



MAR Background Report: The Revolution in Bahrain

Unrest in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries spread to Bahrain, with the first protests taking place on February 14th. The protesters, mainly comprised of the Shi'a majority, called for wide-ranging reforms and intended to remain in the capital until their demands were met. Thousands of protesters flocked to the capital. Funeral services for a protester killed early on in the unrest also gathered a crowd of more than 1,000 people, who used the gathering as a platform to call for the removal of government. On February 17, the military forcibly removed hundreds of protesters from Pearl Square in a pre-dawn raid, leaving four dead and hundreds injured. The attacks elicited widespread international condemnation as weapons were used against the sleeping protesters, a crowd which included women and children. On February 18th, police open fired on a peaceful demonstration, reenergizing protests and leading to a "Day of Transformation" protest on the 19th. As in Egypt, the police are more hated than the military, and at one point began to leave the area, removing barricades and allowing the protest to expand.

Shi'as constitute the majority of the population in Bahrain, but are ruled by a monarchy from the Sunni minority. According to data from the Minorities at Risk Project, Shi'a activists sporadically provoked unrest in the 1980s and 1990s, but activity lightened following the adoption of a new constitution in 2000, and the country's transition to a constitutional monarchy in 2002. The first elections since 1973 were held in October of that year. The newly created legislative body included about a dozen Shi'a representatives, a step forward but far from proportionally representative. Furthermore, some members of the opposition boycotted the elections, in protest over provisions that allowed for the appointed upper house to enjoy equal power with the elected lower body.

Shi'as still live as second-class citizens, facing political and cultural discrimination, as well as discrimination in employment. Though the Shi'a population has faced little direct repression in recent years, protests and political organizing is still tightly monitored, as the regime is highly conscious of their numerical disadvantage. And while Shi'as have seen some improvement on the employment front, the Sunni majority enjoys a favored status in terms of employment in the government sector, and for the highest ranking positions in the security forces. MAR data also reports that social services in Shi'a neighborhoods are inferior to those in Sunni districts, and Shi'as have less access to resources needed to enter the skilled workforce, compounding the disproportionate unemployment problem faced by Bahraini Shi'as.



In Bahrain, the freedom of press and expression is limited, as though citizens have "free speech" there are also laws in place stipulating that an individual must not "slight the Islamic faith" or speak out against the king. MAR research also finds that it has been declared illegal to "create divisions or religious differences," thus giving the regime a wide range of tools to persecute dissenters and discourage overt political organization. MAR has found that, for the most part, Shi'as are free to practice their religion, but both Sunni and Shi'a religious groups must obtain a permit from the government in order to operate legally.

The Sunni monarchy has offered to hold talks with representatives of the country's Shi'a population, with King Hamad asking his son to hold a "national dialogue" to end the unrest. However, opposition and anti-government groups say their demands must be met before they enter in talks with the monarchy. They want the government to resign, political prisoners to be released, and the deaths of protesters to be investigated. The main Shi'a opposition group, al Wefaq, officially rejected Hamad's offer of national dialogue as of the 19th. Protesters reorganized following the deadly clashes on the 17th, and seem to be there to stay, judging by the makeshift hospital and tent camp raised in Pearl Square. While this revolution has certainly been brought about by government policies toward, and repression of, the Shi'a majority, protests have now begun to eclipse the sectarian divide, with demonstrators chanting slogans such as "There are no Sunnis or Shi'as, just Bahraini unity."

About the Minorities at Risk Project

The Minorities at Risk (MAR) Project, based at the University of Maryland, monitors and analyzes the status and conflicts of politically-active communal groups in countries with a current population of at least 500,000. The project is designed to provide information in a standardized format that aids comparative research and contributes to the understanding of conflicts involving relevant groups. Selected project materials on more than 283 groups (the MAR database and codebook as well as detailed historical chronologies) are available on the [project's website](#) for researchers, public officials, journalists, students, activists, and others interested in the topic. The project also has collected data on 118 ethnopolitical organizations representing MAR groups in the Middle East and North Africa as part of the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (MAROB) dataset.



Minorities at Risk Project
www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar

Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM)
Center for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)
0145 Tydings Hall, University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

