



No Applause for Bahrain's Sham Election

Brian Dooley • November 2018

SUMMARY

- The November 24 parliamentary election in Bahrain, home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, will be a sham.
- The vote will be held in an environment of intense repression that has been ongoing since the Bahraini regime, aided by troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, brutally crushed a pro-democracy uprising in March 2011.
- The Trump administration, which counts Bahrain as a key ally in its anti-Iran front, should not legitimize the election. Instead, the U.S. administration and Congress should make clear that the election process is fake; express alarm at Bahrain's authoritarian regression, including the unjust imprisonment of opposition leaders; and press for political reforms.
- Continued repression will only deepen grievances and sharpen sectarian divides that Iran can exploit, increasing the chance of future instability in the Gulf region.

INTRODUCTION

Bahrain's November 24 parliamentary election promises to be a sham, part of the ruling Al Khalifa dynasty's public relations

campaign to give what is in effect an absolute monarchy a democratic façade. Nearly eight years after it crushed a popular uprising that was demanding democratic reforms including rights for the island's marginalized

Shi'a majority, Bahrain's regime has not relented in its crackdown. Dissent is not tolerated. The mainstream opposition, which is predominantly Shi'a but includes pro-reform Sunni groups and individuals, is banned. Its leaders are jailed and activists blocked from standing for the election. Even if the opposition were allowed to run, the parliament has no power.

BACKGROUND

Bahrain's authoritarian system denies basic rights and freedoms to all its citizens. On top of this, the Shi'a majority is subject to systemic political and economic discrimination. The ruling family is Sunni and all key government and security positions are held by Sunnis. Virtually all of Bahrain's police force and military are drawn exclusively from Sunni personnel (including Sunni recruits from Jordan, Pakistan, and Yemen). Shi'a are also typically excluded from senior civil service and other government positions, and there is widespread discrimination in hiring practices and violations of labor rights.¹

Over the last century, Bahrain has experienced cycles of Shi'a-led, cross-sectarian democracy movements, political openings, and repression. In 1973, two years after gaining independence from Britain, Bahrain held its first parliamentary election. In 1975, the constitution was suspended and parliament was dissolved, remaining shut for the next 27 years. During the 1990s, Bahrain was home to unrest when religious and secular groups' push for democratic reform resulted in a government crackdown. In 1999, the new Emir, Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa (who took the title of king when he declared Bahrain a kingdom in 2002), began a period of political liberalization. Political prisoners were released, exiled dissidents were allowed to return home, and some reforms were enacted. A new constitution was issued and in 2002 a pluralistic election was held for a newly



created lower house of parliament. But the reform process soon ground to a halt, and by 2005 gave way to a period of steadily closing political space, increasing intolerance for dissent and elimination of opportunities for the opposition.

In February 2011, during the Arab Spring, a significant opposition movement emerged, tapping into cross-community revulsion at government corruption and repression to organize peaceful mass protests. In the largest demonstration, on February 25, some reports estimated that as many as 200,000 people, about one-third of Bahrainis, took part.² The opposition movement, led by Shi'a figures but including pro-reform Sunnis, demanded political reforms including addressing corruption, devolving meaningful power to the parliament, and ending longstanding discriminatory practices against Shi'a citizens. The protestors mounted a serious challenge to the government.

On March 14, 2011, Saudi forces, supported by troops from the United Arab Emirates (UAE),

¹ "International Labour Conference, Committee on the Application of Standards, Discussion of Individual Cases: Bahrain," International Labor Organization, June 13, 2017, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_558104.pdf

² Michael Slackman and Nadim Audi, "Protestors in Bahrain Demand More Changes," *New York Times*, February 25, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/middleeast/26bahrain.html>



Human rights activists Abdulhadi al-Khawaja (left) and Nabeel Rajab are shown at a May 2011 pro-democracy march; both are now in prison. Photo: Bahrain Centre for Human Rights

entered Bahrain to assist Bahraini security forces in brutally crushing the protests and protecting the monarchy.³ The government then launched a severe crackdown, arresting thousands of people, including peaceful political leaders, academic figures, religious leaders, and medics who had treated injured protestors. There were credible reports of widespread torture and abuse in detention.⁴

In response to an international outcry against the violence, King Hamad promised to introduce reforms to the security services and criminal justice system, but these have not been implemented. Instead, through intimidation, violence, and the corruption of the criminal justice system, the government has managed to suppress nearly all opposition, locking people up

on bogus charges and banning peaceful dissent.

Freedom of speech, including the right to protest and to criticize the government on social media, is harshly denied. Important figures—including internationally prominent human rights activists such as Naji Fateel, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, and Nabeel Rajab—remain in prison. Sheikh Ali Salman, arguably the most influential opposition figure and a leader of the 2011 demonstrations, was imprisoned in 2015, and on November 4, 2018, was handed a life sentence. The courts have dissolved opposition societies (political parties are not allowed in Bahrain, so they are usually called societies or groups). According to rights organizations, hundreds of Bahraini nationals, including opposition activists and civil society figures, have been stripped of their

³ Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, “Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html>

⁴ See *Bahrain: The Human Price for Freedom and Justice, A Joint Report on Human Rights*, Bahrain Center for Human Rights, November 11, 2011, p. 37, <http://bahrainrights.org/BCHR/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/BahrainTheHumanPrice.pdf>; *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, presented in Manama, Bahrain, on November 23, 2011, <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICireportEN.pdf>

citizenship since 2012.⁵ Last year the county's only independent news outlet, *Al Wasat*, was forced to close down. International human rights organizations and foreign media have rarely been allowed into Bahrain in recent years. Opposition figures are not allowed to meet with foreign officials without prior government approval.

Bahrain's government constantly cites Iranian interference as a justification for the crackdown. Opposition figures typically are charged with terrorist offenses and accused of links to Iran. The reality is that while Iran is benefitting from the unrest in Bahrain there is little evidence that it is controlling it. Meanwhile, the ruling family's refusal to address widespread grievances through genuine political reform, including meaningful elections, has only deepened Shi'a alienation. The crackdown on the mainstream opposition has emboldened a small number of radical opposition actors, some of whom are encouraged by Iran. They have committed violent attacks ranging from throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at police officers during protests to attacking security forces using improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁶ More than two dozen policemen have been killed since 2011.

A POWERLESS PARLIAMENT

The 2017 entry for Bahrain in the annual U.S. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices notes with some understatement, "Citizens have limited ability to choose their government and their political system."⁷ In fact their ability is virtually non-existent.

The upcoming election is to fill all 40 seats of the lower house of parliament, the Council of Representatives. The 40 seats in the upper house,

the Consultative Council, are appointed by the king.⁸ A dozen or more candidates are expected to run in most constituencies. If no one wins an outright majority, the top two candidates face off in a second round of voting a week later. In past elections, few candidates have won more than 50 percent in the first round.

The parliament is essentially a talking shop to help promote the illusion of some form of democratic process.

The parliament's powers, especially those of the Council of Representatives, are extremely limited. It can amend, approve, or reject draft laws proposed by the government, but only the government can bring legislation to a vote.⁹ Members of parliament play no role in the cabinet, and although they can take a vote of no confidence in ministers, power to change the cabinet remains with the king. Ministers are appointed by the king, most key positions are occupied by members of his family, and ministers are not held accountable by parliament. The king's uncle, Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, a notoriously anti-democratic figure, has served as the unelected prime minister since 1970. He will remain in his post no matter what the election outcome. The parliament is essentially a talking shop to help promote the illusion of some form of democratic process.

5 "Bahrain: Hundreds Stripped of Citizenship," Human Rights Watch, July 27, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/27/bahrain-hundreds-stripped-citizenship>

6 "National C-IED initiatives: Middle East – Bahrain," Action on Armed Violence, May 31, 2017, <https://aoav.org.uk/2017/national-c-ied-initiatives-middle-east-bahrain/>

7 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017: Bahrain*, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=277237#wrapper>

8 The two chambers together constitute the National Assembly.

9 Abdul Hadi Khalaf, "Bahrain's Parliament: The Quest for a Role," *Sada Journal*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 22, 2008, [http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/21282&sa=D&source=hangouts&ust=1541789685443000&usg=AFQjCNHyMxHrSwZN70-bsmaVCM1aPjvIRA_Abdulla Al Doseri and Essa Jawahery, "The Legal System of the Kingdom of Bahrain \(Bahrain\)," New York University School of Law, May/June 2018, http://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Bahrain1.html#legi](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/21282&sa=D&source=hangouts&ust=1541789685443000&usg=AFQjCNHyMxHrSwZN70-bsmaVCM1aPjvIRA_Abdulla Al Doseri and Essa Jawahery,)



Bahrain's appointed upper house of parliament, the Consultative Council. Photo: Kingdom of Bahrain Shura Council official website

Opposition candidates have won seats in some parliamentary elections since 2002, although they have never become a majority. In 2010 the main opposition society, al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, whose support base comes from Bahrain's majority Shi'a population, won 64 percent of the vote with an official turnout of 67 percent of the electorate. Because of a gerrymandered electoral system, however, this translated into only 18 of the 40 seats.¹⁰ Following the 2011 crackdown, all 18 al-Wefaq members of parliament (MPs) resigned their seats. Some were subsequently jailed and tortured.

In 2014, al-Wefaq, the smaller secularist liberal society Wa'ad National Democratic Action Society, and other smaller opposition groups boycotted the parliamentary election in protest over what they regarded as an unfair process, a move that significantly undermined turnout

and legitimacy. The government claimed that turnout was 51.5 percent, but official results, particularly turnout figures, often are met with suspicion. Al-Wefaq put the figure at closer to 30 percent. Turnout in some predominantly Shi'a constituencies reportedly was less than 10 percent.¹¹

The prevalence of "general" polling stations in 2014, not tied geographically to a particular constituency and where voters could vote for candidates in any of the 40 districts, made monitoring results difficult. Voters had their passports stamped to show they had taken part, a proof of loyalty which Bahrainis say is helpful to show when applying for a government job.

Apart from the boycott, the big news from the 2014 election was that voters firmly rejected Sunni political societies. One, called the

10 See Justin Gengler, "How Bahrain's crushed uprising spawned the Middle East's sectarianism," Monkey Cage Blog, *Washington Post*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/02/13/how-bahrains-crushed-uprising-spawned-the-middle-east-s-sectarianism/>. The article states, "In the last fully contested election in 2010, for example, the average Shiite-majority district represented about 9,500 electors, the average Sunni district only about 6,000."

11 Elizabeth Dickinson, "Bahrain's Election and the Opposition," Middle East Institute, December 23, 2014, <http://www.mei.edu/publications/bahrains-elections-and-opposition>

National Unity Gathering, emerged in 2011 as a counter to the pro-democracy protests and acted as vehicle for people to demonstrate their fidelity to the government. The nine candidates it fielded lost. Independent candidates, virtually all of them loyal to the ruling family, won 36 of the 40 seats.

A DEEPLY FLAWED ELECTION

The political environment today is even more constrained than in 2014. The basic ingredients needed for a free and fair process are simply absent.

The vote will be held in an environment of intense repression. There is basically no opportunity for genuine opposition figures to contest the election. Prominent leaders remain in jail. Since 2014, laws have been passed dissolving the main opposition societies, al-Wefaq, Wa'ad, and Amal.¹² A May 2018 law bans leaders or members of those groups from standing for election and prohibits anyone who has ever been sentenced to six months or longer in prison from running for office. This rule effectively prevents nearly all opposition activists from running for parliament as most have been jailed at one time or another.¹³

There is no independent election commission or other mechanism for the impartial management of the process. No domestic or international monitoring of the election will be allowed. The government will restrict international media coverage, and all independent local media has been stifled. The November 24 vote will be largely meaningless for the majority of the population.

That said, the election offers the only chance for Bahrainis to select any political leaders, and



Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of al-Wefaq and arguably Bahrain's most influential opposition figure, was sentenced to life in prison in November 2018. Photo: Alya Radhi/Twitter

some from the Sunni community might use the process to express disquiet at recent price hikes, occurring amidst an alarming downturn in the economy. Bahrain needs oil prices to be at least \$100 a barrel to balance its budget; a barrel of Brent crude is currently around \$75. Years of low oil prices coupled with a mismanaged economy has left Bahrain vulnerable and dependent on wealthier Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors for bailouts.¹⁴ All the major international ratings agencies have designated Bahrain as junk territory in the last two years.¹⁵ The parliament elected in 2014 has largely acted as a rubber stamp for the government's economic policies, however, and the new body is expected to play the same role.

OPTIONS FOR THE OPPOSITION

While the opposition conceivably could use the election campaign to organize mass displays of discontent, large-scale civil disobedience or

¹² "Bahrain court dissolves main secular opposition group," BBC News, May 31, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40104731>; Merrit Kennedy, "Bahrain Court Orders Dissolution Of Country's Last Major Opposition Group," National Public Radio, May 31, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/05/31/530917066/bahrain-court-orders-dissolution-of-countrys-last-major-opposition-group>

¹³ Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Bahrain bars members of opposition groups from standing in elections," Reuters, May 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-security/bahrain-bars-members-of-opposition-groups-from-standing-in-elections-idUSKCN1IE0QA>

¹⁴ Davide Barbuscia, "Bahrain promised \$10 billion of support from Gulf neighbors," Reuters, October 4, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-economy/bahrain-promised-10-billion-of-support-from-gulf-neighbors-idUSKCN1ME294>

¹⁵ "Fitch downgrades Bahrain to junk on widening deficit," Reuters, June 28, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-ratings-fitch/fitch-downgrades-bahrain-to-junk-on-widening-deficit-idUSKCN0ZE1SG>



Graffiti in the Bahraini village of Barbar, August 2012. Photo: Mohamed CP/Wikipedia

disruption is highly unlikely. Organizing even the softest mobilization (traffic jams, the turning on and off of household lights at a particular time as a coordinated protest) is likely to result in arrest, torture, a sham trial, and prison. Most protests will be limited to boycotting, painting anti-government graffiti, or expressing tempered exasperation on social media. (Posting on social media can be dangerous in Bahrain—on November 13, prosecutors charged a former al-Wefaq MP with “obstructing the electoral process” for a tweet about boycotting).¹⁶

Although the opposition’s options to use the election to draw attention to its cause are limited, they are not nonexistent. If the jailed opposition leaders (most of whom are held in the same part of Jau Prison south of the capital Manama) could agree on a statement to release to coincide with the election, it would likely bring widespread negative international media attention to the sham electoral process. It would remind international audiences that legitimate peaceful

political figures were once again prevented from standing for office while the ruling family uses the election to pretend it allows some meaningful political participation. There will also be a limited presence of international media in the kingdom around election time, which offers a rare, if risky, opportunity for dissidents to meet international reporters.

But the easiest way for Bahrainis to register their discontent is simply not to vote. Turnout is the most important factor in this election. The greater the participation, the greater the government claims that the process has credibility. The lower the turnout, the better for the opposition, who will want to emphasize that they are ruled by a small elite backed by only a minority of the country.

WHY SHOULD THE UNITED STATES CARE?

Bahrain is important to the United States

¹⁶ “Bahraini charged over tweet on upcoming elections,” Agence France-Presse, November 13, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-6384879/Bahraini-charged-tweet-upcoming-elections.html>

because of its geostrategic location and role in U.S. defense policy. Bahraini stability matters because of significant U.S. investment, including the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, and as part of the broader regional competition with Iran, which seeks to exploit Shi'a discontent there. The United States remains a key influencer in Manama, supplying and training Bahrain's military and affording the government considerable international political legitimacy.

Bahrain's appearance of "stability through repression" is misleading. By refusing to reform, by closing off peaceful channels for citizens to express legitimate political grievances and freely select representatives, the government is raising the chance of increased violence or other new eruptions of unrest. Whether the probability of large-scale strife is high or low, whether it looks likely to happen soon or in the relatively distant future, the stakes for the United States are too high to just close its eyes, ignore the fomenting anger just under the surface of repression, and hope for the best. Legitimization of fake elections will further damage Washington's reputation in Bahrain and across the Middle East, reinforcing the perception that the United States is happy with, or at least tolerant of, repression, and that its interests are in supporting and engaging with an authoritarian elite rather than with Bahrain's people.

In May 2011, President Barack Obama said of Bahrain, "The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail."¹⁷ That analysis remains true today, and some degree of political liberalization, including the release of political prisoners, would increase international confidence in Bahrain's stability by offering a safety valve for simmering dissent.

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"stability through repression"
is misleading.**

A planned transition to an inclusive political system would be a safer option for Bahrain and its allies than the unpredictability of continuing rule by fear. International rating agencies cite ongoing political tension in their explanations of downgrading Bahrain's financial outlook, which suggests that political reforms would improve the kingdom's international ratings and attract needed economic investment.¹⁸

WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DO?

Any pretense by the U.S. government (and other allies of Bahrain) that the November 24 election is an exercise in democracy will only prolong Bahrain's political crisis. Instead, the United States should publicly call out the Bahraini government for its fake electoral process, and push for genuine political reform in an effort to encourage longer-term stability.

The United States has various points of leverage to influence the behavior of the Bahraini government, if it chooses to use them. The Trump administration has kept in place the Obama administration's 2011 restriction on sales to the Ministry of the Interior, but regrettably lifted Obama's 2016 human rights conditions on

¹⁷ President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, May 19, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>

¹⁸ Alice Haine, "S&P affirms Bahrain's ratings on its access to international capital," *The National*, June 2, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/economy/s-p-affirms-bahrain-s-ratings-on-its-access-to-international-capital-1.736155>; "Fitch Downgrades Bahrain to 'BB-'; Outlook Stable," Reuters, March 1, 2018, <https://www.kitco.com/news/2018-03-01/Fitch-Downgrades-Bahrain-to-apos-BB-apos-Outlook-Stable.html>



A Seahawk helicopter delivers a pallet of supplies to the USS Lewis B. Puller of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, October 9, 2018. The Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain. Photo: Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jonathan Clay/U.S. Navy

the sale of 19 F-16s.¹⁹ The Trump administration has notified more than \$5 billion²⁰ in potential arms sales (compared with \$350 million over the eight years of the Obama administration).²¹

Although the Trump administration has called for the release of Ali Salman and Nabeel Rajab, President Donald Trump has personally and publicly told King Hamad that Bahrain's relationship with the White House will be smoother than it was during the Obama administration, which intermittently raised concerns about human rights abuses and on occasion pressed for reforms.

Any effective policy to promote reform in Bahrain must reckon with the determination

of neighboring Saudi Arabia and the UAE to protect the Al Khalifa monarchy and to oppose pro-democracy movements across the region. Both countries remain the guarantors of Bahraini domestic security through repression, and Bahrain also relies on them to keep its increasingly fragile economy afloat. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among Washington's most repressive allies, with abysmal human rights records of their own. The Saudi regime's October 2 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi has focused new attention on the nature of Washington's relationship with Riyadh, and there is now an opportunity to reassess the United States' wider engagement with Gulf dictatorships. Saudi Arabia and the UAE bear a great deal of responsibility for the humanitarian

19 David Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "Rex Tillerson to Lift Human Rights Conditions on Arms Sale to Bahrain," *New York Times*, March 29, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/world/middleeast/rex-tillerson-bahrain-weapons-sales.html?_r=0; In 2015, Obama lifted his hold on security assistance to the Bahraini Ministry of Defense and National Guard citing progress in human rights, despite evidence to the contrary.

20 Security Assistance Monitor, Bahrain Arms Sales 2017-2018, <http://securityassistance.org/data/program/arms/Bahrain/2017/2018//Global//all>. Eighty percent of the proposed sales notified by the Trump administration come from just two sales: upgrades to Bahrain's existing fleet of F-16s, and the 19 F-16s originally held by Obama. See <https://securityassistance.org/sites/default/files/Foreign%20Military%20Sales%20DSCA%20Notifications%202017.pdf>

21 Security Assistance Monitor, Bahrain Arms Sales, 2009-2016, <http://securityassistance.org/data/program/arms/Bahrain/2009/2016//Global//all>



President Donald Trump meets with King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa, May 21, 2017. Photo: Shelah Craighead/White House

crisis in Yemen and are proving increasingly problematic allies. Their external aggression and internal repression are promoting instability in the Persian Gulf.

As long as the Bahraini government believes that Saudi Arabia and the UAE will oppose even modest reforms, the impact of U.S. pressure is likely to be attenuated. To counter this, the United States should identify important initial reform steps for which to advocate with Bahrain, and mobilize international support for such reforms in order to raise the costs to Saudi Arabia and the UAE of defending the status quo. While such pressure is unlikely to yield a fundamental change in Saudi or Emirati policy toward Bahrain, it could make them less likely to obstruct reform.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It is unlikely that the Trump administration will push hard for reform, despite it clearly

being in America's national security interest to establish stability in the country that hosts its Fifth Fleet. There is somewhat more appetite in Congress. Since 2011, several lawmakers, notably Jim McGovern (D-MA) in the House and Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) in the Senate, have been persistent critics of the Bahraini regime's abuses and repression. In July 2018, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a briefing on the upcoming election, and in early November its co-chairs McGovern and Randy Hultgren (R-IL) wrote to King Hamad asking him to release political and human rights leaders and to "take all necessary steps to ensure that the upcoming elections... meet international standards for free and fair elections."²²

Recommendations for the U.S. administration:

- U.S. officials should not endorse the November 24 election, and should publicly acknowledge that the process is not free and fair.

22 "Co-Chairs Urge King of Bahrain to Ensure Free and Fair Elections," Press Release, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress, November 6, 2018, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/news/press-releases/co-chairs-urge-king-bahrain-ensure-free-and-fair-elections>

- U.S. officials should use the opportunity afforded by the election to restate the call for the release from prison of opposition leader Ali Salman, and to call for the release of other prominent opposition figures whose role in any peaceful process leading to inclusive politics will be crucial.
- U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain Justin Siberell should offer to visit families of prominent political prisoners around the time of the election as a message that the U.S. government recognizes that legitimate opposition leaders are excluded from the process. He should also try to visit political and civil society leaders in prison around that time.
- Ambassador Siberell should refrain from additional public appearances with senior officials in Bahrain's notorious Ministry of Interior (MOI). In August 2018, Siberell was photographed at an MOI event also attended by Colonel Bassam al-Muraj,²³ identified by Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations as an alleged torturer.²⁴

Recommendations for the U.S. Congress:

- Members of Congress should issue public statements at the time of the election pointing out that the process is neither free nor fair and that the exercise is an indicator of stability, normality, or reform.
- Members of Congress should push for access for international human rights organizations and international media during the election. U.S. lawmakers should

also visit the kingdom for themselves to see what is happening (although McGovern was denied access to Bahrain in 2014).

- Members of Congress should urge the U.S. ambassador to Bahrain to visit political opposition leadership and other activists in prison.
- Members of Congress should not receive or recognize visiting members of Bahrain's parliament as legitimately elected representatives.
- Congress should convene hearings on Bahrain, to include testimony by Trump administration officials explaining the longer-term strategy for bringing stability to Bahrain and what alternative venues are being considered should the Fifth Fleet be forced to relocate due to unrest.

CONCLUSION

Bahrain's November 24 election matters because it will be presented by the ruling family as evidence of a functioning political system. U.S. government reaction to the election and its results will be an important signal of approval or disapproval of how the Al Khalifa monarchy is addressing the grievances of its population.

Bahrain's opposition leaders—threatened, imprisoned, and exiled—are left with few cards to play, but U.S. policymakers can comment on the lack of a fair process, and explain why continuing repression will likely result in further volatility that will be bad for Bahrain and bad for the United States.

²³ See "Public Security Chief Opens Counter-Terror Workshop," Kingdom of Bahrain Ministry of Interior website, August 27, 2018, <http://www.policemc.gov.bh/en/news/ministry/84295>. Al-Muraj is pictured in the top photograph, second from the right in the front row.

²⁴ See "Torture Redux: The Revival of Physical Coercion during Interrogations in Bahrain," Human Rights Watch, February 8, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/02/08/torture-redux/revival-physical-coercion-during-interrogations-bahrain>; "Follow-up information to Letter of Allegation of 15 December 2013 concerning the detention of journalist Mohammed Hassan, photographer Hussain Hubail and cameraman Qassim Zain Aldeen (Bahrain)," Letter from seven human rights organizations to the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, June 4, 2014, <http://www.lrwc.org/ws/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/20140604-Update-of-Letter-of-Allegation-Hassan-Hubail-Zain-Aldeen-FINAL.pdf>



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THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY (POMED) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the United States can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support reform in the Middle East. POMED research publications offer in-depth, original expert analysis of political developments in the Middle East as they relate to the prospects for genuine democracy in the region and to U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. The views expressed in POMED Snapshots and other publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of POMED or its Board of Directors. For more information, please contact the series editor Amy Hawthorne at amy.hawthorne@pomed.org.



Cover: *Bahrainis take part in a February 22, 2011 march honoring political dissidents killed by security forces.* Photo: *Lewa'a Alnasr/Wikipedia*