the people continue to protest. It's inspiring. As I said earlier, I'm not optimistic. Saudi Arabia wouldn't allow anything significant to happen in Bahrain. Neither would Qatar, which controls the Arab world's most-watched news channel, Al Jazeera. They didn't report the Bahraini uprising at all.

And this leads me to your second question: Do Bahrainis see their uprising as part of the Arab Spring? The answer is both yes and no. It certainly began that way, but now there's a feeling of disappointment and isolation. The Bahraini uprising has been largely ignored by other Arab activists.

The media played a pivotal role in this. After all, Saudi and Qatari capital control the vast majority of Arab media outlets, so there's essentially a media blackout. When some Arab friends of mine watched the Al Jazeera English documentary *Shouting in the Dark*, they were quite surprised. It was news to them that an uprising took place in Bahrain.

By the way, you have to note that Al Jazeera English is different from the Arabic one. The former sometimes reports on what happens in Bahrain. When the latter does, which is quite rare, its sympathy for the Bahraini government is clear. It also frames the uprising in very sectarian terms.

DO PEOPLE in Bahrain still follow what's happening in Egypt, whether or not it's reciprocated?

THEY DO. Egypt is widely perceived as the most important country in the Arab world. The Egyptian revolution was the single most exciting political development in my lifetime. I was never optimistic about Bahrain, despite having participated in the uprising myself. There are so many structural barriers. Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Qatar—and we're such a small country.

Only a region-wide movement can take this momentum further and bring the Arab world more independence from the U.S. government. Egypt certainly has the most potential to play the role of vanguard for the Arab revolutions.

If Egyptians manage to change their government, it's more difficult for the U.S. to overturn it—or Saudi Arabia, or Qatar. They can't invade Egypt—that would be very difficult and probably impossible for them.

So, yes, Egypt is the only way forward—I think it's the only hope. But if the U.S. government, with the help of its Saudi and Qatari clients, manages to succeed in hijacking the Egyptian revolution, change in the Arab world will be painfully incremental, at best. Or it may not come at all for another generation.

P.S.

* From Socialist Worker (USA), February 1, 2012:

<http://socialistworker.org/2012/02/01/bahrain-and-the-arab-spring>