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Protesters persist despite crackdown

Stephen Zunes | Dec. 22, 2011

Bahraini Shiites hold a rally in the village of Sanabis, West Manama, on Nov. 27, demanding the overturn of the death sentence passed against protesters accused of killing police last March. (AFP/Getty Images/Newscom)

VIEWPOINT

Of the popular pro-democracy civil insurrections that have swept the Middle East over the past year, none were as large -- relative to the size of the country -- as the one that took place in the island kingdom of Bahrain. And while scattered resistance continues, none were so thoroughly suppressed.

The crackdown against the overwhelmingly nonviolent pro-democracy struggle launched in mid-February was brutal. More 40 people have been killed, including a number in custody, and more than 1,600 have been arrested. Those targeted were not just human rights activists, but journalists who covered the protests and medical personnel who treated victims. In October, a military court sentenced 20 doctors and nurses to up to 15 years in jail for assisting the wounded.

More than 2,500 people have been dismissed from their jobs for supporting the freedom movement and more than 40 mosques and religious sites deemed to have links to pro-democracy activists were destroyed. Human Rights Watch reports, ?Leading political opposition figures, human rights defenders and civil society activists have been sentenced to unduly long prison terms, in some cases for life, solely for their role in organizing the large street protests; their trial record does not link them in any way to acts of violence or any other recognizable criminal offense.?

When the Bahraini regime proved incapable of suppressing the popular nonviolent uprising on its own, U.S.-armed Saudi forces, supplemented by smaller units from the nearby emirates, invaded the country March 14 via the causeway separating the island from the mainland.

On Nov. 22, the government-appointed Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry released a report that was surprisingly frank in acknowledging many of the regime?s abuses. The day after the report was issued, however, security forces launched a new round of repression against the now smaller but still persistent protests.

It is not surprising that the pro-democracy struggle has been so much stronger in Bahrain than in the other Arab

Gulf states. Its traditional role as a leading trading center reinforced traditions of cosmopolitanism, tolerance and pluralism. A visit to the island today reveals not only Sunni and Shiite mosques, but Christian churches, Hindu and Sikh temples and even a synagogue. Bahrain was also the first Arab country in the Gulf to provide formal modern education to women. Even prior to the discovery of oil, the economy based on fishing, pearl diving and trade allowed for the development of a largely urban society with an indigenous middle class, thereby avoiding the parochial tribalism of other Arabian countries.

Though the protesters have represented a broad cross section of society, the Sunni royal family and its supporters have tried to depict the struggle for democracy as a sectarian conflict by radical Shiites tied to Iran. The majority of pro-democracy activists are indeed Shiite, because more than three-quarters of Bahrainis are of the Shiite tradition and have long been discriminated against by the Sunni-controlled Bahraini government in employment, housing and infrastructure. The military, particularly top officers, is mostly made up of Sunnis and the secret police are almost exclusively Sunni. Only a handful of cabinet posts, restricted to the less important ministries, have been granted to Shiites, with the most important positions held by members of the royal family.

Such discrimination, however, is but one aspect of the monarchy?s authoritarian rule that the Bahrainis are challenging. Indeed, the protests in Bahrain are as legitimate a pro-democracy movement as the popular struggles in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, and they have had the support of progressive Sunni and secular elements. Signs and chants at the demonstrations have eschewed sectarianism, emphasizing Shiite-Sunni unity in the cause of democracy. Having been conquered by the Persian Empire for periods of their history, the Arab Bahrainis cherish their independence. In addition, the opposition movement has expressed its solidarity with the ongoing pro-democracy struggle against the Iranian-backed Syrian regime.

That hasn?t stopped some Obama administration officials from denouncing alleged Iranian meddling in Bahraini affairs while refusing to criticize the Saudi invasion and repression.

The United States has long been a major supporter of Bahrain?s autocratic monarchy, which hosts the U.S. Navy?s Fifth Fleet. While President Barack Obama has expressed his concern about the repression and has called for the government to dialogue with the opposition, his language has been restrained compared with his criticisms of the Assad regime in Syria and other repressive governments with which the United States does not have such close relations.

In October, the administration announced a new $53 million arms sale to Bahrain, including 44 armed Humvees that could be important instruments in suppressing street protests. The Pentagon, in defending the arms transfer, praised the authoritarian government as ?an important force for political stability and economic progress in the Middle East.?

Fortunately, a broad coalition of 29 peace, human rights and religious organizations mobilized against the arms sale and a number of prominent congressional Democrats raised concerns as well. The following month, in the face of mounting objections, the Obama administration announced an indefinite delay in the sale.

This serves as a reminder that for the cause of freedom and democracy to advance in the Arab world, the struggle cannot just take place in the Middle East, but here in the United States as well.

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?Joint Letter to U.S. Congress Regarding Arms Sale to Bahrain? www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/28/ joint-letter-us-congress-regarding-arms-sale-bahrain

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