

Riot Report Will Force Bahrain to Choose a Direction

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Brief Analysis

The Bahrain government needs to act speedily on the findings of the inquiry into this year's troubles to avoid even bigger problems.

Inhabitants of the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain are nervously awaiting the November 23 publication of a report on the investigation into the February and March sectarian troubles. Members of the majority Shiite population fear that it will whitewash the history of repression against them, while the Sunni community, led by the ruling al-Khalifa family and backed by Saudi Arabia, is scared of widespread street protests supported, if not instigated, by Iran. And foreigners, including a large western community, are anxious lest they become targeted. In guiding political reconciliation on the island, which hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters, Washington's policy needs to take into account the juxtaposition of the Arab Spring's desire for freedom and Tehran's desire for regional hegemony.

Background

The report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) was written by a group of international human rights experts chaired by Professor Cherif Bassiouni, an Egyptian-American. Originally expected last month, the report has heard evidence from all sides, with personal interviews of more than 5,000 witnesses. During the troubles, thousands of Bahrainis, led by the Shiite majority and inspired by uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, took part in mass marches and demonstrations centering on the Pearl Roundabout, a downtown traffic circle dominated by a concrete statue supporting a giant pearl. More than 40 people died during the unrest, including members of the security forces. Calm was restored after the arrival of 1,200 Saudi paramilitary forces with tanks and armored vehicles (though this force and 600 police officers from the United Arab Emirates were not actually deployed on the streets). Later, the Pearl monument, symbolized on one side of a Bahrain coin, was bulldozed.

During the summer, the level of tension generally eased, but security forces had to cope with nightly riots in Shiite villages around the capital, Manama, as well as demonstrations within the city. Traffic chaos resulting from cars driven deliberately slowly and a banking system overburdened by simultaneous mass withdrawals of cash added to

the confusion.

A "national dialogue" created to discuss reform measures was boycotted by Shiites because of their poor representation in the forum. Then, elections held in September to fill in the seats of Shiite members of the advisory national assembly who had resigned because of the government's handling of the riots did nothing but exacerbate Shiite parliamentary underrepresentation. Until March, Shiite representatives held eighteen of the forty seats; today a mere eight independent Shiites sit as representatives.

In recent days, tension has increased. Since the beginning of October, the U.S. embassy in Manama has issued sixteen advisories to U.S. citizens to avoid areas where demonstrations are likely. The most recent, issued on November 20, warns of protests "throughout Bahrain to coincide with the BICI report," including disruption of traffic at the international airport. From November 23 to 27, it says, "Demonstrators plan to burn tires, disrupt traffic, and have threatened to use Molotov cocktails against police." It also warns of tactics such as placing of "debris and oil on roadways" and attempts by demonstrators "to throw steel spikes at police vehicles."

Political Challenges for Both Sides

But for the profusion of Bahraini flags, mass demonstrations led by turbaned Shiite mullahs in Manama look as though they might be taking place in Iran. Indeed, the Bahrain government itself reinforces this perception by emphasizing the links with Tehran of Shiite leaders, pointing to and any public statements that suggest sympathy with the Islamic republic. The Shiite community has long been divided over cooperation with the government, questioning whether it improves their lot or is a waste of time, and the challenge now is whether to reengage or step up the confrontation.

The report affords King Hamad an opportunity to reach out to the Shiite community, although he has limited room to maneuver. Hardline members of the ruling family are thought to be against any concessions to the Shiites, whom they accuse of dual loyalty. Manama is also restricted by the attitude of Saudi Arabia, worried about political contagion within its own Shiite community, itself a local majority in the kingdom's oil-rich Eastern Province, a mere sixteen miles away and joined to Bahrain by a causeway. Equally, Riyadh is apprehensive that any political gains by Bahrain's Shiites will likewise be demanded by Saudi Shiites, although the recent appointment of interior minister Prince Nayef as heir apparent guarantees a continued hardline view on Shiites. Nonetheless, links between the two royal families are close. Earlier this year, one of King Hamad's sons married a daughter of Saudi King Abdullah.

The BICI report is expected to criticize both sides, but the Shiites, who in the past have been disturbed by Bassiouni's overtly pro-government statements, are doubtful he will name the senior officials believed by the Shiites to be responsible for widespread torture. In an apparent effort to deflect criticism, the Bahrain authorities admitted on November 21 that its security forces have used excessive force and mistreated detainees during the protests, and that prosecutions against the twenty (unidentified) officers involved had been initiated.

Following publication of the report, King Hamad is expected to announce a committee to implement its recommendations. Whether this will involve all the recommendations is not clear, nor is it known who will be on the committee or the timeframe for implementation of changes.

Washington's Role

Along with other conservative Gulf Arab states, Bahrain has been disappointed with the United States for its stance on the Arab Spring and what has been regarded locally as a treacherously abrupt withdrawal of support for Washington's long-term ally, President Mubarak of Egypt. (Earlier this month King Hamad of Bahrain made a point of visiting the detained former leader in Cairo.) Furthermore, the Gulf states regard the possibility of Tehran acquiring nuclear weapons as being the main regional issue rather than more democracy.

The al-Khalifa were particularly surprised by President Obama's address to the UN General Assembly in September, when he stated, without warning Manama in advance: "We will continue to call on the government and the main opposition bloc -- the Wifaq -- to pursue a meaningful dialogue." This speech came three days before the by-elections the Wifaq was boycotting.

The notion that government engagement with the Wifaq is the only workable option for Bahrain is logical, but will require both sides to have a greater level of confidence in each other's good intentions than is currently apparent. American diplomacy has been vital in defusing tension and increasing the room for political negotiation, but it has often been a thankless task. The United States and its diplomats are regularly criticized in the government-controlled media.

One example of the dilemma that Washington faces in Bahrain is the fate of a proposed \$53 million arms package involving armored Humvees and several hundred TOW missiles, of which Congress was informed in September. Members are threatening to block the sale unless the administration certifies that Bahrain is rectifying its alleged human rights abuses. To resolve the issue, the government of Bahrain will have to balance its desire to preserve ties with Washington against the way it deals with the political aspirations of its Shiite community.

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

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