

State of Emergency

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Jun 7, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

Bahrain makes a desperate attempt to charm Washington even as the regime declares war on protestors back home.

Bahrain's diplomatic charm offensive has run aground due to the government's brutal crackdown on its own citizens. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who is seen as one of the leading reformers within the ruling family, was due to meet with U.S. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington on June 7. But the crown prince's tete-a-tete was derailed by news reports on June 6 that the trial of 47 doctors and nurses who treated injured protestors would begin in a special security court in the capital of Manama.

The court's next hearing ended up being delayed for a week, but, unsurprisingly, June 7's meeting with the president was reduced to a "drop-by" during the crown prince's sit-down with Obama's national security advisor, Thomas Donilon; and that afternoon's conversation with Clinton did not include a joint press conference afterward.

Once again, the tiny Persian Gulf kingdom has stumbled in its bid to depict itself as a plucky U.S. ally on the front line of a brewing conflict with Iran.

It had looked like such a great piece of diplomatic choreography. On June 1, the country's Sunni monarchy lifted the state of emergency imposed in mid-March after Saudi forces intervened to counter widespread protests by Bahrain's Shiite majority. That same day, Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa announced further rounds of talks, which are intended to heal the country's sectarian rift, would be held in July. And last week, Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid Al Khalifa arrived in Washington to prepare the ground for the crown prince's visit.

Bahrain also celebrated the announcement that the country's Formula One race, canceled in March, had been rescheduled for October. An internal human rights report by the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile, which made the decision to reinstate the race, painted a rosy picture of the political situation in the kingdom, saying that "Life in Bahrain is completely normal again" and that security is "guaranteed."

But Bahrain's diplomatic charm offensive was unraveling even before the announcement of the Manama court hearing. On June 1, U.S. charge d'affaires Stephanie Williams was roasted for more than an hour on Bahraini state television, often not able to get a word in edgewise. The interviewer accused the United States of "not deal[ing] in a fair way with all the sects" of Bahrain and hoped that the international community "leave[s] the Bahraini people to solve their problems by themselves."

The hostile interview was accompanied by an anti-U.S. media offensive. On June 4, a local newspaper accused Williams of colluding with the moderate Shiite opposition group Al-Wefaq. And on June 6, a government-run paper published an editorial that argued, "American black fingers are aiming to weaken the Gulf."

These attacks seem to be part of a trend. Last week, it emerged that a junior U.S. diplomat who had dealt with human rights issues, Ludovic Hood, had returned to Washington after threats against him and his wife, who had been identified as Jewish on a local blog. Per the requirements of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, Bahrain was obligated to give Hood his own personal security detail after Clinton complained about the harassment to Bahrain's foreign minister in May.

Renewed protests on the island also threaten to derail the newly reinstated Formula One race. The event might seem trivial to finer diplomatic minds, but in the Bahraini government's psyche, it has been a key measure of the kingdom's international acceptance, rivaling only the state of the island's financial services industry. Now, Formula One's chief executive, Bernie Ecclestone, reportedly is having second thoughts as to whether it will be safe to arrange an event in Bahrain.

How did Bahrain's diplomatic push go so wrong? By scheduling the opening of the sedition trial for June 6 and launching incendiary media attacks against the United States, it appears that the ruling family's "dark side" has undermined the reformers -- represented by the crown prince and foreign minister -- in a very publicly embarrassing way.

Overall responsibility for this dismal state of affairs belongs to the vacillating King Hamad, whom one local diplomat described as too easily swayed and lacking strategic vision. With Crown Prince Salman and Khalid in Washington, he was thus vulnerable to the advice of the hard-line head of the royal court and Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid. King Hamad was also blocked by the White House from coming to the United States a few weeks ago for the graduation of one of his children -- a snub that may have also raised his anger at the Obama administration.

What now? Washington should not hold its breath for the withdrawal of Saudi forces from the kingdom. The current plan is for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) -- which includes Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, as well as Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates -- to spread its joint "Peninsula Shield" military units across all member states. For years, the sole base of the grouping has been the Saudi military city of Hafr al-Batin.

Basing "Peninsula Shield" elsewhere in the Gulf would, in the minds of the GCC royals, legitimize the presence of 1,000-plus Saudi National Guard soldiers and 600 UAE police in Bahrain. At present, the forces are stationed at the Sheikh Isa air base, which lies in the far south of Bahrain's main island, at another military facility also in the south, and around the oil refinery close to the capital. Their mission is to support the government against its domestic challengers and deter Iran from becoming embroiled

in the conflict. If there is going to be another round of head-cracking on the island, the task will probably fall again to the police, whose ranks have been bolstered by former soldiers recruited from Pakistan and offered Bahraini citizenship (another grievance of Bahrain's Shiites).

Fresh elections are now being promised in September for Bahrain's lower house, an almost completely powerless legislative body. The members of the upper house are appointed by the king and are only marginally more influential. The day before Saudi Arabia sent forces into Bahrain, the crown prince, who was then in charge of the national dialogue, had accepted the principle of "a government that represents the will of the people." This contentious notion probably gave Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, as well as Bahraini hard-liners, heartburn. It is notable that the concept of representative democracy has not been mentioned as part of the revived dialogue. Meanwhile hundreds of protesters remain detained, including people not involved in violence. Small protests in the last few days have been dispersed with tear gas, rubber bullets, and birdshot.

In his May 19 address on the Arab Spring, Obama said Bahrain's government "must create the conditions for dialogue." However, it's going to take more than a polite request to pry Bahrain from the grip of Saudi Arabia and the most intractable members of the island's royal family.

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