



Saudi Arabia fights the revolution in Bahrain

Marcus Halaby Sat, 19/03/2011 - 13:38

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Bahrain has always been unique among the Arab Gulf states for its possession of a large and active Left. Deriving from the pan-Arab Nasserist and Stalinist currents once led by the Palestinian radical George Habash, it has long struggled against an autocratic monarchy for the extension of democratic rights. This has often been alongside similarly sized liberal and Islamist currents, both Shi'a and Sunni Muslim.

It should therefore not be a surprise that Bahrain has so far been the first and only Arab Gulf state to see mass protests on the scale that brought down governments in Egypt and Tunisia.

Demonstrations began on 14 February, three days after the resignation of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, and on the tenth anniversary of a referendum that had promised 'constitutional government'. Demanding the release of people imprisoned during protests at the rigging of parliamentary elections last year, demonstrators took control of Pearl Roundabout in the capital Manama, only to be met with live rounds, tear gas and rubber bullets.

Within two weeks, the protests had drawn in more than an eighth of the country's population, forcing the largest parliamentary party (the Shi'a Islamist Al Wefaq) to boycott the parliament, and King Hamad to release hundreds of political prisoners. Now the Al Khalifa dynasty is trying to crush the Bahraini people, with the support of a 'mini-invasion' by the combined security forces of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), of which Bahrain is a member. This intervention by the GCC is especially two-faced when set against its claims of 'support' for the anti-Gaddafi rebels in Libya.

Like the other GCC countries, Bahrain was once a 'protectorate' of the British Empire, its ruling family deriving its legitimacy from Britain's past colonial arrangements. Its own oil resources, however, are smaller relative to its population than all five of its fellow GCC members: Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Oman. Like Dubai in the UAE, Bahrain has therefore developed primarily as a commercial and financial services centre, as well as playing an important military role in hosting the United States Fifth Fleet.

Moreover, Bahrain has been less reliant on foreign migrant labour than its neighbours. While foreign residents form slightly over half of its population of 1.2 million, the majority of native Bahrainis are still engaged in the production of goods and services, as wage-earners, professionals or small business owners. The consequence is that the chief obstacle to revolution elsewhere in the Gulf has been largely absent: namely, the existence of a large, privileged and unproductive caste of 'native' residents, essentially drawing rents from foreign capitalists and super-exploited migrant labour, and viewing their own countries' rightless multi-national working class with fear and hatred.

Unable to exploit class divisions reinforced by national divisions, the regime has resorted instead to religious sectarianism. Bahrain has a Shi'a Muslim majority, but is ruled by a Sunni Muslim monarchy. Shi'a Muslims are excluded from whole swathes of state employment, while Bahrain's security forces recruit Sunni Muslims from outside: from Syria, Jordan, and the Baluchi tribal regions in Pakistan.

Bahrain also lies close to Saudi Arabia's oil-producing region, with an oppressed majority Shi'a population of its own. The prospect of a democratic revolution in Bahrain is therefore a mortal threat to the Saudi rulers, and, with them, to all the Gulf petro-monarchies. Even the Qatar-based television station Al Jazeera, whose coverage played such an important role in Egypt's revolution, has been cautious in reporting the Bahraini government's attacks on its own

people, allowing pro-regime accusations of shadowy ?Iranian involvement? to pass without comment.

Socialists should oppose the Saudi-led intervention, and demand its immediate withdrawal. Victory to the Bahraini revolution!

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