

Bahrain - an uprising on the verge of revolution The protesters who are calling for an end to royal rule are in no mood to compromise

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Bahrain is not Egypt. Bahrain is not Tunisia. And Bahrain is not Libya or Algeria or Yemen. True, the tens of thousands gathering again yesterday at the Pearl roundabout - most of them Shia but some of them Sunni Muslims - dressed themselves in Bahraini flags, just as the Cairo millions wore Egyptian flags in Tahrir Square.

But this miniature sultanist kingdom is not yet experiencing a revolution. The uprising of the country's 70 per cent - or is it 80 per cent? - Shia population is more a civil rights movement than a mass of republican rebels, but Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa had better meet their demands quickly if he doesn't want an insurrection.

Indeed, the calls for an end to the entire 200-year-old Khalifa family rule in Bahrain are growing way ahead of the original aims of this explosion of anger: an elected prime minister, a constitutional monarchy, an end to discrimination. The cries of disgust at the Khalifas are much louder, the slogans more incendiary; and the vast array of supposedly opposition personalities talking to the Crown Prince is far behind the mood of the crowds who were yesterday erecting makeshift homes - tented, fully carpeted, complete with tea stalls and portable lavatories - in the very centre of Manama. The royal family would like them to leave but they have no intention of doing so. Yesterday, thousands of employees of the huge Alba aluminium plant marched to the roundabout to remind King Hamad and the Crown Prince that a powerful industrial and trade union movement now lies behind this sea of largely Shia protesters.

Yet Crown Prince Salman talks more about stability, calm, security and "national cohesion" than serious electoral and constitutional reform. Is he trying to "do a Mubarak" and make promises - genuine ones for the moment, perhaps, but kingly pledges do tend to fade with "stability" and time - which will not be met?

In an interview with CNN, he acknowledged the Belfast parallels, exclaiming that "what we don't want to do, like in Northern Ireland, is to descend into militia warfare or sectarianism". But the crazed shooting of the Bahraini army on Thursday evening - 50 wounded, three critically, one already pronounced brain dead - was a small-size Bloody Sunday and it didn't take long for the original civil rights movement in Northern Ireland to be outrun by a new IRA. Clearly, the royal family has been shocked at the events of the last week. Sultan al-Khalifa's admission that "this is not the Bahrain I know, I never thought I would see the day that something like this would happen" proves as much. But his words suggest that this huge manifestation of public fury was merely provoked by television pictures of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. For the record, the Shia rebellion against the country's Sunni rulers has been going on for years, with hundreds of political prisoners tortured in four prisons in and around Manama, their tormentors often from the Jordanian army - just as many Bahraini soldiers come from the Punjab and Baluchistan in Pakistan. Yesterday,

there were repeated demands for the release of political prisoners, banners carrying photographs of young men who are still in jail years after their original sentencing: they run into the hundreds.

Then there are the disturbing stories of the refrigerated trucks which reportedly took dozens of corpses for secret burial, perhaps in Saudi Arabia. These could be part of the carapace of rumour that has settled over the events of the past few days, but now some of the names of the disappeared - men who were present at the shootings near the Pearl roundabout last week - are known.

Twelve of their names have just been released. So where is 14-year-old Ahmed Salah Issa, Hossein Hassan Ali, aged 18, Ahmed Ali Mohsen, 25 and Badria Abda Ali, a woman of unknown age? And where is Hani Mohamed Ali, 27, Mahdi al-Mahousi, 24, Mohamed Abdullah, 18, Hamed Abdullah al-Faraj, 21, Fadel Jassem, 45, and Hossein Salman, 48? English residents of a nearby apartment block were warned before the shooting that if they took photographs of the soldiers, they would be shot.

Matar Ibrahim, one of 18 Bahrain Shia MPs, agrees that there is an increasing gap now between demonstrators and the official political opposition that is being sought out by Crown Prince Salman.

"We are waiting for an initiative from the Crown Prince," he told me. "He has not mentioned reform or constitutional monarchy and a fully elected parliament. If people have a properly elected government, including the prime minister, they will blame their representatives if things go wrong. Now, they blame the King." "What we are suggesting is a removal of the barriers between the people and the ruling family. When Hillary Clinton came to Bahrain, I told her that we don't want to see the US 5th Fleet in Bahrain [its military headquarters] as an obstacle to change, but currently, Bahrain is the worst strategic ally for the US." "The head of the Alba factory trade union, Ali Bin Ali - who is a Sunni - warned that his members could go on strike if they wanted to." "Now that people have been shot down on the roads, we will be political," he said.

Which, of course, is not what the Crown Prince wants to hear.

Robert Fisk in Manama

P.S.

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