

U.S., Saudis complicit in bloodshed that's staining Bahrain's Arab spring

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Three days after Hosni Mubarak resigned as the long-standing dictator in Egypt, people in the small Gulf state of Bahrain took to the streets, marching to their version of Tahrir, Pearl Square, in the capital city of Manama. Bahrain has been ruled by the same family, the House of Khalifa, since the 1780s — more than 220 years. Bahrainis were not demanding an end to the monarchy, but for more representation in their government.



One month into the uprising, Saudi Arabia sent military and police forces over the 16-mile causeway that connects the Saudi mainland to Bahrain, an island. Since then, the protesters, the press and human-rights organizations have suffered increasingly violent repression. One courageous young Bahraini pro-democracy activist, Zainab al-Khawaja, has seen the brutality up close. To her horror, she watched her father, Abdullah al-Khawaja, be beaten and arrested. She described it to me from Manama: "Security forces attacked my home. They came in without prior warning. They broke down the building door, and they broke down our apartment door, and instantly attacked my father, without giving him a chance to speak and without giving any reason for his arrest. They dragged my father down the stairs and started beating him in front of me. They beat him until he was unconscious. The last thing I heard my father say was that he couldn't breathe.

"When I tried to intervene, when I tried

to tell them, 'Please to stop beating him. He will go with you voluntarily. You don't need to beat him this way,' they told me to shut up, basically, and they grabbed me and dragged me up the stairs back into the apartment. By the time I had gotten out of the room again, the only trace of my father was his blood on the stairs."

Human Rights Watch has called for the immediate release of al-Khawaja. Zainab's husband and brother-in-law also have been arrested. Tweeting as "angryarabiyah," she has commenced a water-only fast in protest. She also has written a letter to President Barack Obama: "If anything happens to my father, my husband, my uncle, my brother-in-law, or to me, I hold you just as responsible as the AlKhalifa regime. Your support for this monarchy makes your government a partner in crime. I still have hope that you will realize that freedom and human rights mean as much to a Bahraini person as it does to an American."

Obama condemned the Gadhafi government in his speech justifying the recent military attacks in Libya, saying: "Innocent people were targeted for killing. Hospitals and ambulances were attacked. Journalists were arrested." Now that the same things are happening in Bahrain, Obama has little to say.

As with the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, the sentiment is nationalist, not religious. The country is 70 percent Shia, ruled by the Sunni minority. Nevertheless, a central rallying cry of the protests has been "Not Shia, Not Sunni: Bahraini."

This debunks the argument used by the Bahraini government that the current regime is the best bulwark against increased influence of Iran, a Shia country, in the oil-rich Gulf.

Add to that Bahrain's strategic role: It is

where the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet is based, tasked with protecting "U.S. interests" like the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal, and supporting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Surely, U.S. interests include supporting democracy over despots. Nabeel Rajab is the president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights — the organization formerly run by the recently abducted Abdullahi al-Khawaja. Rajab is facing a possible military trial for publishing the photograph of a protester who died in custody. Rajab told me: "Hundreds of people are in jail for practicing their freedom of expression. People are tortured for expressing their freedom of expression. Thousands of people sacked from their jobs. ... And all that, because one day, a month ago, almost half of the Bahraini population came out in the street demanding democracy and respect for human rights."

Rajab noted that democracy in Bahrain would lead to democracy in neighboring Gulf dictatorships, especially Saudi Arabia, so most regional governments have a stake in crushing the protests. Saudi Arabia is well-positioned for the task, as the recent beneficiary of the largest arms deal in U.S. history.

Despite the threats, Rajab was resilient: "As far as I'm breathing, as far as I'm alive, I am going to continue. I believe in human rights. I'm willing to give my life. I'm willing to give anything to achieve this goal."

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Amy Goodman's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times. She is the host of "Democracy Now!," a daily international TV/radio news hour. Denis Moynihan contributed research to this column.