

Bahrain's Dangerous Race-Track Politics

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Brief Analysis

Amid embassy warnings and an uptick in violence, Washington should urge the Bahraini government and mainstream political groups to avoid worsening the situation ahead of the upcoming auto race.

Political tension is peaking in Bahrain with the arrival this week of teams for the annual Formula One Grand Prix, a major auto race that will draw a large worldwide audience. The Bahraini government sees the prestigious and commercially lucrative event as a reflection of stability in a country that has long been an ally to Washington and home to the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet.

The 2011 edition of the race was cancelled following widespread clashes between Shiite demonstrators and the security forces of the Sunni ruler, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. But it was held successfully last year despite continued protests. Then, as this year, the mainstream opposition wanted the event to take place, arguing that it benefits the country. But hardline opponents have been campaigning at home and abroad to stop it.

In recent weeks, the government has organized a National Dialogue with Sunni, Shiite, and secular groups to promote political reconciliation. And on Sunday, the island's information minister announced that the situation in Bahrain is "very reassuring," criticizing foreign media for exaggerating local problems. A few hours later, however, authorities reported four blasts in the capital, including one in which a gas cylinder set a car ablaze in the financial district. A group called "February 14" -- named after the start date of the 2011 protests and associated with near-nightly clashes between youths throwing Molotov cocktails and riot police -- has claimed responsibility.

Today, the U.S. embassy released a warning to American citizens that widespread demonstrations and violent clashes between security forces and protesters could make travel in and around Bahrain dangerous until race day (April 21). The notice, unprecedented in its use of red bold underlined type, indicated that opposition groups had recently stolen cars and detonated explosives inside them. It was accompanied by a map of areas off-limits to U.S. citizen embassy employees, as well as photos showing what an explosive device might look like.

More broadly, progress in the National Dialogue has been elusive so far, at least from the perspective of the island's majority Shiites. Last month, in a move widely interpreted as a concession to Shiite sentiment, the king appointed his eldest son -- Crown Prince Salman, considered a political moderate -- as first deputy prime minister. Yet the decision has had little apparent consequence.

Meanwhile, the island received a reminder yesterday of years of antipathy between the ruling Khalifa family and Shiites with the announcement that former British colonial policeman Ian Henderson (no relation to this writer) had died. For decades, Henderson ran Bahrain's security and intelligence service. A one-line announcement in the local *Gulf Daily News* described him as a long-time advisor to the Interior Ministry, but Iran's Press TV website noted his reputation as a torturer and called him the "Butcher of Bahrain."

Although Bahrain's leaders are likely determined to ensure that the race takes place without interruption, Washington should monitor the situation to ensure that the government's efforts do not cause further deterioration in the political atmosphere. According to opposition groups, as many as a hundred Shiite activists have already been arrested in the recent security clampdown. The parties in the National Dialogue can all contribute to restoring calm by condemning the violence. King Hamad and Washington are also concerned that Iran, which has been blamed for supporting extremist Shiite groups, will take advantage of the situation.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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