

## Biden Administration Still Silent About Tyranny In Bahrain

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A decade after the Arab Spring, American leadership continues to ignore human-rights abuses in the principality.

The Biden administration has arrived in Washington and wants everyone to know that there is a new sheriff in town. Human rights matter. Sometimes, anyway.

Much has been said about Saudi Arabia, the brutal dictatorship which enjoyed President Donald Trump's warm embrace. Even being an American resident did not protect journalist Jamal Khashoggi from being sliced and diced at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. In contrast to his predecessor, President Joe Biden criticized what is one of the world's most repressive nations—in the bottom ten on earth—even though he dropped his promise to treat the kingdom as a “pariah.”

Almost forgotten has been Saudi satellite Bahrain, a majority Shia principality ruled by a harsh Sunni monarchy with U.S. support. Manama is rated “Not Free” by Freedom House, falling behind Cuba, Egypt, Iran, and Russia. The best that can be said for it is that the ruling al-Khalifa family is not as prodigious at spreading tyranny as the al-Sauds, who a decade ago backed Bahrain's monarchy against its people.

Today repression continues by the ruling Sunni elite. Explained Freedom House:

Bahrain was once viewed as a promising model for political reform and democratic transition, but it has become one of the Middle East's most repressive states. Since violently crushing a popular prodemocracy protest movement in 2011, the Sunni-led monarchy has systematically eliminated a broad range of political rights and civil liberties, dismantled the political opposition, and cracked down harshly on persistent dissent in the Shiite population.

Human Rights Watch offered a similar judgment:

Bahrain's human rights situation continues to be dire. Courts convict and imprison prominent human rights defenders and opposition leaders for their peaceful activism. Security forces ill-treat, threaten, and coerce alleged suspects into signing confessions. Authorities have resumed executions, many after unfair trials marred by torture allegations, and fail to hold officials accountable for torture all. Courts have stripped the citizenship of hundreds, leaving many stateless, and deported dozens of dissidents, journalists, and lawyers as punishments for offenses that include peaceful criticism of government. Authorities in 2017 shut down the only independent newspaper in the country as well as opposition parties. Members of dissolved opposition parties were banned from running in parliamentary elections in November 2018.

The Trump administration predictably offered unquestioned support—with Saudi Arabia and Israel driving U.S. policy, Washington fixated on Iran’s support of democracy advocates rather than Bahrain’s violent suppression of anyone criticizing the dictatorial royals. Nevertheless, the State Department confirmed the regime’s crimes. Reported the latest human rights report:

Significant human rights issues included: allegations of torture; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, and the internet, including censorship, site blocking, and criminal libel; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including restrictions on independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) keeping them from freely operating in the country; restrictions on freedom of movement, including revocation of citizenship; and restrictions on political participation, including banning former members of al-Wefaq and Wa’ad from running as candidates in elections.

Like most Gulf kingdoms, Bahrain has a complicated and recent existence. A protectorate of the United Kingdom, it won independence in 1971. It was mainly known for pearl fishing before the discovery of oil, which now is close to exhaustion. Washington’s greatest interest in Manama is the latter’s role as host of the U.S. Fifth Fleet.

The al-Khalifas mimicked neighboring regimes and never tolerated much dissent. So it was no surprise when in March 2011 Bahrain’s mistreated Shiite majority joined Arabs in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and the Gulf States in pressing for political reform. Although justice was on the protestors’ side, the regime’s darker elements prevailed.

To suppress peaceful protests, the Sunni monarchy unleashed hell on the Shia majority. The *New York Times* observed simply: “Bahrain’s royal family has used tanks, riot police officers, sweeping arrests and tight censorship to thwart demands for democracy among the Shiite Muslim majority.” Uncertain of its own ability to crush all opposition, it relied on the Saudi and Emirati militaries to back its smaller armed forces and staffed its security agencies with Pakistanis and Syrians, who understood how to deal with opposition.

Although the regime briefly promoted a “dialogue,” critics of the al-Khalifas’ dictatorial rule were arrested, beaten, charged with terrorism, tried in military courts, imprisoned, stripped of citizenship, banned from international travel, and otherwise punished for seeking rights guaranteed in the U.S. The regime targeted all criticism, irrespective of how peaceful its expression.

Reported McClatchy newspapers:

Authorities have held secret trials where protesters have been sentenced to death, arrested prominent mainstream opposition politicians, jailed nurses and doctors who treated injured protesters, seized the health care system that had been run primarily by Shiites, fired 1,000 Shiite professionals and canceled their pensions, detained students and teachers who took part in the protests, beat and arrested journalists, and forced the closure of the only opposition newspaper.

The royals created a panel to investigate the government’s response, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. The resulting 513-page report documented widespread abuses. The panel recommended that “all persons charged with offenses involving political expression, not consisting of advocacy of violence, have their convictions reviewed and sentences commuted or, as the case may be, outstanding charges against them dropped.”

Instead, the regime doubled down on its war against dissent. In 2014 Human Rights Watch found that “little has changed in the administration of criminal cases in Bahrain.” Instead, many defendants were convicted “of ‘crimes’ based solely on the peaceful expression of political views or the exercise of the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.” Moreover, security forces continued to enjoy impunity while committing human rights violations, a situation that was “impossible to reconcile with even minimal standards of justice.”

The Obama administration tepidly urged dialogue and restraint from oppressors and victims alike. It initially held up some arms sales but released the weapons the following year. “Bahrain is an important security partner and ally in a region facing enormous challenges,” explained State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland, who has reappeared in the Biden administration.

Bahraini human rights activist Mohammed al-Maskati complained: “It’s a direct message that we support the authorities and we don’t support democracy in Bahrain, we don’t support protestors in Bahrain.” Rep. Tom Malinowski, then with Human Rights Watch, contended that “the number one U.S. security interest in Bahrain right now is not making sure they have slightly better F-16 engines, it’s making sure that they implement the reforms needed to make the relationship sustainable over the long-term.”

At least the Obama administration seemed slightly chagrined when sacrificing the oppressed to augment profits of the military industrial complex. Not so the Trump administration, which acted as if the more people detained and tortured, the better. Trump essentially invited King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa to fill Bahrain’s prisons. “Our countries have a wonderful relationship together,” stated Trump. Despite past tensions, “there won’t be strain with this administration.”

Few are surprised when Washington makes sometimes difficult accommodations with nations that fill an important security role. However, the Trump crew made no pretense about its cynicism toward human rights. Friendly regimes could kill prodigiously with nary a peep from Washington.

Little has changed over the last decade. Sayed Ahmed Alwadei of the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy observed:

Since the uprising, any vestige of pro-democracy sentiment in Bahrain has been ruthlessly suppressed. Unlicensed gatherings of more than five people are illegal under Bahraini law, and even mild criticism of the government can land you in prison. All independent media and opposition political parties have been outlawed, while brave leaders of the uprising such as Abduljalil al-Singace and Abdulwahab Husain remain behind bars, a reminder to any Bahraini who dares to dream of freedom.

Yet Bahrain’s rulers still complain when anyone cites their awful record. Recently Manama upbraided Qatar for an Aljazeera report on Bahrain’s use of torture. Still, some Bahrainis hope for change. Last fall the long-serving prime minister and architect of repression died. He was replaced by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, who was said to favor a more liberal policy.

A push from President Biden might help. Emile Nakhleh of the University of New Mexico suggested:

Washington could use Salman's appointment as an opportunity to encourage him and his father, King Hamad, to allow the banned al-Wefaq and other civil society institutions to reopen. Salman could allow political clubs to resume their legal, peaceful, political and cultural activities. Opening up the country would ultimately pave the way toward creating a more highly educated, technologically advanced and economically vibrant country.

In early March a group of 15 human rights groups wrote Secretary of State Antony Blinken about Manama: "The Biden administration should urge Bahrain to rescind restrictions on civil society, take genuine steps towards justice reform and the restoration of civil rights and reinstate restrictions on arms sales to Bahrain pending an improvement in the country's rights record." Making an effort would help restore Biden's reputation on human rights.

Human rights hypocrisy and sanctimony in the Middle East undercuts U.S. policy—no one can take America's complaints about Iran seriously when Washington arms serial human rights abusers Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates. And if the latter regimes ever fall, their peoples will remember who Washington backed when people were being jailed and killed for seeking liberties that Americans take for granted.

Of course, in a complicated and dangerous world compromises sometimes must be made. However, that is a good reason to disengage from other nations' conflicts. Washington should focus on protecting the interests of Americans, rather than of the gaggle of authoritarian states which prefer to leave their dirty work to the U.S. The Mideast matters ever less to America while Europe, India, China, and Japan, major oil consumers all, have the wherewithal to cooperate in protecting oil transit.

A decade has passed since the people of Bahrain demanded their democratic rights. The Obama administration largely stood by as its closest partners crushed those aspirations. The Trump administration encouraged the regime to extirpate the slightest hope for reform.

Now it is Joe Biden's term. He must make a choice. Will he also be a fair-weather friend of human rights in Bahrain?

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