

# **BAHRAIN PRO-DEMOCRACY UPRISING TARGETS**

## **WASHINGTON: Hungerstrike Activist Nears Death**

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‘The Al Khalifa rulers are just puppets. The puppetmaster we need to deal with is America.’

Tensions between the US-backed regime in Bahrain and pro-democracy protesters are reaching incendiary levels as the life of a prominent human rights activist on hungerstrike hangs perilously in the balance.

For more than a year, largely peaceful rallies have persisted in Bahrain despite a brutal crackdown by Saudi-backed forces. Now, demonstrations in solidarity with imprisoned hungerstriker Abdulhadi Al Khawaja are occurring on a daily basis in villages and towns across the Persian Gulf kingdom – defying intensified state repression.

And the Bahraini uprising, led mainly by the 70 per cent Shia population, is increasingly strident in its calls for the downfall of the unelected Sunni monarchy. The prospect for some kind of compromise leading to a constitutional monarchy – a “settlement” being pushed by Washington – is now viewed as anathema, well past its sell-by date.

Paradoxically, the conflict, chaos and blinding tear gas on the streets seems to be clarifying for the Bahraini people what needs to be done to achieve their democratic freedom.

Furthermore, anger is mounting towards the US government, which is seen more and more as the political guarantor of despotic rule by the Al Khalifa monarchy.

Significantly, in response to Bahraini security force violence and the tin ear of the island’s ruling dynasty, protesters appear to be resorting to violence as their last-resort means of political expression, with youths throwing petrol bombs and barricading off streets with burning vehicles and tyres.

Last week, US deputy ambassador Stephanie Williams posed for state-controlled Bahraini media as she visited riot police in hospital who had been injured (allegedly) during protests. Her visit only served to inflame further protests as Bahrainis point out that Williams has not shown any public concern for the many thousands more victims of state violence – even though there has been an upsurge in deaths among protesters in recent weeks from riot police firing live rounds and tear gas indiscriminately at crowds and into homes.

More than 70 people have been killed over the past year by Saudi-backed regime forces while thousands have been wounded and incarcerated – huge figures proportionate to the island’s tiny indigenous population of less than 600,000.

The invasion of Bahrain by Saudi and other Gulf forces to crush civilian protesters was secretly given the green light last March by Washington (and London). Days before the murderous crackdown, deputy ambassador Williams was photographed in another fawning media set-piece handing out doughnuts to Bahraini protesters who had staged a rally outside the US embassy in Manama.

Not so long ago, it seems, the US could carry off its deceptive pose as a benevolent soft power behind the regime. Not any more.

Heightening the tensions is the harrowing fate of Abdulhadi Al Khawaja (52) who is reported verging on coma after 56 days of refusing food.

Family and supporters fear that the internationally respected rights campaigner may be only hours from death. His family say that he has lost more than a quarter of his body mass and his vision has become impaired. But a visit to his bedside by the US deputy ambassador is not expected any time soon.

Former director of the Bahrain Human Rights Center, Khawaja began his latest fast for “death or freedom” on 8 February to protest the life sentence he received along with six other leading pro-democracy activists. Last April, he was arrested in his home by masked security agents for taking part in anti-regime demonstrations and for his outspoken opposition to the Al Khalifa rulers, in particular their abysmal human rights record. At the time of his arrest, he was viciously assaulted and dragged by his feet down the stairs of his home in front of his wife and children.

After more than two months of illegal detention during which Khawaja was tortured – suffering a broken jaw – he was convicted of “subversion” and being part of a “terrorist network serving a foreign power [Iran]”.

Front Line Defenders, an Irish-based human rights groups, point out that Khawaja first began his prison fast in the last week of January with several other inmates. That initial protest was interrupted, but Khawaja resumed his fast soon after. That means the number of days he has been refusing food is closer to 63 – near the limit that the human body can withstand.

In a moving letter to his family, Khawaja recently wrote: “My dear and beloved family, from behind prison bars, I send to you my love and yearning. From a free man, to a free family. These prison walls don’t separate me from you, they bring us closer together. Our connection and determination is stronger than ever. We take our strength, from beautiful memories. Remembering every trip, every meal we ate together, all the conversations, remembering every smile, all the jokes and the laughter. The distance between us disappears, through our love and faith.” His letter went on: “It’s true: I am in here, and you are out there. But, you are in here with me, and I am out there with you. Our pain is made more bearable when we remember that we chose this difficult path and took an oath to remain on it. We must not only remain patient through our suffering, we must never allow the pain to conquer our souls. Let our hearts be filled with joy, and an acceptance of the responsibility we have been given for in the end, this life is about finding a path of truth towards God.”

Given the gross miscarriage of justice, international appeals for Khawaja’s release have been sent to Washington and London, the main backers of the Bahraini regime. So far, there

has been no intervention from the US or British governments to save the activist's life.

Appeals have also been sent to the government in Denmark, where Khawaja obtained citizenship, having lived in that country for several years and where he trained in human rights. The Copenhagen government says it is lobbying the Bahraini rulers for his release so that he can receive medical treatment in Denmark.

However, Washington is seen as having the pivotal influence on the Al Khalifa regime, which hosts the US Navy Fifth Fleet in the port of Juffair. In a speech last May that alluded to a special relationship, US President Barack Obama said: "Bahrain is a long-standing partner and we are committed to its security."

Earlier this year, Obama spelled out what this commitment meant when he signed off a weapons deal with Bahrain worth \$53 million – this in spite of the year-long brutal repression against civilian pro-democracy protests.

The silence from Washington in the face of suffering by Abdulhadi Khawaja and his family is speaking volumes to the Bahraini populace. His ordeal and Washington's callous indifference is being seen as an epitome of the general population's struggle for justice and democratic freedom.

As one Bahraini activist said: "People are seeing that the real enemy to our freedom is the US government. The Al Khalifa rulers are just puppets. The puppetmaster that we need to deal with is the American government."

To that end, protesters have taken to burning American flags and are planning to focus demonstrations and political action on the US embassy and US Navy Fifth Fleet base. The anti-US government feeling in Bahrain is reaching a flashpoint.

A spokesman for one of the activist groups in Bahrain, the Pearl Revolution Political Center, said: "We are holding the US directly responsible to the suffering in our country. We will not spare the illegal presence of the Fifth Fleet and the counter-revolution that the US embassy is feeding behind the scenes."

As Washington goes into foghorn mode about protecting human rights in Syria, Bahrainis must be realising that such high-minded words are not simply double standards or contradictory. American government deception is straightforward: in Syria, arm and support anti-state groups to kill civilians; in Bahrain, arm and support pro-state groups to kill civilians. Because in the end, it's all about Washington asserting power. Human rights have got nothing to do with it.

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