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# Bahrain unrest: Simmering resentment boils over



By Bill Law BBC News



*Friends and family members are mourning the loss of those killed in protests*

*In the wake of Thursday's attack on peaceful demonstrators in the capital Manama's Pearl Roundabout, which left at least four dead and hundreds injured, claims by Bahrain's ruling family that the police acted to avert a "sectarian abyss" have a hollow ring.*

*The strategic Gulf island state had a brief taste of democracy on gaining independence from Britain in 1971.*

*But the then and still Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa ibn Salman al-Khalifa - the longest-serving unelected prime minister in the world - presided over the ending of parliamentary democracy in the mid-70s.*

*The al-Khalifas - Sunni Muslims, in a country with a significant Shia majority - ruled with an iron hand for decades.*

*That shifted when the prime minister's nephew, Hamad, took the throne in 1999. He promised democratic reform and a new constitution appeared in 2002.*

*Parliamentary elections were held in 2005 but gerrymandering ensured that Shia Muslims remained a minority.*

Meanwhile Shia Muslims, roughly 65% of the indigenous population, were growing increasingly frustrated.

High unemployment, coupled with the fact the Shia were not employed in key government ministries or to top jobs in the country's booming banking centre, stirred resentment.

### **'Foreign police'**

In poor Shia villages outside Manama, unemployed youths blocked roads and set tyres ablaze.



Thousands have taken part in protests in recent days

In my first visit to the island in 2007, I was caught up in one such riot in the village of Malkiya. Security forces were firing tear gas at roving bands of youths. The riots became an almost weekly occurrence and would spread from village to village.

In Malkiya, young Shia Muslims I spoke to said that they had no work and no hope of jobs. They were angry that a member of the ruling family had seized land that had been used for generations by the fishermen of the village.

And their parents complained of poor housing and long waiting lists in a country that was awash with wealth.

Human rights activists, mostly Shia, organised frequent demonstrations to protest against the slow pace of democratisation and what they saw as the suppression of human rights.

I was also told of how the government was hiring men from Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Pakistan - all Sunni - to serve in the police and security forces.

Fast-tracked to citizenship, they were able to jump the queue for housing and also had voting rights that skewed the demographic in favour of candidates supported by the al-Khalifas.

**“Protesters insist they will continue to push for democratic change but it is hard to see how they can achieve their goals in the short term”**

A slow simmering resentment was significantly ratcheted up in August of last year when the National Security Apparatus - the country's security service - swooped on 23 Shia academics, businessmen, religious figures and human rights activists.

The men were arrested in the middle of the night and held incommunicado for several weeks.

At the same time hundreds of other Shia men and boys were arrested.

Lawyers for the 23 - accused of setting up and funding a terror organisation - said that when they were finally able to see their clients, it was clear they had been tortured. It is a charge the government denies.

However, at their first court appearance in October, the men claimed that they had confessed only under torture.

Lawyers and family members told me of bruises on wrists and ankles that are the tell-tale mark of *falaqa* - a torture that involves victims being tightly trussed, hoisted into the air and beaten.

### **Joining forces**

The raids on Shia happened ahead of a general election. As in 2005, gerrymandering ensured that the Shia were kept in a minority.

However it was not until the events in Tahrir Square that Bahraini pro-democracy activists, this time both Sunni and Shia, joined forces.



Protesters claim the police response was brutal and unprovoked

What had been a Shia movement was drawing young Sunnis into the protest.

Waving Bahraini flags they chanted: "We are neither Sunni nor Shia. We are Bahrainis."

These protesters were faced by police and security forces who were largely foreign recruits.

*That may explain the ferocity of the attacks on peaceful demonstrators both on Monday and Tuesday when two people were killed, and again in the early hours of Thursday morning.*

*Unencumbered with either local connections or tribal loyalties, and green-lighted by the government to use whatever means necessary to break up the demonstration, video evidence shows them charging into sleeping men, women and children with tear gas, rubber bullets, batons and shotguns.*

*At least four of the dead were shot at close range. A doctor trying to help the wounded told of how he was severely beaten by men speaking Urdu - they were Pakistanis.*

*The government allege that the protesters were armed and the security forces had no option but to use force.*

*All of the eyewitnesses I have spoken with painted a completely different picture. The protesters had no arms; women and children had come; young Shia mingled with their Sunni counterparts.*

### **Democracy call**

*Video footage shot at the time of the attack supports their claim that the attack was unprovoked, unexpected, and brutal.*

*Protesters insist they will continue to push for democratic change but it is hard to see how they can achieve their goals in the short term.*

*Although further protests have been called for tomorrow, a massive police and military presence stands in their way.*

*The al-Khalifas are presenting themselves as a bulwark against a Shia revolt that would benefit Iran and threaten western interests in the region.*

*Indeed one Shia house I visited had posters of Hezbollah's Nasrallah and Iran's Khomeini on the wall.*

*However, all the Shia I have spoken to over the years insist they are loyal Bahrainis.*

*They point to a UN organised plebiscite in 1970 in which the Shia majority voted overwhelmingly for an independent Bahrain. At the time Iran was claiming ownership.*

*Shia say they want only one thing: democracy. And now for the first time, young Sunni Bahrainis in significant numbers are joining them in that call.*

*The image of Bahrain as a model of how democracy can evolve in the middle east, carefully nurtured by the ruling al-Khalifa family, has been severely dented.*