

Bahrain: Grand Prix State Terror

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Perhaps Bahrain April 22 was a first. Imagine a sporting event featuring state-sponsored terror and blood in the streets.

Imagine one with race drivers and event organizers mindless of raging crimes against humanity nearby.

Hollywood script writers wouldn't touch it. Producers wouldn't let them. The atmosphere was surreal. Attendance was sparse. A normally full grandstand was half empty. It's a wonder anyone came.

Observers said more security forces than spectators showed up. Most teams, drivers, mechanics, engineers, and other personnel preferred to stay home. Nonetheless, they came.

Formula 1's reputation was tarnished. Instead of pulling out, it went ahead anyway. Although favorite Sebastian Vettel took the checkered flag, no one won the contest. It was more travesty than sporting event.

The Al Khalifa monarchy's media strategy backfired. Instead of burnishing Bahrain's image, journalists focused more on rage against injustice, blood in the streets, police state violence, security forces and armored vehicles surrounding the Bahrain International Circuit (BIC), and clouds of black smoke rising nearby.

Even though the heavily guarded venue let the race come off without incident, Bahraini protesters won on Sunday. Millions watched worldwide. Social media spread the word.

So did journalists courageous enough to explain. Even The New York Times got some of it right. It quoted activists saying they were protesting for democratic change.

It mentioned human rights leader Abdulhadi Alkhawaja's "hunger strike for over two months." It's now two and a half months and counting, but how much longer can he hold on?

It also reported protest leader Salah Abbas Habib's death by "gunshot wounds" without mentioning his name. It cited opposition groups blaming police. It explained that "antigovernment protesters have been demonstrating for democratic reforms" since other "revolts erupted across" the region last year.

The Washington Post, however, relied solely on an April 22 AP largely puff piece. It focused mostly on the event. It said "Bahrain got exactly the type of incident-free Formula One race it wanted...."

Perhaps inside, but not on bloodstained streets where the real action took place the way it's done for months.

A London Independent article headlined, "Bahrain GP limps across finish line as lockdown wins the day," saying:

Normalcy was nowhere in sight. Activist Alaa Shehabi said:

"There are armored vehicles at the entrance to every village. If anyone emerges now they will just be shot at. The government has sent a very strong message."

After speaking to the Independent, Shehabi was arrested and detained. Inside the BIC, organizers and participants expressed relief at day's end without incident. For sure, they want to leave and head home. Some may wish they hadn't come. Who wants to race in a war zone?

London Guardian writer Ian Black headlined, "Bahrain Grand Prix fails to drown out angry protests," saying:

Though unable to disrupt the race, protesters "claimed a moral victory against their government in their campaign to focus attention on tensions and repression in the Gulf state...."

Black explained heavy security, armored vehicles, police attacking protesters, tear gas, rubber bullets, thick black smoke clouds, curfews, and overall conditions unfit to live in let alone race.

"A Bahraini photographer reported that police had threatened to smash his camera for taking pictures of them chasing protesters."

Black quoted Brookings Doha Centre analyst Shadi Hamid saying:

"For Bahrain's regime, the F1 race was a massive, almost embarrassing, failure. For the opposition, it was a godsend."

He cited real grievances gone unaddressed. He quoted independent al-Wasat Bahraini journalist, Mansoor al-Jamri, saying he's "amazed by the (regime's) state of denial."

He reported an activist's tweet, saying the "race is over but the Bahrain revolution continues."

On April 23, the Guardian's Josh Halliday said UK Channel 4 News journalists, including foreign affairs correspondent Johathan Miller, were "deported from Bahrain" after being arrested for filming a demonstration.

Denied visas, they came without accreditation. So did other foreign journalists. Authorities tried keeping all unwanted ones out. Some dared come anyway. Those caught were roughed up, detained, and deported.

Miller said police "aggressive and violently attacked the group's driver." Channel 4 aired him saying:

He and his crew “were caught filming a planned demonstration in one of the Shia villages....” Police confronted them. “(T)hey have not been particularly pleasant. They’ve been very aggressive towards me, my crew and driver and Dr Ala’a Shehabi, a prominent human rights activist.”

Authorities seized their cameras and computers, wouldn’t return them, and “initially refused permission to board a flight” home. Finally they got out.

State Terror Took the Checkered Flag on Sunday

Security forces escalated violence. Protesters, activists, and journalists were targeted. Tear gas, rubber bullets, shotguns, stun grenades, and baton beatings were used. Arrests, torture and other abuse followed. Another death was reported from tear gas inhalation. Some believe it’s toxic.

A Sanad village resident known as Sabeer was found dead in his room. The Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) said he’s the 79th confirmed death since protests erupted in mid-February 2011.

On Sunday, at least eight Bahraini women with tickets showed up at the BIC. Unarmed, they began protesting peacefully. Police beat and arrested them.

Nazeeha Saeed, a previous torture victim, tweeted that “torturer officer Sara Al Moosa is on duty in BIC protecting the race.”

Others expressed concern about the arrested women taken to the same Naziha police station where detainees are tortured. Parents were denied permission to see their daughters.

Throughout the weekend, Manama’s Pearl Roundabout (scene of numerous protests) was surrounded and heavily protected. Protesters were heading there. It’s a symbol of freedom and democratic change.

No one was allowed near it. Security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets, stun grenades and shotguns.

On April 21, Alkhawaja’s daughter, Zainab, was arrested for the second time. She was peacefully protesting her father’s detention and condition. She’s currently detained in jail. Her sister, Maryam, BCHR’s foreign affairs head, said:

“I can guess (she’s held) because nobody really believes in the legal system.” Police states have none. “Zainab’s mentality is you can only bring about the fall of the regime when you stop treating it like a government.” It mocks a legitimate one. So do many other regional police states.

On April 21, activist Mohammed Hassan was arrested with London Telegraph journalist Colin Freeman. He was struck with a gun barrel and beaten. He required hospitalization. Detained for about 24 hours, he’s now released.

On April 22, activists Alaa Shehabi and Ali Aali were accompanying journalists when accosted by police and arrested. Aali said they were insulted and humiliated. Shehabi is an economist, lecturer, writer, activist, and research head of BRAVO human rights

organizations, as well as co-founder of Bahrain Watch.

On Saturday, Danish journalist Rasmus Tantholdt was denied entry at Manama airport for the second time in 24 hours. Two weeks ago, he managed to get in to report on Alkhawaja. On Sunday, two Japanese journalists were arrested and detained.

Police accosted German photojournalist Mazen Mahdi while covering Belad Al Qadeem village protests. He was threatened and told his camera would be broken if he didn't leave. He explained saying, the "threat (was) made by what appear(ed) to be an officer masking his face and rank."

On April 23, a media blackout remains in place. Journalists caught violating it are targeted. In the run-up to Sunday's race and the day after, it didn't work. The word got out and spread worldwide.

Millions paying attention know more about state terror than Grand Prix racing. They also understand why Bahrainis risk so much to end it. Given their courage to live free, it's better than even money they will one day.

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