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Bahrain revokes citizenship of top Shiite cleric

Brian Murphy

AP (20.09.2010) - HRWF (21.09.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Bahrain's king warned that mosques would be key targets in sweeps against suspected Shiite dissent in his tiny Gulf nation and vital U.S. ally. The first blow was a big one: stripping the citizenship of a powerful Shiite cleric with close ties to Iraq before next month's parliamentary elections.

The move is seen as stern warning by the kingdom's Sunni rulers as they struggle to hold down protests by the majority Shiites, who claim they are the targets of discrimination and suspicion for their ancestral bonds with the Shiite centers Iran and Iraq.

But the showdown in Bahrain - an island no bigger in area than New York City - speaks of wider stakes for the region and Washington.

Unrest in Bahrain comes right to the doorstep of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, which is the Navy's front-line flotilla against Iran. Bahrain also has been the main experiment with democratic reforms in the Gulf. Any rollback could harden the political positions of Sunni leaders from Kuwait to the United Arab Emirates and feed their perceptions of being in a fight against Iranian influence.

"This is happening to discourage open political debate," said Stephen McInerney, a director at the Project on Middle East Democracy in Washington.

Bahrain's move on Sunday against Ayatollah Hussein al-Najati - the Bahraini representative of Iraq's most powerful Shiite figure - is the strongest swipe against the nation's Shiite clergy. But it was clear something was coming.

In a blunt message last month, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa said "religious forums" would come under scrutiny by authorities. This was an unmistakable reference to Shiite religious leaders seen as fueling the clashes and demonstrations that began in August after security forces arrested a top Shiite political activist.

It was even more notable because King Hamad is the father of Bahrain's political openings a decade ago - including parliamentary elections and a greater political voice for Shiites, who comprise 70 percent of the population.

There is no real danger to Bahrain's Sunni dynasty even if Shiite candidates take control of the 40-seat chamber in the Oct. 23 balloting. The lawmakers cannot bring down the leadership or overrule key decisions. But parliament can serve as a forum for Shiites to express grievances and raise uncomfortable questions such as having the rulers account for their spending.

"The reputation that King Hamad enjoyed of trying to make a more democratic country has slowly reversed in the last four or five years," said McInerney.

So far, Bahrain's latest crackdowns have brought few regional ripples.

But the attempt to put the cleric al-Najati into political exile could draw in Iraq's influential Shiite religious leaders and the political groups that dominate government. Al-Najati is the Bahrain representative for Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the country's most influential Shiite political cleric.

There was no immediate comment from al-Najati or al-Sistani's office in Iraq.

More than 250 Shiites have been detained since mid-August and Bahrain has accused 23 political activists and others of plotting to overthrow the government. Last week, Bahrain closed the semi-independent Human Rights Society and replaced the board with people chosen by the leadership.

On Monday, security officials announced the arrests of at least 11 people accused of setting tires ablaze and throwing firebombs during riots.

"This is the worst crackdown on human rights," said Mohammed al-Tajer, the lawyer representing 15 of the 23 coup suspects. "We are all banned from talking about the events of the last few weeks, but I can't keep quiet about these violations."

Al-Najati is one of Bahrain's leading Shiite scholars and - like his mentor al-Sistani in Iraq - his voice carries great weight in political affairs. He has spoken out about the crackdowns, but any direct role in the unrest is not clear.

An Interior Ministry statement issued in Bahrain's capital, Manama, said the passports for al-Najati, his wife and three children were revoked because their Bahraini nationality was not obtained "through the appropriate legal means."

Bahraini officials have not elaborated, but it appears that al-Najati and his family would revert to the "stateless" status that confronted many Bahraini Shiites before political reforms. Stateless citizens in Bahrain can travel on special permits, but they cannot vote and do not receive state assistance such as housing aid. It also could set the stage for their eventual expulsion.

Al-Najati was born in Bahrain and did religious studies in Iraq and Iran. He and his family obtained Bahraini nationality in 2001 under King Hamad's reforms.

King Hamad told a cabinet meeting Sunday that Bahrain would not be a "spring board" for unrest in the region.

Just hours before the decision on al-Najati, Bahraini officials reportedly issued a two-week ban on sermons by another prominent Shiite cleric, Sheik Abdul Jaleel al-Miqdad, who has denounced the arrests against Shiites.

The past years have not been generous to Bahrain. The island - with about 530,000 nationals - was once the international business hub for the Gulf, but that role has been mostly eclipsed by Dubai and Qatar's capital, Doha.

Instead, Bahrain has banked on its strategic role as the center for U.S. Naval operations in the region. Bahrain also maintains good ties with Iran despite the underlying tensions with Shiites.

Kuwait, meanwhile, has been more open about decrying Iranian influence.

In August, Kuwait indicted seven people, including a Kuwaiti soldier and an Iranian woman, on charges of spying for Iran. Tehran denied the charges.

Kuwait, which has its own Sunni-Shiite tensions, has now banned large demonstrations and meetings dealing with sectarian topics.

Kuwait's Defense Minister Sheik Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah - who is also acting prime minister - claimed Sunday there are groups seeking to "drag us into hateful strife" and exploit a "fragility in the society which we must avert as much as possible," state agency KUNA reported.
