

International Response to Bahrain's Arab Spring

Written by Shamiran Mako

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SHAMIRAN MAKU, JUL 17 2012

The Arab Spring has been one of the most valiant movements to sweep the Middle East for the past few decades, demonstrating the people's capacity to voice their discontent with authoritarian rule and governments that had largely remained impervious to representative governance, transparency, and accountability for their citizens. Beginning in Tunisia and culminating in Egypt's Tahrir Square, mass protests and revolutions have come to define the region and its politics since February 2011.[i] While the revolutions and mass protests have ousted some of the region's longstanding dictators as seen in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the implications of the uprisings on other regional powers, in particular, the Gulf countries, have been complicated and overshadowed by geopolitical and geostrategic interests of both regional and international powers.

Bahrain exemplifies this quagmire. Beginning February 2011, thousands of peaceful and non-sectarian pro-democracy protestors congregated around Pearl Roundabout in Manama demanding socio-economic and political rights and an end to corruption and discrimination under al-Khalifa rule.[ii] In addition, protestors demanded the abolition of the 2002 unilaterally-drafted constitution by the ruling monarchy to be replaced by a new constitution that would warrant greater and equal political and parliamentary representation between the country's Sunni-minority and its majority Shi'i population, as well as electoral reform.[iii] Protestors also articulated demands for the country's transition to a constitutional monarchy, the election of a new state cabinet, and the release of political prisoners.[iv]

However, what ensued was a violent, state-sponsored crackdown on thousands of peaceful protestors resulting in the death and arbitrary detention of hundreds of Bahrainis, widespread allegations of torture and mistreatment of prisoners, and attacks on medical personnel and medical centers.[v] Protestors have been accused of plotting to overthrow the government, many have been terminated from their jobs, and government employees have been forced to pledge allegiance to the royal family.[vi] The government's methodical tactics of quelling peaceful demonstrations was epitomized by the crackdown on medical centers and medical personnel who attempted to aid dying and wounded protestors, culminating in the March 15th, 2011 attacks on Salamaniya hospital.[vii] In addition, the employment of foreign troops and mercenaries from Pakistan and neighbouring Gulf countries mainly Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar under the Gulf Cooperation Council's Joint Defence Agreement, which resulted in the strengthening of Bahrain's military capacity by as much as fifty percent, further exacerbated the government's response to the protests, fuelled sectarian tensions, and served to delegitimize al-Khalifa rule.[viii] Furthermore, Bahrain's state-run media has exacerbated inter-communal tensions by propagating sectarian sentiments and building on a Sunni versus Shi'i narrative, and by contributing to imprisonment and silencing of independent and opposition journalists and bloggers.[ix]

Although pro-democracy protests were popularized in the wake of the Arab Spring, the struggle for constitutional reform and calls for a more representative government between the ruling al-Khalifa family and the Island's Shi'i majority (often considered the Island's indigenous inhabitants prior to the al-Khalifa conquest in the 18th century)[x] have been part and parcel of Bahraini politics. Moreover, since the Island's independence from British colonial rule in 1971, the Sunni al-Khalifa family has attempted to legitimize its rule over the country's majority Shi'i population, with failed promises of political and constitutional reforms, as exemplified by the 1973 constitution that limited legislative and electoral powers in order to consolidate power for the ruling monarchy.[xi]

Previous calls for reform in the 1990s and in 2004 were similarly prompted by ongoing discrimination against the

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country's majority Shi'i population, as well as authoritarianism, limited civil and political rights, and a growing socio-economic disparity between the country's two dominant sectarian communities.[xii] Further deepening the sectarian divide has been the mass naturalization decrees since 2003, which granted Bahraini nationality to thousands of predominantly Sunni citizens from neighbouring countries and Pakistan to serve in the armed forces, the security service, and the National Guard.[xiii] The country's majority Shi'i community viewed this policy as a form of institutionalized discrimination purposed of altering the demographic composition of the minority Sunni Arabs in order to "mitigate Shi'i dominance" in the country.[xiv] Understanding this contextual background illuminates the longstanding tensions that have permeated Bahraini politics.

International response to the Arab Spring has varied depending on the geopolitical and strategic position of the country, nowhere has this been more prevalent than in the case of Bahrain. The Island's territorial position in the Persian Gulf not only makes it a key contending regional power but also determines its geostrategic position as a buffer between the Arab World and Iran. Hence, the overlap in geopolitical and geostrategic implications aid in explaining the international community's response to the uprising in Bahrain. Accordingly, as a proxy state between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Bahrain's domestic politics is both wittingly and unavoidably shaped by regional forces and variables that determine the country's response to internal and external pressures.[xv]

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the international community's response to the violent crackdown on protestors at Pearl Roundabout has been circumscribed by the Island's geopolitical and geostrategic significance. America's response exemplifies this conundrum. As a vital military ally, Bahrain is home to the United States Navy's Fifth Fleet, which ensures the free flow of oil in the region, trade, and safeguards key waterways from regional piracy and is a geostrategic ally in containing an Iranian threat in the region.[xvi] Hence, American response has ranged from President Obama raising concern regarding the government's response to the protests[xvii] to ensuring the Bahraini government's respect for universal human rights in dealing with protestors and encouraging national reform initiatives.[xviii]

More recently, however, the US has voiced deep concern regarding prisoner abuses as well as the security forces' response to protestors, and has ensured that a \$53 million arms sales to the country is contingent upon its compliance with and adoption of the recommendations of the state-sponsored Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry.[xix] In addition, the 2011 U.S. State Department report on human rights in Bahrain highlighted the bleak situation of unarmed protestors during the 2011 uprising and continued structural and institutionalized discrimination and censorship of opposition and foreign media outlets by the country's Information Affairs Authority (IAA).[xx] Nonetheless, American foreign policy interests in the region have been at the crux of its response to the crisis in Bahrain, as demonstrated by the U.S.'s preference of dialogue and reconciliation over regime change, as advocated for Libya and Syria.[xxi]

The broader response of the international community has followed a similar course. In the wake of the uprisings in 2011, an advisor to the EU Foreign Affairs chief Catherine Ashton defended the Bahraini government's violent response to pro-democracy protestors and noted that while "accidents happen," the government's crackdown should be followed by dialogue.[xxii] The UK's Foreign Secretary, William Hague, on the other hand, condemned the government's violent response to peaceful protestors along with the government's use of live ammunition, and suspended a number of arms export licences to the country while urging national dialogue to resolve the crisis.[xxiii]

Similarly, the UNHCHR voiced concern over the use of excess force on innocent protestors and the arbitrary arrest and detention of protestors and medical personnel,[xxiv] while the U.N.'s Secretary General Ban Ki-moon continues to condemn the use of excess force on innocent protestors that have resulted in civilian casualties.[xxv] More recently, 28 members of the U.N. Human Rights Council issued a joint declaration condemning ongoing violations of basic human rights, while, simultaneously, calling on the government to implement the full recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, and accountability for government personnel engaging in human rights abuses.[xxvi] However, the United States, the United Kingdom, along with key EU member states did not endorse the declaration—severely restricting an international response to the crisis.

Ultimately, international response to the crisis in Bahrain has been mired in geopolitical and geostrategic interests of

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both the international community and Bahrain's neighbouring countries. Whereas geostrategic interests dominate America's response to the crisis, particularly as the Island is home to the United States' Fifth Fleet, geopolitical and regional dynamics between neighbouring Iran and other Gulf countries influence, and to a degree, determine Bahrain's response to its domestic affairs, as succinctly noted by Mabon:

Given the increase in Shia power across the region, perhaps this adds even more weight to the Al Saud calculation that the security of the Al Khalifa regime is a red line. As such, given the perception of increase Iranian involvement within Bahrain and the ensuring empowerment of the Shia across the Middle East and thus Iran, Saudi Arabia has been left with little choice but to become involved in securing the regime of the Al Khalifa.[xxvii]

While a confluence of factors is contributing to the lack of media attention, geopolitical and geostrategic interests have largely trumped a concerted international response to the ensuing crisis in Bahrain. Although government-sponsored crackdowns of the protests in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011 have resulted in the systematic and gross violation of basic human rights, international intervention remains bleak so long as the country's domestic affairs remain vital to the broader security interests of regional and international actors.

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Shamiran Mako is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. Her areas of interest are state formation, governing in divided societies, and ethnic conflict.

[i] For a succinct timeline of the protests and revolutions, see *The Guardian*, "Arab spring: an interactive timeline of Middle East protests," available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline>.

[ii] *The Economist*, "Ripples Spreading: Even the Oil-Rich Gulf Monarchies are Feeling the Egypt Effect," (February 10, 2011): available at: http://www.economist.com/node/18114585?story_id=18114585.

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[iv] *The Economist*, "Protests in Bahrain: an Uneasy Truce," (February 20, 2011): available at: http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/02/protests_bahrain.

[v] Human Rights Watch, "Bahrain's Human Rights Crisis," (July 1, 2011): available at: http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/Bahrain's%20Human%20Rights%20Crisis_0.pdf.

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