

Bahrain's rulers cast net for loyalty oaths online

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In this photo taken April 27, 2011, a Bahraini man wearing a scarf representing the Saudi and Bahraini flags assists a man signing a book pledging loyalty to the Bahraini ruling Al Khalifa family in the country's main upscale shopping mall in Manama, Bahrain. A poster of Bahraini Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa is seen behind them. While Bahrain's justice minister was making the latest accusations against alleged enemies of the state, this time medical staff and other officials were busy organizing a patriotic blitz that encourages pledges of loyalty on Facebook and Twitter. (AP Photo/Hasan Jamali)

(AP) -- While Bahrain's justice minister was making the latest accusations against alleged enemies of the state - this time medical staff - other officials were busy organizing a patriotic blitz that encourages pledges of loyalty on Facebook and Twitter.

These are the parallel worlds of one of Washington's linchpin military allies in the Gulf.

On one side is a grinding campaign to break the spirits of Shiite-led opponents whose pro-reform uprising was smothered by martial law. On the other: An expanding PR offensive to portray the Sunni monarchy as firmly in charge, and Bahrain as a firewall against Iranian influence in the nation that hosts the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet.

Bahrain's current spin - shifting from state media to the web - could appear as just more boosterism in a region where rulers are constantly bathed in state-sponsored praise. But there is a distinct undercurrent in the island kingdom: pumping up its own rhetoric to match Iran's increasing barrage of criticism.

It serves as further recognition that Bahrain's crisis doubles as a window into the region's collective phobias - the mutual mistrust of Sunni Arab leaders and Shiite powerhouse Iran - as America effectively watches from the sidelines.

"So many of the Gulf's big issues are squeezed into this one tiny country," said Shadi Hamid, director of research at The Brookings Doha Center in Qatar.

Iran has relentlessly assailed Bahrain's rulers for crackdowns against the country's Shiite majority, which comprises 70 percent of the population but is denied key roles in government or security affairs. Tehran's statements took on an even harder edge after Bahrain's monarchy declared military rule and was aided in March by a Gulf force dominated by Iran's regional rival, [Saudi Arabia](#).

The Gulf Arab sheiks and monarchs view Bahrain as a domino that cannot fall. Any gains by Bahrain's Shiites, in their minds, equates to a

potential opening for greater Iranian footholds on Saudi Arabia's doorstep.

And Gulf leaders have set aside their traditional opaque and meandering political discourses to make their point, warning Iran to stop "meddling." Last week in Abu Dhabi, Gulf interior ministers called Iran "provocative and irresponsible" after a senior military commander said the Gulf has always belonged to Iran.

On Thursday, Bahrain's chamber of commerce urged traders to shed Iranian investments and start a buy-Bahrain drive.

"This patriotic duty is dictated by our conscience, allegiance to the leadership and loyalty to Bahrain,' the group said.

Such sound bites are becoming part of the new Gulf phrase book as rulers try to portray confidence during increasingly uncertain times.

Bahrain's propaganda machine is revving the fastest by necessity. The uprising that began in February has left at least 30 people dead and carved up the tiny country along Sunni and Shiite lines - with divisions seeming to deepen as authorities shift into an us-or-them mode.

Just moments after a closed-door security court issued four death sentences on April 28 for the slayings of two policemen, state authorities sent journalists the web links to two government-produced videos on the case that were posted on YouTube. The attackers were described as "traitors" and "beasts without any mercy," with no mention of the harsh measures used by security forces, including firing on crowds and widespread arrests.

The U.N.'s top rights official, Navi Pillay, Thursday called for an independent probe into violence by Bahraini police and military against

protests.

But authorities are moving in a different direction, encouraging their backers to show support for their rule and actions. So-called "loyalty books" have been placed around the country for signatures and comments.

This week, a separate online campaign was launched called "We Are All Hamad" - a reference to Bahrain's king Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. It asks people to add portraits of the king on their social media pages and post messages on [Facebook](#), Twitter and other sites to prove Bahrainis are "united in love and loyalty to their nation and its wise leadership."

Maysa Yussef, a supporter quoted by the state-run Bahrain News Agency, claimed more than 10,000 people had already posted photos of King Hamad before the start of the weeklong campaign, which ends Monday.

It's impossible to verify any figures on the campaign. But clearly some backers of the Bahrain's monarchy heeded the call.

"Thank God Bahrain is back on track," wrote one post. Another wrote: "May the force be with you, King Hamad."

Bahrain's foreign minister, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, added on his Twitter page: "Yes we can!"

Jamal Fakhro, a state-appointed member of Bahrain's parliament, said such pledges of loyalty hold great value in the tribal-based Gulf societies, particularly when a country "is going through a difficult time."

"Many people want to say they are against those calling for the regime change," Fakhro said. "They have a voice, too, but rather than shouting

their support on the streets they write it down."

But others see another potentially damaging blows to Bahrain's fragile unity.

The state is increasingly trying to "enforce the official narrative" of the unrest, said Jane Kinninmont, a Gulf specialist at the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit.

"There are only two positions to have in Bahrain now," Kinninmont said. "It's very much an 'either you are with us or against us' campaign."

On Tuesday, Bahrain's justice minister, Khaled bin Ali Al Khalifa, said 23 doctors and 24 nurses would be the next to face charges that include attempts to topple the monarchy.

Authorities also claim that Bahrain's main state-run hospital, the Salmaniya Medical Complex, was turned into a base of operations for "saboteurs who sought to spread chaos, cause disruptions and trouble and create sedition."

Bit by bit, meanwhile, officials are erasing symbols of the uprising.

Some Shiite mosques have been bulldozed for apparently being built without permits. The main opposition paper, Al Wasat, will be forced to shut down next week and three of its former top editors are scheduled to on trial May 19.

Cranes have toppled the towering monument in Pearl Square, the center of the protest in the capital Manama, and renamed the site the GCC Roundabout after the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, which supported Bahrain's embattled monarchy by sending in 1,500 troops.

"The rule that states might makes it right is still operative in Bahrain," said Ehsan Ahrari, an analyst and commentator on regional affairs based in Alexandria, Virginia.

U.S. officials have struggled with this. They have stepped up criticism of Bahrain's crackdowns, but are wary of pressing too hard.

The 5th Fleet is the Pentagon's main counterweight to Iran's expanding military, and the Gulf leaders' shared fears about Iran are a cornerstone of U.S. policies in the region - even though there is little concern evidence of ties between Bahrain's Shiites and Tehran.

Earlier this week, State Department spokesman Mark Toner cautioned Bahrain on its tactics, saying: "There's no security solution to resolve the challenges that Bahrain faces."

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