



Nonviolent Action Strategy: Lessons from Bahrain's Demonstration Movement

Loghman Fattahi

From February 14 to March 16, 2011, a demonstration movement swept Bahrain employing nonviolent action strategy to effect political and economic change in country. The success of a nonviolent action strategy rests on the ability of organizers to maximize the participation of individual and collective actors in the demonstration process. Participation increases the probability of overcoming the state's pillars of power, chiefly its security forces. Maximizing and managing participation is best achieved by building upon and sustaining the three pillars of a nonviolent action strategy: nonviolent unity, planning, and discipline.

The unity pillar demands building and sustaining a multilateral coalition representing the diverse socio-political interests of a state. The nonviolent coalition must then secure overwhelming consensus on a concrete set of socio-political objectives to maximize the number of participants involved and guide the political objectives of the demonstration movement.¹

The planning pillar comes into play because strategists must identify and exploit the state's institutional vulnerabilities as it reacts to and represses a nonviolent action movement.²

The discipline pillar is critical for preparing participants for the likely violent reaction of the state and accepting the probable risks, including loss of life. A disciplined commitment to nonviolence is more likely to persuade regime supporters, notably soldiers, to defect to the nonviolent action movement because its nonviolence reduces their perception of insecurity in a future system that does not include the incumbent regime.³

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These three pillars are equally vital in maximizing and managing participation in a nonviolent action movement. The balancing of these pillars is key to chipping away at the state's pillars of support and achieving the aims of the movement.

Despite major achievements, the nonviolent action movement in Bahrain did not induce true democratic reform. Although most Shiite citizens participated in the demonstration process, this religiously homogenous group was not sufficient to compel king al-Khalifa to adopt democratic reforms. Had a large number of Sunni citizens participated in the movement, it would have increased its probability of success because Sunnis, unlike Shiites, are a pillar of support of the al-Khalifa dynasty.

Analyzing the relationship between maximum participation and pillars of support for the regime, this paper argues that the nonviolent action movement's failure to unite Bahrain's Sunni and Shiite sects inhibited its ability to fully maximize individual and collective participation in demonstrations against the rule of the al-Khalifa dynasty. This failure to unite the two main religious sects ultimately undercut the ability of activists to strategically plan and to preserve the nonviolent discipline of demonstrators. As a result, the regime retained its pillar of support among Sunnis and managed to contain the nonviolent movement in the short-term.

POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

An anonymous Facebook group, the "February 14th Revolution in Bahrain," initiated the demonstration movement in Bahrain on February 14, 2011. The group justified the demonstrations with a set of political positions that were considered vital to achieving democracy in the kingdom of Bahrain. These political positions were as follows:

1. Disband the National Assembly
2. Abrogate the current Constitution and form a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, which should stipulate the following:
 - a. Legislative authority is vested in a parliament all the members of which must be elected;
 - b. Executive authority is exercised by an elected Prime Minister; and Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy ruled by the Al Khalifa family. However, members of the royal family are barred from holding top positions in the three branches of government.⁴

For a nonviolent demonstration movement to succeed it needs to have a unified political objective. These preset objectives were part of the movement's strategy to give demonstrators a clear and concise political goal with which to unite its diverse participants. In particular, it aimed to unify the various Shiite blocs and to recruit members of the Sunni sect.

This strategy effectively garnered the overt support of the various Shiite elements. Unlicensed Shiite political blocs such as al-Haq and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement issued statements supporting demonstrations. The licensed Shiite groups, like al-Wifaq, indirectly supported the call for demonstrations by supporting the principle of peaceful assembly.⁵

Besides the strategic planning evident in the demonstrations' political aims, it is also evident that there was a high degree of strategic planning that went into the choice of date for launching the demonstration movement. The Facebook group selected February 14 to launch the demonstrations because it embodied two symbolic events in recent Bahraini political history: on February 14, 2001, Bahrainis voted in a referendum for the National Action Charter to usher in political reforms and exactly one year later the king changed his title from emir to king and declared Bahrain a constitutional monarchy.⁶

The selection of this politically sensitive date was a part of a strategic plan to appeal to all Bahraini citizens, Shiite and Sunni, desiring to check the political power of the al-Khalifa dynasty. In general, the subunits of the Shiite sect were more supportive of the movement's political objectives and the selected date for the demonstrations than the Sunnis because they are a part of the ruling Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty. Including Sunnis in the demonstrations was a

daunting challenge for the movement from the start. This would have negative implications for the numbers of those participating and even the degree of unity of the movement's political objectives. Nonetheless, the demonstrations went forward.

FUNERAL PROCESSIONS

On February 14, 2011, Shiites began to demonstrate en masse in Bahrain with over 6,000 demonstrators marching throughout the day.⁷ The demonstrators' destination was Pearl Square, a national monument in Manama, the capital of Bahrain. At 8:00 p.m., police fatally shot a demonstrator, Ali Abdulhadi Almeshaima, whom doctors at the Salmaniya Medical Complex (SMC) pronounced dead at 8:20 p.m.⁸ The killing of Almeshaima and others would inflame the passions of fellow demonstrators and expand the number of participants in the movement.

Early in the morning of February 15, over one thousand demonstrators gathered at the SMC to receive Almeshaima's body from the morgue. More demonstrators joined his funeral procession on the way to a local cemetery.⁹ Incidentally, during this first of many funeral processions, riot police shot a bullet in the head of another demonstrator, Fadel Salman Ali Salman Matrouk. The SMC doctors marked his death at 09:30 a.m.¹⁰ The activists used these two and other future casualties to dramatically expand the number of demonstrators marching to Pearl Square.

By the night of February 15, several thousand demonstrators had occupied Pearl Square. Activists installed a projector screen and raised tents for the night. There was also an SMC medical unit on site to provide medical care. Meanwhile, demonstrators used text messaging to encourage others to join them.¹¹ The occupation of Pearl Square illustrates that the activists, at least at the early stage, were able to maneuver and sustain a nonviolent demonstration movement with an expanding number of participants.

The movement strategically used Pearl Square to communicate its message of political discontent to the Sunni monarchy and to the world. The successful occupation of Pearl Square also persuaded diverse political parties and civil society actors to unite and directly participate in the demonstration process. For example, while al-Wifaq politicians boycotted Parliament, the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions

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called for a national strike to begin on February 17.¹²

The alliance of demonstrators, parliamentarians, laborers, and others illustrated the movement's ability to unite diverse sectors of Bahraini society seeking a common political goal. The unity expanded the number of participants in the demonstrations, thus rattling the monarchy's economic and political pillars of support. In general, the popular expression of discontent resoundingly exposed the illegitimacy of the existing political order in Bahrain, at least in the mind of Shiite citizens.

The first two days of demonstrations illustrate a robust adherence to the plinth of a nonviolent action strategy: maximizing the number of participants in the movement.

During these two days the movement kept its nonviolent discipline while planning to expand itself. This pattern persisted during the third day of the demonstration movement, which also started with a funeral procession. The rapid success of the movement's nonviolent demonstrations resulted in an estimated 12,000 demonstrators occupying Pearl Square on midnight of February 16.¹³

This nonviolent civilian occupation transformed Pearl Square into a political arena for expressing demonstrators' political positions and discontent with the al-Khalifa monarchy. Major political personalities, such as Sheik Ali Salman, the Secretary General of al-Wifaq, visited the demonstrators at Pearl Square to support the movement's call for socio-political reforms.¹⁴ Images of Pearl Square were broadcast around the globe via the Internet, television networks, and other social media. The milieu there was festive as people shouted slogans for reform and people shared food, tea, and coffee.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the political negotiations between the government, led by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, and al-Wifaq, led by Sheikh Ali Salman, failed to produce any agreement.¹⁶ The failure of these political negotiations had lethal results and subsequently led to the radicalization of the demonstration movement.

On the night of February 16, demonstrators decided to sleep in their tents at Pearl Square. At 3:00 a.m., security forces launched an operation to expel the demonstrators from the square.¹⁷ The operation was carried out by four battalions (1,000 members) equipped with "sticks, shields, sound bombs, tear gas launchers and shotguns."¹⁸ The assault killed three sleeping demonstrators.¹⁹ An hour later, the police fatally shot another demonstrator at Pearl Square.²⁰ Although the operation injured hundreds, the Ministry of

Health allegedly had ordered paramedics to remain at SMC until the police had fully cleared Pearl Square of demonstrators.²¹ This operation showed the readiness of the monarchy to use violent force to smother the budding nonviolent demonstration movement in Bahrain.

This assault on unarmed sleeping demonstrators disgusted political and civil society actors in Bahrain – both Shiite and Sunni alike. For example, Al-Wifaq, Wa'ad, Islamic Action Society, National Democratic Assemblage, Nationalist Democratic Society, al-Ikha National Society, and al-Menbar Progressive Democratic Society collectively denounced the "heinous massacre" at Pearl Square.²² In addition, Al-Wifaq's eighteen ministers of parliament resigned to protest the violence.²³

The attack also led the Bahrain Teachers' Society to call for a nationwide strike on February 20.²⁴

In the short term, the lethal nighttime operation against sleeping demonstrators intensified the unity among street demonstrators and political and civil society actors, resulting in a significant increase in the size of the demonstration movement. The death of four demonstrators led to a new wave of larger funeral processions, resulting in thousands of citizens joining the protests. Having lost Pearl Square, demonstrators congregated at the SMC, where doctors were treating the injured.

The gathering at the SMC enabled the demonstration movement to attract the global media, airing the hysteric voices and showing the bloody images of demonstrators to the world. Al Jazeera English, for example, aired the appeal of an SMC doctor, Ghassan Dhaif, to "everybody in the world, European Union, United States...all the Arab countries...please do come here to help us." In a hysteric tone, he described the demonstrators as "innocent" and the violent assault as "unbelievable."²⁵ Despite this, the demonstration movement would continue as many at the SMC decided to march back to reoccupy Pearl Square, which by this point was controlled by heavily armed security forces.

En route, young demonstrators took off their shirts and t-shirts to prove that they were unarmed.²⁶ They also used their cell phones to broadcast via YouTube the confrontations between unarmed, nonviolent demonstrators and the heavily armed riot police. As a result, mobile

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technology enabled demonstrators to communicate with and seek the sympathy and support of the global community.

On the international level, there was strong condemnation of the deadly nighttime assault on the nonviolent demonstrators at Pearl Square. In a telephone call on February 18, President Barack Obama urged the king of Bahrain to stop using violence against the demonstrators. A White House statement similarly called on the Government of Bahrain (GOB) to uphold the "universal rights" of its citizens and implement "meaningful reform."²⁷

Besides gaining the support of the global community, the movement successfully gained the backing of the pillars of the monarchy. The Crown Prince and other moderate Sunnis condemned the violence against the unarmed demonstrators and emphasized the need to reach a resolution that would satisfy the movement's political aims. This support from among the moderate bloc of the Sunni community signified the ability of the demonstration movement to attract support beyond the Shiite community and leverage Sunni political sympathy, if not active presence on the streets, for its cause.

On February 18 the Crown Prince delivered an impromptu televised address to the nation saying that he wanted "to express condolences to all Bahrainis for the painful days we are living and... to deliver a message as a citizen for everyone to be calm."²⁸ Meanwhile, the King granted the Crown Prince the power to negotiate with the demonstrators by declaring that he had "all the powers to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of all the gracious citizens of Bahrain."²⁹ In response, Al-Wifaq set the removal of the security forces from Pearl Square and the resignation of the Council of Ministers as prerequisites to negotiations.³⁰

During the initial phase of the nonviolent demonstration movement's activities, there was a sense of unity among demonstrators, licensed and unlicensed Shiite and Sunni blocs, and international actors, including the United States, regarding the need to foster democratic change in Bahrain. This gathering unity was reinforced by the nonviolent discipline of street demonstrators, whose suffering was aired and witnessed via global media. The activists also used strategic planning to expand the number of individual and group participants and solidify general support for the movement's political goals. The expanding number of participants, reinforced with nonviolent action, unity, and planning, enabled the demonstration movement to reoccupy Pearl Square.

REOCCUPYING PEARL SQUARE

On February 19, the GoB withdrew its forces from Pearl Square, allowing demonstrators to reoccupy it.³¹ Shouting "salmiya" – peaceful in Arabic – demonstrators reoccupied and transformed Pearl Square into an encampment as demonstrators reinstalled tents, satellite dishes, and portable toilets. Organizers also handed out food, water, tea, and other amenities to keep the momentum and passion flowing in the square.

The reoccupation of Pearl Square strengthened the nonviolent character of the movement. It was able to consolidate a larger number of participants, individual and collective, into the rallies. This nonviolent discipline was on display at Pearl Square, where a "national carnival of civic activity" was taking place as demonstrators recited political poetry, engaged in debates, and held seminars.³²

This nonviolent character was symbolically expressed with slogans like "We are people of peace" and was visibly strengthened by extensive participation on the part of women and children.³³ Along with the men, women protested, organized, read poetry, and provided other forms of support to the movement.³⁴

The reoccupation of Pearl Square was also supported by nationwide strikes in the public and private sectors. On February 20, an estimated eighty percent of the country's employees, including teachers and lawyers, went on strike to support the demonstration movement. The strikers called for reform and rejected sectarianism while some called for the abolition of the al-Khalifa dynasty.³⁵

These strikes, combined with the movement's protests, did great damage to Bahrain's economy and caused a massive flight of foreign investment from the island.³⁶ The economic consequences of the protests were clear as the effective coalescence of multiple sectors of society in Bahrain - political, economic, and civic - supported the movement's political aims by damaging the regime's economic pillar of support.

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The increasing unity is exemplified by another joint statement by diverse political actors in Bahrain calling for an end to the use of violence and implementation of political reforms by the monarchy. These political groups – Al-Wifaq, Wa'ad, the Islamic Action Society, the National Democratic Assembly, the Nationalist Democratic Society, the al-Ikha National Society, and the al-Menbar Progressive Democratic Society – reaffirmed their support for the "youth of 14 February" and demanded that the Bahraini government take more "positive measures" to validate the national dialogue, end the "incitement of sectarian hatred" in the state media, and release all political prisoners.³⁷ The political statements and the nationwide strikes illustrated the evolving coalescence of disparate groups in support of the movement. This coalition was necessary to present a unified front with a core political message to the monarchy demanding socio-political reforms. The strategic nonviolent planning, discipline, and unity of the demonstration movement reached its climax after the reoccupation of Pearl Square. On February 22, 2011, the movement held its largest demonstration, the "Martyrs March," honoring demonstrators who had been killed by the state security forces.³⁸ The number of participants exceeded 100,000 men, women, and children, reaching upwards of 150,000 demonstrators by the day's end.³⁹

Mass participation and adherence to the pillars of nonviolent unity, planning, and discipline were at their peak. At the same time, though, the movement exposed its internal fractions. These, in combination with the state's violent repression, would significantly contribute to its eventual undoing.

THINGS FALL APART

There was widespread unity, at least among Shiite citizens, regarding participation in the demonstration movement. In addition, many Sunnis, particularly the moderate bloc led by the Crown Prince, recognized the necessity of institutional reforms for reconciling the fractions in Bahraini society and advancing the norms and institutions of democracy within the monarchy.

This gathering unity did not translate into a coherent unity regarding the precise political objective of the movement. In general, the expansion of the demonstrations and the violent, lethal reaction of the Bahraini government increased the anger and ambition of extremist subunits, which began interpreting reform as the replacement of the Sunni-dominated monarchy with a Shiite-dominated republic. The more extremist bloc of the Shiite community therefore expanded its political positions beyond the agreed-upon objectives publicized by the movement's organizers.

This failure to unify is evident in one of the popular slogans of the "Martyrs March" rally: "The people demand the removal of the regime."⁴⁰ The call for "removal of the regime" is a provocatively ambiguous slogan that does not distinguish whether demonstrators are seeking the abolition of the Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty or the resignation of Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, a position he has held since Bahrain's independence from Britain in 1971.⁴¹

The ambiguity surrounding the precise political ends of the demonstration movement alarmed the ruling Sunni minority, including its moderate bloc, who feared for their life, property, and power, if Shiites were to abolish the Sunni monarchy and establish a Shiite-dominated republic. This political ambiguity deterred most Sunnis from active participation in the demonstration movement and instead pushed them to embrace the monarchy.

The lack of a collective consensus regarding the precise political aim of the movement also undermined its nonviolent planning and discipline. As a result, demonstrators fell for the state's trap of inflaming sectarian tensions, which precluded Sunni-Shiite unity. On one hand, the state media intensified its vilification of demonstrators by characterizing them as a "fifth column" planted by a "foreign power." One state television announcer rhetorically asked: "With whom are we supposed to do dialogue? People who want to drag Bahrain into sectarian conflict? People who are thirsty for blood?"⁴²

Along with the state media attack on the patriotism of the demonstrators, pro-regime civilians joined security forces in attacking demonstrators. On March 13 several hundred pro-regime Sunnis, armed with clubs and knives, attacked Shiite students at the University of

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Bahrain while security forces stood by and watched.⁴³ This attack led Shiite demonstrators at Pearl Square to rush to Bahrain University in defense of the students, thus escalating sectarian violence and distrust.⁴⁴

Every violent incident between Shiites and pro-regime Sunnis contributed to the deterioration of the movement's nonviolent unity, planning, and discipline. The outbreak of sectarian violence, though minimal, allowed the Bahraini government to legitimize its use of violent force to suppress the demonstration movement under the pretext of restoring law and order.

This breakdown in the movement's nonviolent strategic planning and discipline surfaced dramatically as groups of the protesters movement made a unilateral decision to move beyond Pearl Square. On March 11 demonstrators marched to the al-Riffa district, the location of the King's palace and the residence of senior Sunni government officials.⁴⁵ After failing to persuade the 3,000 demonstrators to turn back, the police forcibly repelled them.⁴⁶ Behind the riot police force there also was a large number of Sunni residents of al-Riffa – also exceeding 3,000 in number – ready to confront and repel the Shiite demonstrators.⁴⁷ In fact, these Riffa residents did help the police in repelling the demonstrators.⁴⁸

The series of violent sectarian incidents in March escalated tensions between Shiites and Sunnis and undermined all the three strategic elements of a nonviolent action strategy: unity, planning, and discipline. The monarchy's aim to transform the nonviolent demonstration movement into a sectarian conflict and the inability of the movement to prevent the escalation of sectarian incidents greatly reduced the possibility of a Shiite-Sunni coalition pursuing collective political ends. As a result, the monarchy retained its main pillars of support, those Sunni citizens and the security forces. In the end, this enabled the Bahraini government to use disproportionate military force to suppress and dissipate the largely nonviolent demonstration movement led by its Shiite citizens.

The incapacity of the demonstration movement to develop a precise political objective, a coherent coalition, and an unyielding nonviolent discipline resulted in an alarmed Sunni community fearing for its future welfare and deterred moderate Sunnis from joining it, thus

largely limiting the size of the demonstration movement to Shiite citizens.

The failure to incorporate Sunni citizens illustrated that, though Shiite activists did plan effectively to motivate fellow Shiites to pour into the streets of Bahrain en masse, they failed to formulate a plan to attract and sustain large segments of the Sunni population. They also failed to empower the moderate Sunni bloc in the Bahraini government, led by the Crown Prince, to maintain its influence over the policies of the government towards the movement.

BROKEN PEARL

Before the Bahrain government unleashed its security forces on the demonstrators, it was reinforced by allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). On March 14, Saudi Arabia sent over 1,000 soldiers to Bahrain to support the government.⁴⁹ These foreign forces sought to defend the key interests of the Bahraini regime such as its oilfields, and defend against external aggression.⁵⁰

In the days following, the Bahraini government implemented its final security operation to forcibly end the demonstration movement and remove the demonstrators from the streets. On March 15, 2011, the King promulgated a royal decree that imposed a State of National Safety throughout Bahrain.⁵¹ This state of emergency outlawed any form of public demonstration and authorized the military to impose martial law on the country. Military officials declared that "Every type of gathering is prohibited in every part of the Kingdom of Bahrain."⁵² The royal decree was a precursor to the second and final security operation to expel the demonstrators from Pearl Square.

The next day, March 16, the government launched a violent operation that successfully expelled the demonstrators from Pearl Square. In addition, it took control of the SMC and prevented the treatment of injured demonstrators there. Wounded protesters had to turn to clinics and mosques to receive medical treatment.⁵³ During the clearing operation, a demonstrator used an SUV to kill two police officers at Pearl Square – a lethal demonstration of the movement's failure to ensure that its participants internalize the significance of nonviolent action and fully adhere to it.⁵⁴

That day's security operation decimated the protests and the Bahraini government achieved its objective of ending the mass demonstration

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movement in the short term. It made no distinction between peaceful and non-peaceful demonstrators as it described all demonstrators as "outlaws who had terrorized citizens...and harmed the national economy."⁵⁵ During the clearing process, the government arrested at least 1,000 demonstrators, including many of the leaders of the movement.⁵⁶ As part of its policy to erase the memory of the movement, on March 18 the GoB demolished Pearl Square, a monument that now symbolized the movement's struggles.⁵⁷

In terms of unity, the demonstration movement failed to transform the Shiite groups into a coherent and diverse coalition with a concrete socio-political message. It was not able to garner the active support or incorporate large segments of the Sunni civilian population to expand its size and transform itself into a non-sectarian movement. In contrast, sectarian clashes, though limited in number and often instigated by pro-regime Sunni civilians, deteriorated sectarian trust and amplified fears of retribution in the event that Shiites gained political power. The inability to unify and expand the protest movement also indicated the underlying lack of

rigorous planning on the part of the movement's organizers. The lack of strategic planning to guide the direction of the protests, necessary to manage mass participation in a large scale movement, resulted in spontaneous and impulsive actions such as blockading highways and marching into sensitive neighborhoods, such as al-Riffa, thus increasing Sunni fears of Shiite intentions.

The movement's inability to strategically balance the three key pillars of nonviolent unity, planning, and discipline to manage the large number of individuals and groups participating in the demonstration movement made it easy for the Bahraini government to suppress it.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

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- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Bassiouni, "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 141.
- ⁵⁵ Bahrain News Agency, "Bahrain Defence Force General Command," Bahrain News Agency (16 March 2011). <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/450034> (accessed 8 December 2011).
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