

Bahrain Medics Show Trial: This Is Not Syria, Therefore No Western Outcry

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Bahrain's disgraceful show trial of medical staff is set to continue, with news this week that 20 doctors and nurses are to be retried in a civilian court on trumped-up charges of subversion against the US-backed regime.

The medics were already sentenced by a military tribunal (a military tribunal!) to up to 15 years in prison after months of being held in illegal detention, denied legal counsel and subjected to torture.

Moving their case to a civilian court is presumably meant to signal a concession by the regime. But what it illustrates is that the Al Khalifa royal rulers of Bahrain are unreconstructed despots who are implacably set against accepting any kind of democratic reform.

The persecution of the majority Shia population - 70 per cent of the island - by an unelected Sunni elite is business as usual as epitomized by the vindictive targeting of medics whose only "crime" was that they treated hundreds of people injured in the state's brutal crackdown against the pro-democracy movement.

Recently, Washington has been doing its PR best to present the monarchy in the Persian Gulf kingdom as being belatedly open to reform - this after a year of unrelenting repression against a largely peaceful pro-democracy uprising.

Bahraini grassroots activists are concerned that sections of the official opposition belonging to the Shia Al Wafaq political society are being groomed by the US State Department to accept a "compromise deal" with the royal rulers that would effectively see the monarchy remaining in power and the status quo merely being given a facelift.

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa has been praised in the US corporate media for overseeing "brave" moves towards political power-sharing and dialogue with the mainly Shia-led opposition.

Washington's envoy on human rights Michael Posner and former national security advisor Elliott Abrams have talked up "important steps" by the Bahraini regime towards reform.

However, no amount of Washington spinning can conceal the facts of life: that the US-backed Bahraini regime will continue violating human rights and international law in order to maintain its stranglehold hold on political and economic power at the expense of the Shia majority.

For 280 years, the Sunni rulers, who invaded the country from neighbouring Qatar, have sat on the chests of the indigenous Shia, and they are not going to give up their privileged seats of comfort. The Al Khalifa dynasty has enriched itself through graft and corruption while the majority of Bahrainis struggle with unemployment and poverty.

The oil wealth of the tiny island has lined the pockets of the Al Khalifas, but for the ordinary Shia it has brought poverty, pollution and sickness. To add insult to injury, when the mainly Shia-led uprising last February peacefully demanded elected government to replace the unelected venal family dynasty, it was met with batons, bullets and brutality, with thousands incarcerated or fired from their jobs, several tortured to death while in prison.

Historically, to maintain this excruciating state of inequality, the Bahraini rulers developed a system of governance and state security apparatus that is “bullet-proof to reform”. Under American and British tutelage, the Bahraini rulers became adept at presenting the kingdom as a relatively benign monarchy. They may have acquired the modern semantics and appearance of political progressivism, such as referring to the kingdom as a constitutional monarchy with a (rigged) parliament instead of an absolute monarchy as in neighbouring Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf sheikhdoms. But not far below the surface, Bahrain’s institutionalized despotism was always the dominant reality.

For example, the kingdom’s prime minister is 78-year-old Prince Khalifa Al Khalifa, the uncle of the incumbent king. He is the world’s longest sitting prime minister, having first occupied the post in 1971 when Bahrain gained nominal independence from Britain. Prime Minister Khalifa – also known locally as Mr Fifty-Fifty – has never faced an electorate and is notorious for siphoning off Bahrain’s oil wealth to become one of the richest men in the world.

For decades, despite glamorous images of mirrored skyscrapers and Formula One Grand Prix, Bahrain has been run with an ironclad National Security Agency. The agency was, and is, a veritable “torture apparatus” headed up by members of the royal family and assisted in its nefarious conduct by ex-colonial power Britain.

Between 1968-98, the main architect of the NSA and its sectarian methods of repression against the Shia population was British colonel Sir Ian Henderson. Henderson, who had previously gained British government commendation for his role in efficiently, that is brutally, suppressing the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya during the 1950s-60s, oversaw the detention and torture of thousands of Bahrainis held for years without trial in the dungeons of Bahrain.

Former detainees told Global Research that one of Henderson’s sadistic methods of interrogation was to force them to sit naked on upright glass bottles, the necks of which had been roughly broken off to leave protruding jagged points. The detainees told how Henderson personally oversaw the torture of inmates.

Today, the British influence on Bahrain’s NSA continues. One of Bahrain’s senior police chiefs is Briton John Yates, formerly of Scotland Yard; another senior police chief is American John Timoney, who formerly ran the force in Miami, Florida. Both men have reputations of corruption and brutality from their previous commands.

Bahrain’s institutionalized despotism under a family dynasty is backed up with a military and police force whose ranks are filled by foreign expatriate Sunnis recruited from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Pakistan and Jordan. The regime forces serve their Sunni masters with a

vicious hatred towards the Shia population.

This fact is attested by the daily and nightly attacks on Shia villages by Saudi-backed regime forces, with massive amounts of tear gas fired into streets and homes. At least 25 people have died from suffocation with tear gas over the past year since Saudi-led forces invaded Bahrain to crush the uprising. The victims range from a five-day-old baby girl to elderly men and women who are too weak or infirmed to escape from their smoke-filled homes.

In the past week, mourners attending the funerals for two men who died from tear gas exposure were themselves attacked by riot police who proceeded to fire more tear gas.

So, on the one hand, we see the Bahraini rulers wearing a velvet glove offering “dialogue” and “reforms”, with Washington and London providing the positive-sounding script; while on the other hand, what is felt is an iron-fist smashing down the doors of homes, firing tear gas into houses, dragging suspects away in the middle of the night, detaining them without trial and torturing to death.

And this is all happening in a supposed new era of reformism and dialogue in Bahrain that Washington assures is underway.

The continued persecution of the Bahraini medics is another fact on the ground to demonstrate the despotic nature of Washington and London’s “important ally” in the Persian Gulf.

The medics were sentenced for up to 15 years by a military court last September on a range of outlandish charges, including “attempting to overthrow the government” and “spreading defamatory information” about the royal rulers.

That verdict caused international protests from human rights groups, who denounced it as a travesty of legal procedure, not least because the sole basis for the prosecution were the confessions of the defendants – confessions that were obtained under torture.

Then, as now, the response from Washington and other Western governments and media was muted.

The medics include world-renowned surgeons Ali Al Ekri and Ghassan Dhaif and his wife, Zahra, and brother and sister, Bassim and Nada. Also sentenced was Rula Al Suffar, the former head of Bahrain’s Nursing Society. These are individuals of impeccable medical professionalism and ethics, who refused to close the doors of Bahrain’s main public hospital, Al Salmaniya, when the regime began butchering protesters last February-March. Global Research can bear witness to the dedication of these medics and countless others who struggled in the wards and corridors of the hospital to patch people up with the most horrendous wounds as wave after wave of injured were ferried in.

Dr Al Ekri was assaulted while performing surgery and hauled into detention by Saudi-backed forces who had smashed their way into Salmaniya Hospital – a crime against humanity, just one of many following the Saudi-led invasion of Bahrain that was given the green light by Washington and London.

There was a faint sign that Washington’s recent talk of progress and reform in Bahrain may have somehow sent the hint to its favoured despots to quietly drop the embarrassing show trial against the medics. But with the continuance of the prosecution – albeit in a civilian

court instead of a military tribunal – it seems that institutionalized barbarism cannot overcome its tyrannical instincts for power, even at the behest of its more PR-savvy patron in Washington.

One can only imagine the sanctimonious mouth-foaming reaction by Washington, London and the corporate media if such a travesty was perpetrated against medics in Syria.

But Bahrain is not Syria; it is an ally, therefore Western governments and media suddenly develop blindness and speech impediment in the face of blatant crimes against humanity.

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