



Manama and the Repression of Dissent: Terror Sentencing or Political Convictions?

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Current Situation

On January 31, Bahrain's High Criminal Court sentenced two convicted militants to death and 19 others to life in prison. Only two suspects were acquitted. It also stripped 48 defendants of their citizenship. The accused were charged of being involved in acts of militancy in Bahrain, including attacks on security personnel, smuggling of weapons, assembly of explosives, and facilitation of escape from the Jau Reformatory and Rehabilitation Centre among others.

The sentencing follows a statement by the Bahraini Interior Minister on January 21, 2018 of the security forces undertaking 105 security operations across 42 locations. Approximately 290 entities suspected of being involved in or supporting militancy in the Island Kingdom was arrested, without specifying the date or duration in which the security operations were conducted. However, given the heightened security measures and the increasing lack of tolerance of the Bahraini regime towards dissidence, especially after the attack on the oil pipeline on November 10, 2017, it remains likely that the aforementioned operations were carried out anytime between November 2017 and January 2018.

Why Now?

The spike in counter-militancy operations comes in the days leading up to February 14, which commemorates the 2011 'Revolution', featuring large scale anti-government protests in Bahrain primarily by the Shiite population against the ruling Sunni monarchy. The protests were forcefully quelled by the Bahraini authorities with active support by Saudi Arabia. The event is commemorated in the country every year with multiple localized protests in predominantly Shiite neighborhoods with some devolving in acts of violence.

With this in mind, it remains likely that the blanket security operations are aimed at stemming the momentum of the upcoming nationwide protests on February 14, 2018. Therefore, the arrests were likely targeted at entities that were identified by the intelligence services to foment unrest. Furthermore, the rationale for the operations were likely aimed to undercut any potential militant attacks during the sensitive period, as well as symbolic attacks by hardline political protesters over the coming days.



Protests surrounding Bahrain's Pearl Monument

Militancy in Bahrain



Location of recent militant attack

Majority of militancy related incidents in the Kingdom have been attributed to Shiite groups, most prominent of them being Saraya al-Ashtar, Saraya al-Muqawama al-Sha'biya and Saraya al-Mukhtar. Almost all have been accused by the Bahraini authorities of being linked with Iran and its proxies like the Lebanese Hezbollah. Moreover, most of the attacks, including the November 10, 2017 oil pipeline bombing, are typically attributed by Bahraini security agencies to have been perpetrated by Iran or through Tehran's assistance.

However, the attacks have been characterized to be of relatively low level of sophistication. Coupled with this facet, the relatively minimal casualties in comparison with other restive countries in the region during the recorded attacks poses questions on the claim of the Bahraini security agencies of the connect between Iran and the Bahraini militant groups. Moreover, with the exception of the oil pipeline attacks, majority of low yield attacks targeting security personnel has also resulted in collateral damages, as was announced by the Interior Ministry on June 20, 2017. This was preceded by an IED detonation in Diraz, located in the outskirts of Manama on June 18, which led to the killing of a security officer

and scores of wounded. That being said, majority of attacks against security personnel and government infrastructure typically involve arson attacks and stone pelting.

Civil Unrest



Likely location of protests over the coming weeks

While localized instances of unrest continue to be recorded on a near daily basis, majority of these instances involve demands for release of detained activists or appeals to government to take due concern of the perceived sense of marginalization. Protests typically witness a surge following Friday prayers, especially during the afternoon and early evening hours and in predominantly Shiite neighborhoods like Diraz, Saar, BaniJamra, al Muharraq, Samaheej, al-Dair, A'ali, Karzakkan, Wadiyan and other locales in Sitra Island. Some protest devolve into acts of unrest, including tire fires, typically those along the national Highway, including the strategic Budaiya Highway leading to Manama. Given precedence, the latest sentencing by the High Criminal Court, it remains highly likely that the event will be perceived as provocative and also further the sense of marginalization. With this in mind, localized

protests of varying intensity from low dozens to high dozens remains likely to be recorded in the coming days and the relative lack of tolerance of the security forces to such incidents of dissent are likely to result in forceful dispersals over the coming days and weeks.

What to Expect

Despite heightened security measures and multiple arrest raids, low intensity militant attacks targeting security personnel remains more or less likely over the coming days triggering the cyclical nature of crackdown by security agencies. Moreover, given the unsophisticated nature of these attacks, likelihood of collateral damages cannot be completely ruled out. Given precedence of similar incidents, majority of the attacks are likely to be recorded during late evening hours and in areas witnessing frequent police patrols especially in the predominantly Shiite neighborhoods.

In case of instances of protests and acts of civil unrest, relatively higher turnouts will be recorded on Friday, especially after the evening prayers and also in the days leading upto February 14, to commemorate the 'Revolution'. Those traveling or operating in Bahrain over the coming days are thus advised to remain cognizant of the overall security situation and avoid traveling to the aforementioned locales which have a relatively higher propensity for civil unrest and forceful dispersals over the coming days and weeks.

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