

Bahraini military court sentences four protesters to die

By David Walsh
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On Thursday, a military court in Manama, Bahrain's capital, condemned four young anti-government protesters to death at the conclusion of a shameless frame-up trial. Three others were sentenced to life in prison. The seven Shiite Muslims were charged with premeditated murder in the deaths of two policemen during last month's mass protests in the small island nation.

The two-week trial, condemned universally by human rights organizations, was held behind closed doors, with the defendants having only limited access to legal counsel, relatives and supporters. One of the most prominent lawyers representing the defendants, Mohammed Al Tajer, was arrested during the recent round-up of government critics.

The foreign press was banned from the proceedings, and the Bahraini media forbidden to speak or write about them.

The four condemned to death, all 20 or 21, according to Reuters, have been identified as Ali Abdullah Hassan al-Sankis, Qassim Hassan Matar Ahmad, Saeed Abduljalil Saeed and Isa Abdullah Kadhim Ali.

All seven men pleaded not guilty to the charges. Critics of the autocratic Bahraini regime of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, along with human rights activists and opposition politicians, dismissed the "confessions" from the condemned men—aired on Bahraini television—as having been obtained under torture.

Information minister Sheikh Fawaz bin Mohammed Al Khalifa told the media that the defendants "confessed that they deliberately targeted the security men in order to cause casualties, take lives, terrorize people and exact revenge." An official government statement claimed that "the long arm of the law" would catch "all those who betrayed the nation and undermined its security." The seven were accused of running over the policemen in automobiles during the March protests.

The sister of one of the convicted men, who understandably chose to remain anonymous, told the *Christian Science Monitor* "that her young brother was a peaceful protester whose confession was fabricated and forced.

"She says that in the few minutes her family was allowed to see him after each trial hearing, he told them that he was kept constantly blindfolded and did not know where he was being held. He refused to reveal more about his treatment because he did not want to worry them, says the sister, who asked to remain anonymous to protect both herself and her brother.

"Today, after hearing his own death sentence, her brother tried to tell his mother not to worry, that he would appeal it. 'But my mother was crying,' she says. 'I couldn't stay because I didn't want him to see me crying. All of Bahrain is crying.'"

Another relative of one of the prisoners told the *National*, "Even the accusations contradicted each other." The Abu Dhabi newspaper also reported that, according to this individual, "there were discrepancies between statements by prosecutors and coroner reports issued at the time of the killings."

Thousands of Bahrainis protested outside a Shiite mosque on Friday, denouncing the government for its brutality. Moussa, one of the protesters, told Reuters, "It's not true that they killed them. The government made it up just like a movie." He was referring to a video broadcast by Bahraini officials claiming to show two policemen smashed by a vehicle speeding through a crowd of protesters.

According to Nabeel Rajab, head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, the seven Shiites "were activists in their villages and we think they were targeted because of their activities. This will deepen the gap between the ruling elite and the population."

A death sentence is highly unusual in Bahrain. Thursday's verdicts were reportedly only the third time in over 30 years that authorities there have issued such a sentence. Only one execution has actually taken place during that time.

The suspects in the recent case, in a sinister precedent, were the first civilians to be tried in a Bahraini military court, known as the Lower Security Court. The regime promises more trials and vindictive sentences to come.

The head of the government's Information Affairs

Authority told the media that hundreds of cases involving protesters were being transferred to courts. He declared that 23 doctors and nurses would be charged with crimes next week. As the *Monitor* noted, "Healthcare professionals, particularly those who provided care to wounded protesters, have been targeted in the government crackdown."

The Bahraini government claims the right to use military courts under the state of emergency declared March 15, as authorities prepared to brutally disperse protesters in Manama's Pearl Square, backed by as many as 2,000 troops from neighboring Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The Al Khalifa regime has detained more than 800 people since it launched the savage repression in mid-March. Another 200 individuals are said to be missing. At least four detainees have died in custody, with signs of abuse and torture evident on their corpses.

The state violence came in the face of massive protests and demands for elementary democratic rights, along with anger over festering economic grievances. The protests, which brought Shiites and Sunnis together, have been painted by the Bahraini regime as a Shiite sectarian conspiracy organized by Iran and Hezbollah. Shiite Muslims make up 70 percent of Bahrain's population, but are largely excluded from positions of power. The Al Khalifa clan dominates the government.

The recent repression has been directed primarily at Shiite organizations and protesters. Shiite mosques (ten in the village of Nuwaidrat alone) and shrines have been demolished by security forces, some of whom are allegedly Saudis and Jordanians. Reports of beatings and abuse of Shiite civilians at military checkpoints are also widespread.

One Bahraini woman told Agence France-Presse "she was dragged from her workplace along with other Shia Muslim colleagues. In the bus to the police station, policewomen slapped their faces and made them chant pro-monarchy slogans." She alleges she was later threatened with rape if she did not confess to taking part in protests.

The woman told AFP that "she shared a cell with several doctors, nurses and teachers. While being released, she said she saw teenage female students being dragged into a police station and beaten mercilessly by policewomen.

"They used to punish us psychologically by opening a door leading to the men's section of the police station so we could see them being beaten. We would hear their screams under torture,' she said."

The arrest of 71 women during the recent tumultuous events was described by Rajab of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights as "a new phenomenon" in the history of the country.

As many as 1,000 Shiite public employees have also been

singled out and fired, according to government critics, including many health care workers. Al Jazeera adds, "Even sports professionals were targeted. An investigatory committee has suspended 150 players, coaches and staff over their alleged involvement in protests."

The foul Al Khalifa regime is a loyal ally of Washington, and Bahrain is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. The current wave of mass arrests, torture, and now military-style kangaroo court trials has not shifted the Obama administration from its policy of support for the Bahraini authorities.

In an emailed statement in response to the death sentences, which Reuters characterized as a "rare, mild rebuke" to the Bahraini government, US State Department spokeswoman Heide Bronke-Fulton blandly asserted that "Security measures will not resolve the challenges faced by Bahrain." She added that "We are also extremely troubled by reports of ongoing human rights abuses and violations of medical neutrality in Bahrain. These actions only exacerbate frictions in Bahraini society." Such a "rebuke" is equivalent to a green light from the US to continue the repression.

The *Los Angeles Times* commented Thursday, "The trial itself bore the trademarks of the kind of shadowy security courts common in drab dictatorships such as Iran, Myanmar or Syria rather than a country that is chummy with Washington and hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet." On the contrary, the record of US imperialism in the region is one of plundering its resources, propping up dictatorships, intervening militarily with great violence and generally assisting in the oppression of the broad masses of the population.

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