

Bahrain: Grand Prix Disgrace

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On Sunday, April 22, Bahrain's Grand Prix went on as scheduled. This year's grand prize is disgrace, not glory.

Formula 1's governing board shamed itself by not pulling out. So did participating drivers. Agreeing to race in a virtual war zone shows nothing matters but winning and money - lots of it. Going along turns a blind eye to state terror.

Mass street protests for justice don't matter. Nor do brutal security force crackdowns. London Guardian writer Richard Williams said F1's "supremo Bernie Ecclestone" has a "habit of taking the money and asking no questions."

Already a billionaire, his money lust is insatiable. Even with race day blood on the streets he wants more. So do participating drivers. Many are multi-millionaires. Passing up one stop on the circuit hardly matters. Sacrifice isn't their long suit. Neither is doing the right thing.

They turn race competition into a perversion of sport. Thanks to Ecclestone, said Williams, "a sport whose conscience was only troubled by its environmental impact now looks like a pariah."

Welcome to Bahrain. Witness two spectacles for the price of one - Grand Prix racing and security force viciousness on street protesters in one of the world's most repressive dictatorships.

One protester death was reported. Salah Abbas Habib's body was found on a Al Shakhoura rooftop. A well-known activist leader, he was arrested the previous night with others. Reportedly they were tortured. His body showed evidence of shotgun injuries and abuse.

Police tried to prevent journalists and others from seeing it. Photos revealed what they tried to suppress.

Mohammed Hassan was arrested. He tried escorting journalists to protest areas. Security forces beat him badly. Now detained, he's held incommunicado with no access to counsel or family members.

On a March 30 TV interview, he was asked why he risked speaking publicly. He replied:

"I don't care anymore. My friends have been in prison. Some are still (there), and some are in hiding, and some are dead." Whatever happens to him, he added, he accepts it. "I have no choice but to accept it."

After the interview, he was threatened. He was arrested and beaten. He also participated in

a public debate. Expressing his views freely made him a marked man. Now he's dead. Responsibility points one way.

For weeks, security force violence caused many injuries. More occur daily. On April 10, Bahrain's interior minister authorized excessive force. Dozens of casualties followed. Many were from shotgun cartridge fragments directed on faces, chests, backs, abdomens, thighs, and other upper body areas.

For weeks ahead of race day, security forces raided towns and villages. Dozens of arrests followed. So did torture and other forms of abuse.

Imagine turning a blind eye and agreeing to be part of this. Writer/activist Finian Cunningham quoted a racing fan saying "(a) bunch of rich people hav(e) fun while others are being killed."

Ancient Rome scoundrels threw victims to the lions. Thousands turned out to watch. Bahrain Grand Prix racing fans aren't much different. Only spectacle watching matters, not raging state-sponsored violence on nearby streets.

On April 20, Der Spiegel interviewed Abdhulhadi Alkhawaja's daughter, Zainab. He's a longtime courageous activist barely clinging to life in prison after 74 hunger striking days.

Zainab said authorities are using the Grand Prix "to trick the world." Westerners "are supposed to believe that Bahrain is a country whose people live in peace, but we suffer under a regime that does not want to hear our screaming."

People across the country are fed up and want democratic change, she explained. "We will not keep silent, even if the Formula One is taking place. We will protest for human rights and freedom."

Calling herself a Shiite and proud of it, she added that "first and foremost (she's) a Bahraini." Her father's only crime was wanting democratic freedom. She was also arrested, held two days, interrogated, then released.

She expects much worse ahead. Thousands protest daily. Brute force confronts them. They still courageously rally for justice. "People are sick and tired of living in a country where they cannot speak about what is on their mind. I am speaking out, but we are paying a high price for it."

Race day images showed state-sponsored violence, burning vehicles and tires, rising smoke, and rubble-filled streets. Security forces and armored vehicles surrounded the race venue. Drivers are secluded from events outside.

Few comment other than discussing preparations, expectations, and hopes. Jenson Button told reporters:

"You are here interviewing me as a driver and that's exactly what I am going to talk about - motor racing. The outside issues, I'm not going to talk about."

Sebastian Vettel joked saying "I haven't seen anyone throwing bombs." He added that his job like other participants is concentrating on the sport and "nothing else."

Opposition Al Wefaq party senior member, Mattar Ebrahim, said “Formula One is being used by the government to mislead public opinion by saying that Bahrain is back to normal.”

AFP reported London protests outside F1’s offices. Participants want UK drivers to pull out. Rights campaigner Peter Tatchell “appeal(ed) to Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button to withdraw from the” event. “By participating (they give) respectability to the regime.”

“Shame on you, Bernie,” he added. “There can be no normal sporting relations with an abnormal regime that is killing its own people.”

Authorities spent millions promoting what became a spectacle of shame. Nothing going forward will change things. Damage done won’t easily be erased.

On race day Sunday, London Independent writer David Tremayne headlined, “Money talks as F1 show goes on regardless,” saying:

“If you closed your eyes and put everything that has happened over the past week out of your mind, it was possible to imagine that it was business” as usual.

Why race after “almost universal condemnation from human rights activists.” Money matters more than morality.

Independent writer James Corrigan called “Weekend at Bernie’s....beyond bad. The show must go on,” he said. It never should have been scheduled in the first place, nor in other nations ruled by despots.

Bernie takes “the outrageous to a new level.” He needs police protection to get through it, get out, and go home. Henceforth, he’ll be remembered as the maestro of misery, oblivious to street violence outside his cloistered paddock at the Bahraini International Circuit.

Asked by reporters to comment, he said “it’s a lot of nonsense. You guys love it. What we really need is an earthquake or something like that now so you can write about that.”

UK Prime Minister David Cameron contemptuously avoided expressing condemnation, saying:

The event is “a matter for Formula One. Bahrain is not Syria. There is a process of reform underway.”

Ed Milliband was one of 17 MPs signing a Commons motion, calling the race “an endorsement of (Al Khalifa) policies of suppression of dissent. I certainly think it is the case that, given the violence we have seen in Bahrain and given the human rights abuses, I don’t believe the Grand Prix should go ahead.”

Alkhwaja’s daughter told the Independent:

If drivers don’t reconsider and leave, “their children will ask them why they went to race in a country when its rulers were arresting and torturing so many people.”

Imagine starting their engines mindless about protesters assaulted, brutalized, and perhaps shot nearby. It gives outrage, disgrace, and contempt for what’s right new meaning.

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