What are the root causes of Bahrain’s protests?

The al-Khalifa royal family has a monopoly on political power:
- The al-Khalifa family has ruled for over two centuries, after coming to Bahrain from Saudi Arabia.
- The unelected Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa (right)—in power since 1971—is the royal family’s richest member and uncle of current monarch King Hamad.
- Four-fifths of the 25-man cabinet are members of the royal family. King Hamad can appoint and dismiss cabinet ministers and prorogue parliament at will. He appoints all members of the upper house. The al-Khalifa emir disbanded the first National Assembly in 1975 after it attempted to legislate the end of Al-Khalifa rule and the expulsion of the U.S. Navy from Bahrain.
- The al-Khalifa family controls appointments to most senior government positions.
- $65 billion worth of prime real estate that had been public land somehow became royal property. Shia and Sunni MPs, uncharacteristically, joined forces in 2010 to investigate this previously taboo issue. The revelations provoked widespread outrage and protests.1

Sharp deterioration of human rights in latter half of 2010:
Although King Hamad dramatically improved the human rights situation after assuming power in 1999,2 Human Rights Watch noted a sharp deterioration of human rights conditions in the latter half of 2010:3
- In August, following wide-scale protests, authorities began detaining an eventual total of 250 people, including non-violent critics of the government, in the run-up to October’s parliamentary elections.
- Twenty-five of the most prominent opposition activists—most of whom are Shias—were accused of “spreading false information,” “meeting with outside organizations,” and “terrorism.” When their trial began Oct. 28, most informed the court that they had been tortured and lawyers attending the pre-trial interrogation of some clients said they observed marks and wounds consistent with torture.
- The Information Affairs Authority blocked websites and blogs associated with the opposition, and arrested, charged and allegedly tortured popular human rights blogger Ali Abdelemam.
- The Social Development Ministry dismissed the Bahrain Human Rights Society’s director after BHRS criticised the mass arrests and alleged torture of detainees; it replaced him with a ministry official. The government kept denying legal status to the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), which it dissolved in 2004 when BCHR’s then-president criticised the PM for corruption and rights violations.

The Shia majority is subjected to political marginalization, discrimination and poverty:
- Despite Bahrain’s relative wealth, many Shias, especially those in rural areas, are poor. Although 70 percent of Bahrain’s citizens are Shias, the royal family has appointed fellow Sunnis to most senior government posts and other positions of power. According to a leaked August 2008 US diplomatic cable, the US embassy attributed Shia unrest then to persistent discrimination against Shia youth by the Sunni minority ruling the country and controlling all security forces. (The Bahrain government had blamed the unrest on Iranian meddling.)4 The Sunni dynasty’s attempt to alter Bahrain’s demographic balance by granting Sunnis from elsewhere speedy citizenship.
- In the October 22 parliamentary elections, many supporters of the main Shia opposition group Al-Wifaq were prevented from voting. Despite this, Al-Wifaq won all 18 of the seats it contested, emerging as the largest block among the 40 elected seats in the lower house. However, all other seats went to Sunnis.

How have Bahrain’s protests evolved, and how has the government reacted?
There were months of street protests in the first half of 2010. The government detained activists who criticized Bahrain’s human rights record at a public meeting in London. It suspended Al Jazeera May 18, after it broadcast a feature on Bahrain’s poverty.5 The government launched a major crackdown in the latter half of 2010 (see above). Angered by that, and energized by Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution” and the overthrow of Egypt’s long-time president Hosni Mubarak, Bahraini cyber-activists scheduled a “Day of Wrath” for Feb. 14, 2011, 10th anniversary of a referendum approving a reform charter. The royal family tried to stave off protests by offering a subsidy of $2650 per family. Despite that, protesters hit the streets...
across Bahrain Feb. 14, calling for constitutional changes, release of political prisoners and an end to torture. Police killed one; 25 others were injured.

With the outrage at the Feb. 14 killings, the number of protesters swelled. On Feb. 15 10,000 to 20,000 attended the victim’s funeral. In addition to the previous demands, they also called for a democratically-elected government and an end to anti-Shia discrimination. Without warning, police opened fire on the mourners, killing one. Al-Wifaq MPs suspended their participation in parliament. Protesters and their children began massing at Manama’s Pearl Roundabout (a.k.a “Pearl Square”). Resisting government attempts to portray the protests as Shia vs Sunni clashes, the protesters chanted “No Sunnis! No Shiites! We are all Bahrainis!” Protesters also set up info-sharing Facebook pages.

On the morning of Feb. 16, 5-6,000 people gathered at the Pearl Roundabout. Most were Shia, but many Sunnis also participated. For the first time, a large number of the protesters began calling for the Prime Minister and the entire Parliament to resign, and criticized the monarchy. Police temporarily withdrew from the vicinity. Internet access was slow, reportedly due to government interference. Protesters announced a large demonstration to be held Feb. 18.6

On Feb. 17th, shortly after 3:15 a.m., without warning, police began firing rubber bullets and tear gas into the crowds of protesters, including women and children, sleeping at the Pearl Roundabout. Truncheon-wielding police then clubbed their way into the crowds and dispersed them. Hospitals reported hundreds of people with serious gaping wounds, broken limbs and tear gas–related breathing problems. Police set up checkpoints on main roads and erected barbed wire around the Roundabout. Salmaniya hospital’s courtyard, where thousands of protesters had fled, became the new hub for planning the Feb. 18 protest. The government banned public gatherings.7 8

On Feb. 18, reports indicated that soldiers fired on protesters trying to reoccupy the Pearl Roundabout, and the capital was locked down. When protesters tried to reoccupy the Pearl Roundabout, Army units fired on them, injuring over 50. However, when the military withdrew, the protesters again set up camp in the Roundabout. An opposition politician estimated that 70 protesters had “disappeared.” On Feb. 18, Bahrain’s crown prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who is also the deputy supreme commander of the country’s armed forces, appeared on television appealing for dialogue. On Feb. 19 he ordered troops and armoured vehicles be withdrawn from the Pearl Roundabout.9 10 11

What international impact may the protests have?

- **Military and energy implications:** Bahrain is host to the naval base of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, key to the US security architecture for the Persian Gulf, and has provided crucial support in both Gulf Wars and in the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In May 2010 the US announced a five-year project to double the size of the base. A Shia-dominated Bahraini government might well demand closure of the US naval base, and halt cooperation with the US war in Afghanistan and US attempts to guarantee its unimpeded access to the Gulf’s energy resources. Two thirds of the world’s proven petroleum reserves and 45 percent of the world’s natural gas reserves are in the Gulf. Bahrain itself is a major petroleum refining centre, at 270,000 barrels a day. With tight oil supplies and Brent Crude running at over $100 a barrel, Bahrain’s unrest will likely drive up world oil prices.12 13
- **Bahrain is also an important international finance center,** having replaced Beirut as the Middle East’s financial centre during Lebanon’s civil war in the 1970s. Prolonged instability may affect this.

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