

# Bahrainis Demand Regime Change

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Global Research, May 23, 2013

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#) 21 May 2013

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*World media outlets give little attention to the events in Bahrain, a small island nation, which is a key ally of Saudi Arabia and the United States in the Persian Gulf.*

On May 10 thousands of anti-government activists flocked to the streets of the Shiite village of Daih in Bahrain to protest against the torture of victims arrested by the minority Sunni-ruled monarchy and demanding freedom to 80 opposition activists held behind bars. The frustrated mob held up signs that read: «Manama, capital of torture», and waved the national flag. It's not the first time the protests hit the streets. Just a few days before many people held a meeting demanding «Freedom to prisoners!»...

It's a long time since Bahrain joined the zone of instability. The Sunni-ruled country is home to Shiites, making up 75% of the population deprived of rights and distanced from political mainstream.

Until recently it suited Washington as its main Middle East adversary is Iran, a country of Shiite majority, which is a cultural and political attraction for the Shiites of the world. Oppressed in their homelands, many Shiites of Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen and other countries come to Iran for getting religious teaching. The country is home to Shiite holy places: Mashhad, a shrine of Imam Raza, and Qom, the largest center for Shi'a scholarship in the world, and is a significant destination of pilgrimage.

Bahrain was under Persian rule in IV-V and XVII-XVIII. The country hosts many immigrant workers, half of them come from Iran. Tehran doesn't impede the Iranians going to work in Bahrain, so farsi language is popular enough there. Psychologically Iranians don't perceive Bahrain as a foreign land, they rather view Americans as guests there.

The Shiite opposition coming to power Bahrain will inevitably develop closer ties with Iran. That's what evokes concern in Washington. Bahrain is home to the US fifth operational fleet and United States Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), the US military personnel in the country numbers 1500 servicemen. The country enjoys favorable geographical position, a causeway bridge links it with neighbouring Saudi Arabia while Iran is on the other side of the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia has an important stake here too. Shiites, predominantly living in the east, account for 8 percent of population. They were responsible for unrest in 2012, which was put down by force, resulting in victims. An idea of creating an independent Shia state on the Arab Peninsula is popular among Saudi Shiites. The eastern part of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are supposed to become parts of the new country. That's why Riyadh and Manama quelled the Shite rebellion together. It's important to note that the Saudi Shiites live in the oil-rich land. If it goes to Iran, all the geographical Persian Gulf plans concocted by Riyadh and

Washington get stymied. So the Saudi Arabia may crack down on the Shiite opposition any way it likes, neither Europe nor the United States will pay attention or raise ballyhoo about «human rights».

The Bahrain's Shiites are consolidated by al-Wifaq, the leading opposition group. The leaders stand against monarchy, the demands include the transition of power from the ruling dynasty to people. Tehran is watching closely, it calls for a dialogue between the government and the opposition. Some sources say it provides funds to Bahrain's opposition leaders.

In April 2013 the stand off between the Shiites and Sunnis entered the phase of terrorist activities... A car explosion took place in Manama. There were no victims. The unknown before Shiite group called February 14 took the responsibility. The Al-Wifaq condemned the act and called for peaceful settlement of the conflict. No matter if the Shiite opposition was responsible or not, the incident served as a pretext for a new crack down even more powerful than before. No matter the government gets tough on the discontented (the jail terms for offending members of ruling dynasty, consecration of Bahrain's national symbols and freedom of speech abuse), the unrest is not subsiding.

The opposition is heterogeneous, including moderates and radicals. The first ones are ready for a dialogue with the authorities while the others stay adamant demanding the ruling dynasty's overthrow. Still, the demands of moderates are drastic enough, according to them, the agreement to hold a dialogue presupposes saying yes to the process of transition from absolute rule to constitutional monarchy, equal rights for Shiites and free parliamentary elections. Accepting the demands means political demise for Manama-based rulers, no good will gestures are to be expected on their part. Still, Washington will have to study the possibility of a dialogue held with the Bahrain's opposition to prevent its sliding towards the influence of Iran.

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