

THE SHAME OF FORMULA ONE IN BAHRAIN

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International Circuit in Sakhir, Bahrain. Three years ago I wrote about the local protests in Bahrain seeking some modicum of civil liberties and fair treatment. Instead there was a violent crackdown by the tyrannical ruling Khalifa family leading to bloodied protestors and dead bodies near the track.

There is no good reason, save for greed, that Formula One is in Bahrain this weekend but, nevertheless, there it is.

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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.

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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 USA war machine is, obviously, the Fifth Fleet, which is based in Bahrain. That, too, is of big money and logistical importance to US Mideast hegemony. Same as the huge race sanctioning fee Bernie Ecclestone and F1 is important to their bottom line. By last report, F1 charged over \$40 million as the sanctioning fee for the Bahrain race, which is far more lucrative a piece of income than many of the traditional grand prix in Europe and elsewhere. It is raw greed.

So, after canceling the 2011 race under duress, and showcasing the civil liberty atrocities of the Khalifas and their regime in 2012, there has been a lot of progress, right? There is so little mention of strife now that it must be better, right?

No.

Sure Bernie Ecclestone put some lip gloss on the money pig:

Formula One has long-insisted this is none of its business. "We're not here, or we don't go anywhere, to judge how a country is run," Bernie Ecclestone pointed out two years ago. The damning Amnesty report, however, was preceded by another announcement with considerably less fanfare. In it the group Americans for Democracy on Human Rights in Bahrain said that it had concluded an agreement with F1 that the sport would begin a policy of analysing the human rights impact it might have on host nations.

"Formula One Group has committed to taking a number of further steps to strengthen its processes in relation to human rights," it read.

But there is the Amnesty report, and as laid out in the Guardian article from yesterday linked above, it is not pretty. The same denial of speech and liberty, not to mention brutal oppression still maintains in Bahrain.

Worse yet, it is clear that the presence of Formula One in Bahrain doesn't just ignore the brutal problems, it is a significant cause of them:

He does not believe this was an isolated event. "Many journalists come to cover F1 and maybe that's why they arrested my father," he says, adding that it was part of a wider crackdown that has occurred in areas where there are regular protests. "If you go to the villages, you will see them surrounded by police, any gathering of six or seven people chanting will be attacked with tear gas or Kevlar bullets or birdshot; the government are not allowing any protests to happen there."

While there are human rights issues in other countries the sport visits, the activists claim that, unlike in China for example, it is Formula One's very presence in Bahrain that makes the situation worse. Maryam al-Khawaja, the co-director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights who is living in Denmark having been sentenced to one year in prison in absentia for allegedly assaulting a police officer, describes the reforms since 2011 as both a smokescreen and a whitewash.

"The problem is that the F1 isn't just being used as part of that whitewash, the F1 actually causes human rights

violations in Bahrain," she says. "Right before the race we have the government going on an arrest spree to try and prevent protest. We have protesters cracked down on during the F1 and the violence that is used is usually more than what we see for the rest of the year. F1 causes human rights violations and for that reason it should not come to Bahrain."

That would be exactly consistent with reports from the ground in Bahrain in 2012. Nothing has changed. And nothing will change so long as powerful entities like Formula One and the US Government will blindly sanction such oppression to further their own interests.

As to the race itself, practice was as expected with the Mercedes and Ferraris leading the rest of the pack. Qualifying just concluded, however, and there was a bit of a shakeup at the top. Lewis Hamilton took his fourth pole to open the season, but Vettel took P2 followed by Rosberg and Raikkonen in the second row. No front row lockout for Mercedes as they have become expected to lately. The rest of the top 10 in order are Bottas, Massa, Ricciardo, Hulkenberg, Sainz and Grosjean.

Will the Ferrari and Williams cars have anything for Hamilton and Rosberg in the actual race? We shall see, but they are getting ever closer.

Also, baseball has started the regular season, and the Tigers and Royals look awesome so far; the Giants not so much. The NBA playoffs are starting and the NFL draft is nearly upon us.

Consider this a full Trash Talk and discuss anything you wish. And don't be a dick like Lewis Hamilton and spray champagne into unsuspecting girl's eardrums.