

A Revolution Paused in Bahrain

Sunday 6 March 2011, by [JONES Toby C.](#), [KERR Cortni](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2011).

Contents

- [Toward Defiance](#)
- [Point of No Return](#)
- [Balance of Forces](#)
- [What's Next?](#)

An uncertain calm has settled over the small island kingdom of Bahrain. The wave of peaceful pro-democracy protests from February 14-17 culminated in bloodshed, including the brutal murder of seven activists, some of whom were asleep in tents, by the armed forces. On orders from above, the army withdrew from the roundabout on the outskirts of the capital of Manama where the protests have been centered, and since shortly after the seven deaths it has observed calls for restraint. Thousands of jubilant protesters seized the moment to reoccupy the roundabout, the now infamous Pearl Circle. In commemoration of the dead, the demonstrators have renamed it Martyrs' Circle.

The mood in the circle is buoyant, even carnivalesque. It is also dead serious, for the thousands of encamped demonstrators demand nothing short of fundamental change to the kingdom's autocratic political order. The crown prince, Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, has issued a bland call for healing and national dialogue. The country's formal opposition may be tempted by the prospect of realizing at least some of its long-established demands for reform. But the wounds from the direct assault at dawn on February 17 are deep. Several prominent banners in Martyrs' Circle display the pledge, "No dialogue with those who killed us in cold blood." Chants echo: "We will sit here until the fall of the regime!" The fault lines that have long divided rulers and subjects in Bahrain have widened due to the carnage.

On February 21, meanwhile, the regime summoned tens of thousands of supporters (state television wildly claimed 300,000) to rally behind it outside a large Sunni mosque, al-Fatih, in Manama. The choice of a Sunni mosque was deliberate; the Al Khalifa, themselves Sunni, have a history of playing sectarian politics to divide and rule the population, which has a Shi'i majority. The pro-democracy protesters, for their part, have maintained from the start that their cause is national. Their slogans have explicitly appealed to cross-sectarian solidarity. On February 22, the largest crowd to date streamed into the streets, answering a call from the opposition groups, and marched nearly two miles from a mall to the roundabout. State TV ignored them, re-running footage of the previous day's pro-monarchy gathering.

The killing is done for now, but it is too early to tell if the cold peace between the regime and the dissidents will last and, if so, how long. Bahrain's revolution is not over, but its outcome is far from decided.

Toward Defiance

At the heart of the uncertainty is the question of whether the royal family can muster the political

will to see through substantive political reform at long last. On February 20, the crown prince acknowledged the “clear messages from the Bahraini people...about the need for reforms,” though what the changes might be, he did not say. The majority of Bahrainis greeted his vague words with pronounced cynicism, and with good reason, for they know the country has been down the road of false promises before. In 2000 and 2001 then Emir Hamad (he has since declared himself king) promised sweeping liberal reforms that would, in essence, transform Bahrain from an absolute into a constitutional monarchy. The promises proved illusory. Instead, Hamad and his cronies set up a sham bicameral parliamentary system, decreed a constitution that consolidated power in the hands of the elites and institutionalized discrimination against the island’s majority Shi’i population. The king appoints a consultative council that can block the elected lower house’s legislation. Electoral districts are hopelessly gerrymandered to minimize Shi’i representation.

Popular hostility to the political status quo has simmered ever since. Although the Shi’a have suffered the most from the regime’s intransigence, frustrations cut across sectarian lines. For ten years, an organized opposition, consisting of a handful of formal political societies (actual parties are illegal), has struggled to generate enough pressure on the regime to correct its course. The two most prominent societies, the Shi’i Islamist grouping al-Wifaq and the left-leaning, non-sectarian Wa’ad, led the charge, boycotting the 2002 elections and generally refusing to give the system a stamp of legitimacy. But something changed in 2006. The opposition ended its boycott, ran for Parliament and vowed to change the system from within. By all accounts, the opposition deputies agitated repeatedly for structural changes, but their incorporation into the system rendered them wholly ineffective.

The opposition’s decision to end the boycott, meanwhile, split its social and political base. Alternative centers of dissent emerged in 2005 and 2006, notably the Haqq Movement for Liberty and Democracy. Led by charismatic figures like Hasan Mushayma’, ‘Isa al-Jawdar and ‘Abd al-Jalil Singace, Haqq rejected participation in elections and called for increased grassroots organizing, up to and including civil disobedience, and reached out to Western governments. With this bold program, Haqq siphoned off a considerable amount of supporters from al-Wifaq and Wa’ad, eventually boasting a significant following in both the Shi’i and Sunni communities. Equally important was the intensification of efforts by a network of young, energetic and devoted human rights activists, who drew attention to the grievances of the Shi’a, in particular. At the heart of this network was the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, headed by ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja and Nabeel Rajab. Using the language of human rights, al-Khawaja and Rajab carved out influential political roles as well, inspiring younger Bahrainis to get involved in civic affairs and instructing them in how to build potent grassroots organizations.

Haqq and the human rights activists also assumed a decidedly more defiant stance against the regime and its excesses than the established opposition. In doing so they distinguished but also separated themselves from the safety of numbers. Beginning in earnest in 2005 and 2006, the organizations began to mount regular peaceful demonstrations, in which knots of young activists would take to the streets demanding the amelioration of various complaints, from poor housing to under-employment among Shi’i youth to the torture that is credibly reported in the kingdom’s jails. The new opposition leaders also became increasingly provocative in their public statements, regularly offering direct criticism of the Al Khalifa. They paid a heavy price. Al-Khawaja and Mushayma’ have been arrested multiple times. Singace was abducted by the security services in August 2010, imprisoned, tortured and is now facing charges of terrorism and plotting to overthrow the government. The same accusations are leveled at Mushayma’, who went into exile in London.

The rise of the new Bahraini opposition was met with a surge of regime brutality. From 2005 to 2010, the security forces routinely used tear gas and rubber bullets in their attacks to disperse demonstrations. To preempt refusal of orders by the police, the regime stepped up its long-standing

practice of recruiting foreigners as officers, including non-Bahraini Arabs and Pakistanis. Not coincidentally, the opposition says, the recruits tended to be Sunni. A cycle of state violence and opposition recrimination was firmly entrenched by 2010. Their increasingly vicious treatment by the state garnered the younger activist generation considerable credibility with the population. Where al-Wifaq and Wa'ad pliantly sought influence in the corrupt halls of power, Haqq and the human rights groups were resilient in their insubordination. It became increasingly clear that the country's political future would be decided in the streets.

Point of No Return

Neither Haqq nor the Bahrain Center for Human Rights is entirely responsible for drumming up the massive February 2011 demonstrations, but the power of their example should not be understated. Many of these organizations' grassroots activists, furthermore, were directly involved in the February 14 "day of rage" that kicked off the series of protests, both through social media like Twitter and Facebook, and also through hands-on planning on the ground.

February 14, 2011 was the tenth anniversary of the publication of the National Action Charter, the document that contained King Hamad's original blueprint for reform. Ahead of the protest, and cognizant of the fates of autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt, Hamad announced that every Bahraini family would receive a lump-sum payment of 1,000 Bahraini dinars (approximately \$2,650). Such royal largesse is not uncommon in the Gulf's richer and less populous petro-princelands, but in Bahrain it was previously unheard of. The handout, however, did not placate the protest movement's organizers. Prior to February 14, these young men and women had laid out their demands on various social media platforms. They called for constitutional reform, as well as freedom. They demanded genuinely free and fair elections, a consultative council representative of the citizens, the release of political prisoners and an end to corruption, torture and "political naturalization," a term referring to the practice of granting foreign police recruits citizenship. As one writer summed up the movement's program, "We do not want to overthrow the regime, as many imagine, and we do not want to gain control of the government. We do not want chairs and seats here or there. We want to be a people living with dignity and rights."

Encouraged by the Internet-savvy youth, tens of thousands of Bahrainis attended demonstrations in Manama and villages across the country. In most places, the police attempted to halt the proceedings with physical force, but the participants refused to disperse, initiating a violent game of cat and mouse. Police shut down main roads to block access to potential assembly points, and in the places where demonstrators still managed to gather, riot police stood at the ready with guns, batons and tear gas. February 14 marked the first fatal mistake of the regime: the death of 27 year-old 'Ali 'Abd al-Hadi Mushayma'.

A large crowd convened early the following morning for what should have been the orderly, pacific funeral procession. Instead, the security forces unloaded a barrage of gunfire and tear gas canisters upon the mourners, leading to the death of a second demonstrator, Fadhil 'Ali Matrouk, 31. The king took the dramatic step of apologizing for his police, promising a swift internal investigation to punish the wrongdoers in the ranks. Few Bahrainis were convinced.

In retrospect, moreover, it is apparent that the two deaths transformed what were loosely coordinated protests into a more centralized and powerful movement. By the late afternoon, thousands of Bahrainis were pouring into Pearl Circle voicing their demands for constitutional reform and economic and social justice. Their determination was self-evident: Some had marched nearly two miles from their villages to the roundabout, risking harassment by the police. Despite the

duress of the preceding 24 hours, a sense of joy and empowerment permeated the circle, a feeling that something had been won that could not be taken away. At sunset on February 15, the crowd registered several thousand members, swelling further as the evening progressed. Loudspeakers, a media tent and food stalls appeared.

There was no clear leadership in the circle. The online organizers who had stirred thousands to protest were not a visible presence. Cadres of al-Wifaq and Wa'ad scrambled to fill the void, but this movement was not theirs, and they knew it. In spite of some confusion about who was authorized to speak and by whom, one message rang clear: non-violence. Speakers repeatedly condemned police brutality and urged those in attendance not to follow suit. February 15 was a holiday, the birthday of the prophet Muhammad, and organizers worried that demonstrators might return to work on the morrow. Instead, they returned to the roundabout, if anything in greater numbers than before, with what they thought was a green light from the government. Many participants erected tents, intending to spend the night in the circle. A half-mile away, however, hundreds of police vehicles and buses carrying riot troopers sat waiting. Their presence was undetectable from the roundabout except from the high vantage point of the bridge.

In the early morning hours of February 17, witnesses report, the police moved in, backed up by the army. Within five to ten minutes of their arrival, without warning, they descended upon the protester encampment from all sides, firing into tents with shotguns loaded with birdshot. Most of the camp had been asleep. Four demonstrators lost their lives and many more were wounded in the ensuing mayhem. The armed forces fired upon demonstrators trying to reach the roundabout again on February 18, resulting in the seventh death of the uprising.

Thousands gathered that day in the village of Sitra for the funerals of three killed in the roundabout attack. Whatever legitimacy the royal family had enjoyed in the eyes of demonstrators had largely dissipated. The regime had discredited itself further by claiming ludicrously in official media outlets that police had "exhausted all channels" of peaceable persuasion with the snoozing protesters before drawing the shotguns. Rumors swirled regarding the whereabouts of missing persons and the involvement of Saudi Arabian troops alongside other foreigners in the crackdown. The atmosphere in Sitra was a fusion of sorrow and subdued rage.

Mourners stuck gamely to their original petitions for justice and freedom through the transformation of the political system, as well as the omnipresent refutation of regime sectarianism: "No Shi'a, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis." Yet angrier slogans also resounded. "Try the Al Khalifa as criminals," some shouted, calling for international aid in bringing the ruling family to book. Zaynab, a schoolteacher from Sitra, expressed the new mood bluntly: "Today is for civilization and no longer for kings." At one point during a funeral procession, a man broke the chain of chants and prayers with a message for those outside of Bahrain. For four emotional minutes he spoke in English, not to the mourners, but to the trailing pack of journalists. As he ended his impromptu account of the February 17 events, he pleaded, "Please show them this — we are not pretending. We have rights. We are human beings and we are Bahrainis. We will not stop until freedom."

The February 17 massacre, caught on videotape and broadcast worldwide, may have been the point of no return for the Al Khalifa. The king hastened to anoint the crown prince, who has a reputation in the West as a reformer, as the convener of national dialogue and negotiations. Pro-democracy supporters reclaimed Pearl Circle and quickly reestablished their camp, which had been destroyed. Bahrainis from all walks of life have marched in solidarity to the giant pearl-shaped sculpture for which the roundabout is named: nurses, doctors, teachers, lawyers, human rights activists, bankers, students, unionized workers and more.

Balance of Forces

But the tense, eerie quiet that followed February 17 was also an opportunity for the ruling family to energize its own social base, which is not negligible. There are many Bahrainis who benefit from the status quo, because they work for state institutions, because they belong to favored merchant families or simply because they prefer the devil they know to the devil they do not. As in Egypt before the resignation of President Husni Mubarak, there is a sizable chunk of the population that feels the unruly Pearl Circle demonstrators have succeeded mainly in disrupting normal life. This sentiment is tinged with class prejudice, but also with sectarianism; many government backers claim that the complaints of the Shi'i majority are unsubstantiated. State TV has unsubtly amplified these imprecations, to the extent that pro-democracy activists regard it as a government tool to incite sectarian tension. Following the February 17 attack on Pearl Circle, the official network reported the discovery of a weapons cache belonging to the demonstrators there. At the funerals the next day, mourners adamantly denied the story. The state TV claim was never validated.

The presence of the pro-government Bahrainis has been felt on Facebook and Twitter, the very virtual sites of dissent where the February 14 event was organized. There posts can also be found griping about the protesters and voicing steadfast support for the royal family. It has been apparent on the avenues of Manama as well: Within hours of the last rites of the Pearl Circle casualties, people paraded around the city in cars honking horns and waving flags, banners and portraits of the king, celebrating the royal family responsible for the previous day's tragedy. On February 21, some of the regime loyalists made their way from al-Fatih mosque to the roundabout in what was perceived by the pro-democracy demonstrators as an attempt at intimidation. Pearl Circle greeted the arrivals from the mosque with cheers for Sunni-Shi'i unity.

The forces in the middle are the established opposition groups, al-Wifaq and Wa'ad. Initially reluctant to support the call for demonstrations, al-Wifaq and Wa'ad subsequently changed tack, as the regime's violence made them feel compelled to join forces with the protesters. But since the crown prince's call for dialogue, they have pointedly declined to echo the calls for the fall of the regime. Instead, they are pressing their old reform agenda, hoping to obtain concessions from the royal family, while leaving the Al Khalifa in place. As a Wifaq MP, Mattar Mattar, told the press, "The opposition parties are discussing their set of demands, while the protesters on the streets have their own issues." Will those in the circle who are chanting "Down, down, Al Khalifa!" accept anything less when the opposition societies sit down at the bargaining table? It is an open question to Bahrainis themselves.

What's Next?

No revolution is identical. While the Bahraini king may have been scared into concessions by the experiences of Tunisia and Egypt, the same chain of events cannot be assumed.

It is widely believed, for instance, that the Al Khalifa's allies will not allow the king and his progeny to meet the same fate as Egypt's Mubaraks. The foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council converged on Manama on the evening of February 17, by all accounts to stiffen the spines of the Al Khalifa in quelling the disturbances as soon as possible. Apart from the natural aversion of the Gulf monarchies to popular protest, or anything that smacks of participatory politics, the Saudis have a special interest in suppressing Shi'i voices of dissent. The province of al-Hasa in Saudi Arabia's east is home to a large Shi'i population, and though they are a minority rather than a majority, they harbor grievances similar to those of their Bahraini co-religionists. Al-Hasa also happens to be where most of Saudi Arabia's untapped petroleum lies. Bahraini dissenters cite this existential interest as

grounds for suspecting the Saudis of considerably more than aggressive diplomacy in combating the rebellion next door. There are already signs of growing assertiveness on the part of some Shi'i activists in al-Hasa, who are keen to capitalize on the regional momentum to score reforms in Saudi Arabia.

Then there is the United States, whose Fifth Fleet is anchored in Bahrain, along with several other military assets. The Fifth Fleet prowls the Persian Gulf, location of two thirds of the world's proven oil reserves, to ensure that the precious liquid flows to global consumers with minimal interruption. From its aircraft carriers were launched the jets that patrolled the no-fly zone in southern Iraq in the 1990s and the bombers that struck Baghdad in advance of the 2003 invasion. US diplomats have accordingly been inclined to overlook the escalating roughness of the Al Khalifa's response to dissent over the last five years. "I am impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain is walking on," said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a Manama news conference on December 3, 2010. Now, as that path appears lit from Pearl Circle rather than the palace, the Obama administration is trapped in its own rhetoric, urging the Al Khalifa to pursue "meaningful reform" and rebuking the regime for its violence, but stopping well short of the condemnatory language it employed to denounce similar repression in nearby Iran. The US diffidence is likely informed by the judgment of a top intelligence official, interviewed by Reuters, that the royal family can and will "restore order" in Bahrain.

Waves of violence have crashed ashore on this island nation since mid-February, and with each one, the demands of the pro-democracy demonstrators have grown louder, more insistent and more radical. King Hamad has responded with a series of apparent climbdowns, issuing a royal apology for the first two fatalities, pledging a renewed push for political reform and, on February 22, ordering the release of several political prisoners, including 23 Shi'i activists who were on trial for sedition. The freeing of these men has been a key plank of the new opposition's platform for some time.

One of the accused, who was being tried in absentia, is Hasan Mushayma' of Haqq. The warrant out for his arrest is now presumably suspended, paving the way for his return to Bahrain. If he is allowed back unhindered, Mushayma' could serve as a mediator between the hardline challenge of the crowds and the less confrontational approach of the established opposition societies.

The mass protests that took place on February 22, called by the established opposition itself, sent a clear signal that the uprising in Bahrain is far from resolved. Al-Wifaq, Wa`ad and their opposition allies are trying to balance their instincts for gradual reform against the power of the social forces unleashed by the demonstrations and the violence directed against them. But the initiative rests with the protesters. For now, they remain unyielding in their demands for the creation of an entirely new political order. By forcing al-Wifaq into the streets, even as that society hews to its softer line, they have kept alive the possibility that Bahrain may yet complete its revolution.

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P.S.

* From Merip, February 23, 2011:
<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero0223011.html>

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