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Bahrain's Dictatorship and the Pentagon

by Jacob G. Hornberger

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Sometimes it's good to look at foreign dictatorships to see what the president and the U.S. military have done to our country. Consider, for example, the trial of 20 doctors that is currently taking place in Bahrain.

As most everyone knows, Bahrain is ruled by a brutal dictatorship, just as many other countries in the Middle East are. Bahrain is also besieged by anti-government demonstrations, just as other countries in the Middle East are. Like other dictatorships in the Middle East, Bahrain's dictatorial regime is using brute force to suppress the protests.

What distinguishes the Bahrain dictatorship from, say, the Libyan or Syrian dictatorships, is that the U.S. government supports the dictatorship in Bahrain while opposing the Libyan and Syrian dictatorships. Thus, not only does U.S. foreign aid flow into the Bahrain dictatorship, the U.S. military also has a major base there.

The Bahrain dictatorship is accusing those 20 doctors of participating in anti-government protests in Bahrain. Guess what type of court the doctors are being tried in. You got it: a military tribunal, just like those employed by the Pentagon at Guantanamo Bay.

It probably won't surprise you to know that the doctors are accusing Bahrain's military of torturing them while in custody and forcing confessions out of them — and that the military is denying it.

The tribunal is actually a special national-security court that was established last March as part of the emergency rule that the dictatorship imposed on the country to deal with the anti-government protests. Emergency rule essentially means martial law, with the military wielding the power to protect “national security” by establishing “order and stability” within the country.

Not surprisingly, in previous prosecutions in Bahrain's national-security court, defendants have been charged with “terrorism.” Moreover, since the trials pertain to “national security,” some of the proceedings have been held in secret.

Sound familiar?

Well, of course it does. All this is familiar ground for Americans, who have seen the Pentagon under both President Bush and President Obama engage in this same sort of conduct.

Consider, for example, the Pentagon's military tribunals. Are they any different in principle from those employed in Bahrain? Consider also the circumstances under which the Pentagon's tribunals came into existence — during the emergency known as 9/11.

As in Bahrain, many of the accused have been tortured by U.S. military personnel while in the custody of the military or the CIA. Of course, oftentimes the U.S. military authorities take the same position as their Bahrain counterparts — that they don't torture and that the defendants are lying.

While the Bahrain dictatorship recently lifted its emergency rule, 11 years after the 9/11 attacks the U.S. military still wields the authority to take the American people (and foreigners) into custody as suspected terrorists in the global war on terrorism — the authority to them with waterboarding, sensory deprivation, and other “harsh-interrogation” techniques — and the authority to hold them indefinitely without trial. Why, the Pentagon and the CIA can now even assassinate Americans whom they label terrorists.

Indeed, about the same time that Bahrain was recently lifting its emergency rule, the U.S. Congress was renewing the USA Patriot Act for another four years. And yesterday, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the FBI is expanding the authority of its 14,000 agents to monitor the activities of Americans who are even not suspected of breaking the law.

By the way, Bahrain and the United States aren't the only ones to employ special courts to deal with acts of suspected terrorism. After the Reichstag Fire trials in which some of the accused terrorists were acquitted by the regular German courts, Adolf Hitler established what was known as the “People's Court,” a special national-security court to deal with cases of terrorism and treason, one in which the chances of any suspected terrorist getting off were virtually nil.

Is it any wonder that the president and the Pentagon continue to partner with and support dictators in the Middle East? I don't think so. When it comes to emergency dictatorial powers, they have lots in common.