



## [The 10-Year Anniversary of the Crackdown on Pro-Democracy Protests in Bahrain Passes](#)

Sunday of this week marked the 10-year anniversary of the mass pro-democracy protests in Bahrain. Small gatherings took place to highlight the milestone, but the number of people was limited due to COVID-19 restrictions and a heavy police presence. Back in February of 2011, tens of thousands of people took to the streets to demand an elected government and other reforms, temporarily threatening the monarchy's grip on power before a deadly crackdown. The demonstrations were largely attended by the country's Shia-majority citizens, who have long accused the Al Khalifa monarchy of political persecution. However, the movement was swiftly crushed weeks later after the ruling family brought troops from the neighboring Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to protect its regime at the height of the uprising's momentum in mid-March 2011. The monarchical Bahraini government unleashed a brutal suppression campaign to quell the protests, and as a result, thousands of activists in the country were arrested or injured.

The 2011 protests in Bahrain were inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings in several other countries across the region such as Tunisia and Egypt. The demonstrations were deemed to be a major threat by the ruling forces and were therefore subsequently met by a heavy-handed police reaction. During the course of the crackdown, the iconic Pearl Roundabout monument, which was one of the main centers of the protests, was demolished. Participants in the uprising movement were expressing their dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime of the Al Khalifa monarchy, and called for the release of detained political prisoners and opponents. In the end, the government responded brutally by banning opposition parties, placing civilians in front of military courts, and jailing hundreds more activists.

The Arab Spring uprisings in the aforementioned nearby countries gave protesters initial hope for potential success in securing some reforms from the government, however the deployment of troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates helped the ruling family stifle the demonstrations. The neighboring Saudi and Emirati regimes saw themselves and their stability as also being threatened by the protests, and as such, it is no surprise that they decided to intervene. Furthermore, the Gulf Cooperation Council sought to support the Bahraini government against the so-called Iranian-backed uprising, with the ruling powers selling the struggle as a Shia-majority inspired revolt against the Sunni-minority monarchy. In fact, the Bahraini regime directly accused Iran of supporting the opposition and attempting to intervene in its internal affairs.

While the Bahraini government's ruthless response to the protests did trigger some international criticism, the United States didn't seem to put pressure on it. The United States, which counts Bahrain and the other Gulf regimes among its allies, is hesitant to involve itself in the matter. The geopolitical importance of Bahrain, being situated between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, complicates the issue because of a fear of causing drawn-out and potentially widespread instability. Additionally, some analysts have argued that the situation is further muddled by the fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran are keen on exerting their influence in the region. Ultimately, this often leaves the United States caught in a difficult balancing act between regime stability and the tolerance levels for repressive government behavior.