

Bahrain: a background briefing May 2014

Produced by MENA Solidarity, Bahrain Watch and Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy



Cameron backs Bahraini regime

Bahrain is a former British colony. It gained nominal independence in 1971, but the two countries have retained close ties ever since. Addressing British dignitaries in 2013, King Hamad said, "for all practical and strategic purposes, the British presence has not changed and it remains such that we believe we shall never be without it." Bahrain and other autocratic Gulf states are viewed by the UK government as key strategic, military and economic allies, central to protecting oil and capital interests in the region, regardless of their antidemocratic and repressive practices.

The UK government responded to the brutal repression in 2011 by strengthening its military and commercial ties with the regime. When King Hamad told Prime Minister David Cameron he wanted "more British companies winning business in Bahrain," Cameron replied that it was "music to his ears." In January 2014, the UK Embassy, along with UK Trade and Investment, ran "GREAT British Week", the first in a series of events planned to mark the 200th anniversary of British colonial interests in Bahrain.

Made in Britain: tanks and spyware target Bahrainis

Troops from Saudi Arabia used Tactica armoured vehicles manufactured by BAE Systems when they entered Bahrain in March 2011 to help suppress the pro-democracy movement. Spyware manufactured by British firm Gamma International has also been used to target Bahraini activists. Despite this, over £20 million in arms exports was approved in 2011 and 2012, with a further £18 million in 2013.

The British government is currently aggressively lobbying Bahrain to spend £1 billion on a fleet of Typhoon warplanes. Work started recently on an expansion of the UK naval base in Bahrain, which will make it Britain's largest operational base outside the UK. Britain also signed a new defence accord with Bahrain in 2012, although the details of it remain secret.

Torture: a culture of impunity

Torture has been deployed systematically in Bahrain for decades. A central demand of the pro-democracy uprising in 2011 was an end to torture and accountability for those responsible. The regime responded with even more brutal torture, resulting in five deaths in 2011. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), whose findings were accepted by the King, documented the systematic torture of political leaders, human rights activists, medics, teachers and union leaders amongst others. Those responsible have not been held accountable and there has been scant justice for the victims, many of whom remain behind bars.

In December 2013, Amnesty International issued a report detailing how, "children are being routinely detained, ill-treated and tortured in Bahrain". Despite this, the UK government is increasingly turning a blind eye to torture. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister Baroness Warsi claimed in Parliament in March 2014 that "the UK has not received any specific evidence of the use of torture to extract confessions" in Bahrain.



Protest campaigns bring results

An international campaign organised by Bahrain Watch against a massive shipment of tear gas from Korea to Bahrain succeeded in pressuring Korean regulators to ban the export in January 2014. Nearly 400,000 people sent emails to the Korean government calling for the shipment to be halted, while Korean trade unionists and activists mobilised protests in solidarity with the campaign.

Attempts by the British and Bahraini governments to promote links between UK universities and the Ministry of Education in Bahrain have also been successfully challenged. In October 2013, an FCO Minister was present for the signing of a deal between the Higher Education Academy and in January 2012, a deal was announced between the University of Edinburgh and Bahrain's Ministry of Education to create "a network of scientific research". However, following pressure from activists and the students union, the deal was dropped.

What you can do

By Dave Binns, UCU Retired members branch

The intertwining of democratic and labour movement demands in Bahrain is of significance for the labour movement internationally. Not least is that the case in Britain, which both historically and today has done much to shape the character of the Bahraini regime. Initially a wider and more public awareness of what is happening is needed urgently. In particular, the outrageous treatment suffered by our BTA colleagues requires an uncompromising response from trade unions within education. University and college based unions are potentially key centres for development of opposition through solidarity motions and meetings.

Pass this resolution

1. This union notes that three years after the 2011 uprising was brutally crushed, Bahrainis are continuing to protest and campaign for democracy and social justice. We recognize and support the Bahraini people's demands for a fully democratic government, freedom of speech and assembly, an independent judiciary, free and independent trade unions, and basic social rights such as a living wage, affordable housing and secure employment.
2. This union further notes the wrongful imprisonment and torture of ordinary Bahrainis, including medics, teachers and academics, merely for protesting for basic democratic rights and treating injured protesters.
3. This union also notes the collusion of the British government in repression of protests in Bahrain by strengthening its military and commercial ties with the regime.
4. This union therefore calls for:
 - a. The immediate release of, and dropping of all charges against, all political prisoners in Bahrain.
 - b. An end to all UK arms sales to Bahrain.
5. This union further resolves:
 - a. To send a message of solidarity to political prisoners in Bahrain.
 - b. To write to the Foreign secretary William Hague demanding an end to arms sales to Bahrain and the immediate release of all political prisoners.
 - c. To circulate information about the situation in Bahrain amongst our members and to