

BAHRAIN DRAIN: OPPRESSIVE US CLIENT STATE SUCKS THE LIFE OUT OF FORMULA ONE

[UPDATE] Qualifying went off without much hitch this morning, at least inside the circuit. Outside the circuit, the body of a protester was found, dead after a night of clashes with government authorities and police. Inside the confines of the circuit, Sebastian Vettel regained qualifying form and took his first pole of the season, followed by Lewis Hamilton, Mark Webber and Jenson Button. Schumacher didn't even manage to get out of Q1. Unlike the desolate practice yesterday, there were at least some fans observable in the main grandstand for qualifying today. But the scene was still as bleak and lifeless as I have ever seen for a F1 Grand Prix. It remains an embarrassment for FIA and the teams (FOTA) to be in Bahrain. And, as I pointed out yesterday, the lie that FIA and Bernie Ecclestone comfort themselves with – that they are being non-political by going and not giving in to international political concerns – is absurd and outrageous. The oppressive Sunni minority and the ruling Khalifa clan are using the mere presence of F1 in Sakhir to paint the picture that everything is okay with the Shia majority in Bahrain. It is not, and F1 looks like a tool. – bmaz 10:30 am EST Sat Apr. 21

Formula One is in Bahrain. There is no good reason, save for greed, that Formula One is in Bahrain this weekend but, nevertheless, there it is. As I write this report, practice is underway. The most expensive and technologically sophisticated racing motorcars in the world are on the track and at speed. The factory Mercedes of Nico Rosberg and Michael Schumacher are fighting with the Red Bulls of Sebastian Vettel and Mark Webber for the fast times in practice. Ferrari and McLaren are trying to catch up.

The scene is surreal in how vacant and empty it is. There are no people, no crowds, no passenger cars in the surrounding lots, no motorhomes in the infield. There is no party. There is no circus. There are no people. F1 is not lovingly referred to by longtime aficionados as “the circus” for nothing, *it is the circus*. F1 brings the press, the families, the hangers on, the beautiful women, the beautiful people – and the press that follow them. It is a traveling roadshow party of epic proportions, and always has been.

But not now, not today, not in Bahrain. The cars are there, and there are apparently drivers piloting them, but save for the team engineers and pit hands, there does not appear to be a living soul at the Bahrain International Circuit in Sakhir. It looks like a scene from *The Twilight Zone* where all the people have been disappeared from the face of the earth.

It might have been like this last year, but Bahrain was yanked from the F1 calendar, with the sport’s godfather like mafia don, Bernie Ecclestone, lamely saying at the time:

“The truth of the matter is we put the calendar together and the teams race on the calendar,” he said. “We were trying to help Bahrain, who have been very helpful to Formula One, and hoping they could get themselves sorted out.

“I don’t know whether there is peace or not. I have no idea. The FIA sent somebody out to check and they said it was all OK. I think the teams had different information and they have the right to say they don’t want to change the calendar.”

The truth of the matter was that it pained Ecclestone greatly to not give Bahrain, and its heavy handed ruling Khalifa family, its cherished F1 race last year, and Bernie and the F1 moneychangers were not about to skip it a

second year, so there they are.

I know people whose life it is to follow F1 and document it, it is their profession. It was their father's profession before them. It is their life. They are not in Bahrain. Presumably, as effectively permanent attachments to the sport, they could have gotten in; they just refused to go. Just having the option is more than most journalists can say. From the AFP:

Bahrain has denied visas to foreign journalists and photographers, including from AFP, to cover this Sunday's controversial Grand Prix race.

An AFP photographer, accredited by the sport's governing body, the FIA (Federation Internationale de l'Automobile), was informed by Bahrain's information affairs authority that there has been a "delay to your visa application, so it might not be processed."

Associated Press said two of its Dubai-based journalists were prevented from covering the Grand Prix because they could not receive entry visas, despite being accredited by the FIA.

Meanwhile, cameramen already in Bahrain were required to keep fluorescent orange stickers on their cameras so that they would be easily recognisable to ensure they do not cover any off-track events, such as ongoing protests.

What might the journalists report on were they allowed in Bahrain? Maybe the petrol bomb attack members of the Force India racing team were caught up in. The incident so shook the team that it withdrew from the second practice session and at least one team member left the country due to safety concerns.

How is this occurring? Why is the race still being sanctioned? Money and hegemony.

F1 Grand Prix is big money. Really big money. As the New York Time's Brad Spurgeon explains:

For the monarchy – and for Formula One – there are also overriding economic concerns. The Grand Prix is the kingdom's biggest sports event, drawing a worldwide television audience of roughly 100 million in nearly 200 countries, bringing in half a billion dollars in revenue and attracting thousands of visitors. When the race was canceled last year, Bahrain still had to pay Formula One a \$40 million "hosting fee."

And, of course, there is the ever present United States hegemony at play as well. As NPR reported last year:

The tiny island nation of Bahrain plays a big role in America's Middle East strategy. In fact, more than 6,000 U.S. military personnel and contractors are located just five miles from where government security forces violently put down demonstrations this week.

Bahrain is also home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, a major logistics hub for the U.S. Navy ships. The island is located halfway down the Persian Gulf, just off the coast of Saudi Arabia, and is something of a rest stop for U.S. Navy ships cruising the waters of the Gulf.

"It has facilities that can provide support to our ships, including, you know, fuel, water provisions, resupply," retired Rear Adm. Steve Pietropaoli says.

Those facilities have been resupplying warships for nearly a half-century, ever since Great Britain's fleet left the island. Bahrain provided major basing facilities and support for the armada of U.S. Navy ships sent for the first

Persian Gulf War in 1990 and the Iraq War in 2003.

“Bahrain is an outstanding partner,” Pietropaoli says. “It has been the enduring logistical support for the United States Navy operating in the Persian Gulf for 50 years.”

Big money and the mighty US war machine are a potent combination and, between the two of them, are permitting the disgrace occurring this weekend in Bahrain. It is a stain on international human rights, and it is a stain on Formula One. F1 and Ecclestone cravenly hide behind the false premise that they are a business and would be allowing themselves to be politicized if they were to cancel the Bahrain Grand Prix again. The governing body, basically an extension of Ecclestone, cites Article 1 of its charter in this regard:

“The FIA shall refrain from manifesting racial, political or religious discrimination in the course of its activities and from taking any action in this respect.”

This is a load of baloney from Bernie. The mere fact that F1 is in Bahrain now, as a false front for the oppressive Bahrain government and Khalifa ruling family, is, itself, politicization of the worst kind.