

Clampdown in Bahrain

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The trial was like a scene from a bad play: for seven hours in June, third-rate actors played the roles of unscrupulous prosecutors and a military judge fabricating evidence to convict twenty doctors and medical staff of trying to overthrow the Bahrain monarchy. The judge scolded defense attorneys when they cross-examined state witnesses, who testified under oath that Shiite Muslim medics had occupied Bahrain's main hospital and denied treatment to Sunni patients. He either objected to the questions or responded to them himself.

Of course, the court session in the capital of Manama was no act. Bahrain's justice system was using flimsy evidence to punish and humiliate not only health workers who'd treated injured antigovernment protesters during last winter's pro-democracy rally but also anyone who stood against the monarchy. At least thirty-three people have been killed in the unrest since the uprising erupted on February 14 in the capital's Pearl Square, with many protesters demanding a republic. Hundreds more have been wounded, many severely beaten by security forces while in the hospital, according to human rights groups.

"Who are these people prosecuting us, judging us?" Dr. B., one of the accused, remembers thinking as she and other defendants watched the surreal proceedings. "It's scary what they're capable of doing. The security forces shoot people, put bullets in their heads and then accuse doctors of breaking and smashing their brains and causing their death." Dr. B., who asked not to be identified to avoid government retaliation, had to sign a paper pledging not to speak to the media when she was released on bail after nearly two months in jail. "It looks like I'm with the worst actors in the world, like when you go to theater. It's so boring. But I have to watch it." If convicted on various national security charges, she and other defendants could be sentenced to as many as 130 years. At a minimum, they could be jailed 15-20 years.

After police killed at least five people three days after the protests began, demonstrators wanted nothing less than to tear down the whole system. They made dialogue with the government conditional on the ouster of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. The radical shift in their demands played into the hands of Saudi Arabia, which from the outset had opposed any reform. With a green light from the United States, the Saudi-led invasion by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on March 14 killed any hope of reform and democracy. The troops arrived right after a visit to Bahrain by former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates. As host to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, Bahrain is a key US logistical and command center not only for the Gulf but for operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean.

The crackdown did not end in Pearl Square. The government has since been carrying out a systematic campaign of violent repression against its citizens, which was not eased by the lifting of the state of emergency on June 1. Security forces are still deployed in the streets, protests are violently attacked, military trials continue, people are still arrested and tortured (several have died in custody), and Bahrain state television continues to sow sectarian hatred against Shiites.

The crackdown hasn't spared Shiite mosques: scores have been destroyed or seriously damaged, allegedly for not having building permits, giving credence to the common view that the government is trying to bring Shiites to their knees. With most activist leaders languishing in jail, Bahrain's

opposition is all but crippled. Wefaq, the country's main Shiite opposition party, pulled out of the national dialogue in July and has said it will boycott a special parliamentary election scheduled for September.

Despite government attempts to polish its image, protests continue in villages outside Manama, which "send a message—especially to reporters and policy-makers—that Bahrain will never be stable if grievances are not addressed," says Husain Abdulla, director of the Washington-based Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain. He says the underground resistance, mostly by youth, relies on Facebook, Twitter and websites like bahrainonline.org to organize gatherings. Videos posted on the web show small groups shouting, "Down with Hamad!" and clashing with riot police.

Meanwhile, the Saudis seem entrenched on the island, despite the withdrawal of some troops. "It's their opportunity to extend their hegemony in the Persian Gulf," says Ali Al-Ahmed, director of the Washington-based Institute for Gulf Affairs. "Bahrain has a rope around its neck; they've lost any legitimacy and ability to project power locally. The Saudis are going to dig in."

During the protests Bahrain's crown prince, Sheik Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, who was assigned the daunting task of arranging a dialogue, confided to a group of Shiite businessmen that the Saudis had given him a short deadline to wrap up talks or else they would take action. They wanted "this mess in Bahrain to be cleared up as soon as possible, before it spread to their country," says one businessman who was at the meeting.

According to Saudi and Arab observers, Saudi Arabia's powerful interior minister, Prince Nayef, wanted to invade at the end of February, less than two weeks after the protests began, but was discouraged by the Americans. So the Saudis started lobbying in Washington—with the help of the Bahraini ambassador there—to incite fear of Iranian involvement. "While in Bahrain, they were talking about dialogue and reconciliation; in Washington the message was that Iran was behind it," says Abdulla. Iran claimed the protests were inspired by its revolutionary Islamic ideology, something most protesters strongly deny. Indeed, there's no evidence of any Iranian role in the uprising.

Soon after the February 18 shooting of demonstrators, President Obama spoke to King Hamad on the phone, asking that he not militarily suppress the peaceful protests. The king obliged and withdrew his army from the streets, allowing the demonstrators to camp out in Pearl Square. According to Bahrain insiders, it was at the suggestion of Jeffrey Feltman, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, that the crown prince appeared on state TV after the shooting and appealed for calm. He said that what had happened was unacceptable and invited the opposition to dialogue. As the protesters became more intransigent—and several opposition groups called for a republic—the American position changed, allowing a Saudi invasion. For the United States, the royal family was a red line. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested that Bahrain, one of Washington's most subservient allies, had the sovereign right to invite GCC troops anytime it chose—something no US official said when the Communist government of Afghanistan invited Soviet troops in 1979.

Shiites and Sunnis alike say that since the arrival of the Saudis, the influence of Wahhabi doctrine—the ultra-conservative ideology that Saudi leaders and Al Qaeda espouse and that considers Shiites infidels—has permeated Bahraini society. Religious police now operate under the name of the Committee to Protect Koranic Values, a branch of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Affairs Ministry. "That is very scary. They might leave Bahrain one day, but they will continue to have influence not only from the outside but from within," says Abdulla. "The fear is, you bring more sectarian people or ideas into the country to create a political society that is nothing but Sunni."

No official census has been conducted to determine the Shiite-Sunni balance in Bahrain. Most

international media estimate a 60–70 percent Shiite majority, out of a population of about 600,000 citizens. More broadly, Western media coverage has not given an accurate account of the country's demography, ethnicity and social makeup, instead oversimplifying to depict a Sunni minority ruling over a discriminated Shiite majority. The ruling al-Khalifa is indeed Sunni, but there's no evidence that it favors the ordinary Sunni population. Long before other Gulf states modernized, Bahrain boasted a relatively educated and politicized population, with dissent common among an opposition mostly made up of leftist Sunnis. In 1975, however, Parliament was dissolved, and the following year the Constitution was suspended. Many oppositionists were arrested, with leaders forced into exile.

Two years after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, a group of Bahraini Shiites who had forged close ties with Iran, staged a failed coup. The organizers had planned to install a theocratic Shiite regime, an event that left a deep scar on Bahrain's Sunnis. Around the same time, Saudi Arabia began spreading its Wahhabi teachings to counter Iran's drive to export its Shiite ideology. The Bahrain government has also encouraged the spread of Salafi preaching.

Bahraini Sunnis insist—and Shiites agree—that their community is not aligned with the royal family just because they share the same faith. They dismiss claims that al-Khalifa represents them. The family, they say, rules as a tribe, and the army and police are there only to protect the tribe. It recruits only those who are loyal to it, including thousands of Sunnis imported from Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan and Pakistan, ostensibly to increase the Sunni percentage—and perhaps also because they would have no allegiances to ordinary Bahrainis, whether Sunni or Shiite. There are nearly as many senior government positions occupied by trusted and loyal Shiites as ordinary Sunnis. However, Shiites are almost never allowed employment in sectors like defense, police, state TV and radio, or the information ministry, though there's no law barring them. There are almost as many—if not more—wealthy Shiite businessmen as Sunni. “The political problem in Bahrain is not sectarian,” says Abdulla.

Many Sunnis initially sympathized with protesters' demands for a constitutional monarchy, but they were at the same time worried that religious leaders would hijack the cause and set up a theocratic state if they came to power. The ruling family was seen as a barrier to such a threat. What ultimately turned many Sunnis against the protesters was their call for regime change. “Sunnis are boiling inside,” said Mohammed al-Sayed a few days before the attack on Pearl Square. Al-Sayed is from the Al Eslah Society, which espouses the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. “Sunnis resent the way [Shiites] present these grievances as only their own, as though they are the only community that aspires to change.” Sunnis also suffer from unemployment, the housing crisis, government corruption and lack of political freedom.

This year's events are bound to have a deep impact on the way the two communities perceive each other. Bahrain was a symbol of peaceful coexistence in the Gulf, with widespread intermarriage between Sunnis and Shiites. It's difficult to see how such coexistence will return to the island so long as the state media insult Shiites with impunity. By the time Saudi tanks arrived, even some of the more liberal Sunnis expressed relief that a feared civil war had been averted and that the streets had, in their eyes, become safe again. Their relief may come at the cost of fulfilling the promise of the Arab Spring.

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P.S.

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