

# BAHRAIN: US-Backed Regime Replays State of Emergency to Crush Pro-Democracy Movement

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*Bahrain's first anniversary of its pro-democracy protests has been met with massive police and army violence, with many civilians injured from regime forces firing birdshot and teargas into homes and at cars.*

*Reports are coming in of Saudi-backed troops and mercenaries attacking mainly Shia villages in the Persian Gulf kingdom with armoured vehicles.*

"It's like the State of Emergency all over again," said one resident, referring to the Saudi-led invasion by Gulf Cooperation Council troops last March to suppress the pro-democracy uprising against the Sunni regime that began on 14 February, 2011.

There are reports of troops wearing ski masks firing teargas and live rounds randomly in Shia villages, such as Sanabis, Daih and Sitra, which are seen as strongly supportive of the pro-democracy movement calling for the Western-backed unelected Sunni monarchy to stand down.

Over the past week, the Bahraini regime has stepped up the presence of state forces in the capital, Manama, and in surrounding villages, with heavy deployment of helicopters and armoured vehicles. This was in anticipation of pro-democracy demonstrations attempting to converge on the former focal point of the Bahraini protest movement - the Pearl Monument, near the financial district of the capital.

Last Spring, the monument saw hundreds of thousands making a protest camp before it was demolished by Saudi-backed troops. The site - renamed Martyrs' Square by protesters in memory of those killed in the repression - was intended to be reclaimed by demonstrators this week to mark the anniversary of the uprising.

However, troops and police saturated the area over the past few days and were reported to have opened fire on cars and pedestrians as they made their way to the site.

There appears to be a concerted effort by the regime to escalate the violence in order to justify calling another State of Emergency.

The day before the anniversary, the US-backed Al Khalifa rulers warned "those who would take Bahrain back into a dark tunnel" would not be tolerated. The foreboding language was reminiscent of that used last year to describe largely peaceful protests before a three-month State of Emergency was invoked on 15 March. Then, that was followed within hours by the lethal invasion of Saudi-led troops and massive detention of people swept up in raids on Shia villages and districts of the capital.

The State of Emergency was lifted last July and there followed entreaties to the oppositionists from King Hamad Al Khalifa and from the US government for “dialogue”. But the popular opposition remained steadfast in its calls for the unelected Sunni regime to stand down and make way for elected government that would represent the nearly 70 per cent Shia population.

More than 60 civilians were killed during state repression over the past year. Hundreds remain in prison, incarcerated by military courts. With the approach of the anniversary this week, the popular calls for democracy have grown more determined.

It seems that, faced with implacable demands for the regime to go, the rulers are now playing the “national security” card again to militarise the situation.

State-controlled media have made claims of widespread use of Molotov bombs by pro-democracy youths, with police claiming to have recovered “thousands of ready-to-use petrol bombs”. Pro-democracy sources do not deny that some youths have thrown such weapons at state forces in recent weeks, but they say that the extent of violence by protesters is minimal in comparison with the excessive, lethal force used by state forces.

Speaking ahead of the anniversary, former British police chief John Yates, who is now assigned to the Bahraini force, said that police had a well-rehearsed plan to meet the kind of “extraordinary provocation” that they had faced last year. What Yates was referring to as “extraordinary provocation” is hard to fathom. Last year, Bahraini forces killed seven unarmed civilians during the first week of non-violent demonstrations, between 14-21 February.

Yates denounced the right to peaceful protest by the Bahraini pro-democracy movement: “This isn’t organised protests, it’s just vandalism, rioting on the streets,” he told Britain’s Daily Telegraph. “Acts of wanton damage that are destroying the economy,” he added, implying that the right to peaceful protest for basic democratic franchise was somehow a national threat.

Earlier this week, supporters of the Bahraini regime apparently staged a protest outside the Iranian embassy in Manama chanting slogans against the Tehran government, inferring that it is stoking tensions in Bahrain. Similar claims of Iranian subversion were made last year by the Bahraini regime – without any evidence – and used to justify the State of Emergency.

Another sinister twist is the reappearance of masked mobs on the streets of Manama who are targeting the large expatriate population of mainly impoverished Asian construction workers. Prior to declaring the State of Emergency last March, there were widespread reports in state media of similar attacks, with lurid commentary and claims that it was the conduct of pro-democracy activists trying to destabilise the Bahraini economy. Global Research witnessed at the time that the assailants were in fact pro-regime mobs made up of off-duty state mercenaries who were deliberately attacking Indian, Pakistani and Bengali workers with the intention of whipping up a climate of chaos and fear. That had the double pro-state benefit then of justifying a State of Emergency and discrediting the pro-democracy movement.

One year on, it seems that the US-backed Bahraini regime is intent on using the same tactics to thwart legitimate demands for democracy on the island, where the Al Khalifa family has ruled as an unelected dynasty since nominal independence from Britain in 1971.

The island has since become the Persian Gulf base for the US Navy Fifth Fleet.

The ironic comparison with the current situation in Syria cannot be overstated. In Syria, Washington, London, the Arab League and the Gulf Arab monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar are loudly denouncing the Assad government and calling for regime change over violence that the former have substantially fomented; while in Bahrain, the same players are ruthlessly repressing a largely peaceful civilian pro-democracy movement and demanding dialogue with a despotic regime – that is acceptance of the regime – or face more repression under a renewed State of Emergency.

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Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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