

Bahrain Pulls a Qaddafi

Written by NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

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It is heartbreaking to see a renegade country like Libya shoot pro-democracy protesters. But it's even more wrenching to watch America's ally, Bahrain, pull a Qaddafi and use American tanks, guns and tear gas as well as foreign mercenaries to crush a pro-democracy movement — as we stay mostly silent.

In Bahrain in recent weeks, I've seen corpses of protesters who were shot at close range, seen a teenage girl writhing in pain after being clubbed, seen ambulance workers beaten for trying to rescue protesters — and in the last few days it has gotten much worse. Saudi Arabia, in a slap at American efforts to defuse the crisis, dispatched troops to Bahrain to help crush the protesters. The result is five more deaths, by the count of The Associated Press.

One video from Bahrain appears to show security forces shooting an unarmed middle-aged man in the chest with a tear gas canister at a range of a few feet. The man collapses and struggles to get up. And then they shoot him with a canister in the head. Amazingly, he survived.

Today the United States is in a vise — caught between our allies and our values. And the problem with our pal Bahrain is not just that it is shooting protesters but also that it is something like an apartheid state. Sunni Muslims rule the country, and now they are systematically trying to crush an overwhelmingly Shiite protest movement.

My New York Times colleague Michael Slackman was caught by Bahrain security forces a few weeks ago. He said that they pointed shotguns at him and that he was afraid they were about to shoot when he pulled out his passport and shouted that he was an American journalist. Then, he says, the mood changed abruptly and the leader of the group came over and took Mr. Slackman's hand, saying warmly: "Don't worry! We love Americans!"

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“We’re not after you. We’re after Shia,” the policeman added. Mr. Slackman recalls: “It sounded like they were hunting rats.”

All this is tragic because the ruling al-Khalifa family can be justly proud of what it has built in Bahrain, including a prosperous and dynamic society, a highly educated work force and a society in which women are far better off than next door in Saudi Arabia. On a good day, Bahrain feels like an oasis of moderation in a tough region.

Yet you can parachute blindfolded into almost any neighborhood in Bahrain and tell immediately whether it is Sunni or Shiite. The former enjoy better roads and public services. And it’s almost impossible for Shiites to be hired by the army or police. Doesn’t that sound like an echo of apartheid?

It is true that Bahrain’s protesters have behaved in ways that have undermined their cause. They frequently chant “Death to al-Khalifa” — a toxic slogan that should offend everyone. And some protesters have targeted Pakistanis and other South Asians who often work for security services.

This slide toward radicalization and violence was unnecessary. The king could have met some of the protesters’ demands — such as fire the prime minister and move to a Jordanian- or Moroccan-style constitutional monarchy. Most protesters would have accepted such a compromise. Instead, the royal family talked about dialogue but didn’t make meaningful concessions, and the security forces remain almost as brutal as any in the region.

[I wrote a few weeks ago](#) about a distinguished plastic surgeon, Sadiq al-Ekri, who had been bludgeoned by security forces. At the time, I couldn’t interview Dr. Ekri because he was unconscious. But I later returned and was able to talk to him, and his story offers a glimpse into Bahrain’s tragedy.

Dr. Ekri is a moderate Shiite who said his best friend is a Sunni. Indeed, Dr. Ekri recently took several weeks off work to escort this friend to Houston for medical treatment. When Bahrain’s security forces attacked protesters, Dr. Ekri tried to help the injured. He said he was trying to rescue a baby abandoned in the melee when police handcuffed him. Even after they knew his identity, he said they clubbed him so hard that they broke his nose. Then, he said, they pulled down his pants and threatened to rape him — all while cursing Shiites.

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The Arab democracy spring that begun with such exhilaration in Tunisia and Egypt is now enduring a brutal winter in Libya, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The United States bases the Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, and we have close relations with the Bahraini government. We're not going to pull out our naval base.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton rightly deplored the violence in Bahrain, and the administration as a whole should speak out forcefully. If the brave women and men demanding democracy in Bahrain have the courage to speak out, we should do so as well.□