

Bahrain Interview: Nabeel Rajab - How Police Attacked the Manama March and Beat Me

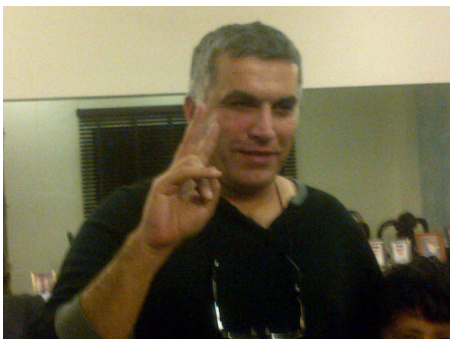
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Josh Shahryar in Bahrain Center for Human Rights, EA Middle East and Turkey, Middle East and Iran, Nabeel Rajab, Said Yousif Almuhafda

Footage of the Manama march and police attack on Friday night

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On Friday night Nabeel Rajab, the president of the [Bahrain Center for Human Rights](#), was at the front of a march in the capital Manama. Minutes after police spoke to him, trying to halt the rally, security forces charged the demonstrators. Rajab was knocked down and beaten before he was put into an ambulance and taken to hospital. He was released later in the evening.

Rajab talks to EA about the episode:

For Nabeel Rajab, last Friday night --- like most of his nights when he is in Bahrain --- was supposed to be an evening of visits to the homes of families who have lost loved ones in the violence or have had members detained since the beginning of February's protests.

This Friday was different. "I thought I should go visit some families in Manama," he said, but then he decided that he might join a family member in the protests over killings and detentions.

Even before Rajab and his companions reached Manama, the city had been flooded with hundreds of security forces. At 7:30 PM, he and activist friends Zainab Alkhawaja and Said Yousif Almuhafda started to walk near Alkhawaja Mosque. "As we walked, more people showed up and started walking with us, but the location where the protesters were supposed to gather had a heavy presence of riot police."

So instead of gathering, the crowd kept walking and growing. At some point, they turned back and walked back to where they had started their journey. By 8:20, there were more than a thousand marchers, holding banners and calling for the release of political prisoners, in an area roughly a square kilometer (0.37 square miles). But before they could complete their round-trip journey on Babul Bahrain Road, they saw a dozens of riot police blocking their path.

Fearing a confrontation was imminent, the marchers stopped 15 metres from where the riot police had stopped. For five minutes, nobody made a move. Then, the riot police started to lose patience. An officer walked towards the marchers and told Rajab to tell the protesters to go back home or they would be attacked in five minute.

"I told them there was no reason for an attack. I told him that the marchers were just men and women who'd peacefully gathered and had a right under international law to be here."

The officer told him they needed permission for a protest.

"I told him that we wouldn't be granted permission. We've asked for a permission; other political societies have asked for one, but the government rejected them all."

The officer would not listen.

"I told him we were close to the end of our march, back to where we started, and we just wanted to complete the round trip and it would just take 10 minutes."

The officer still would not budge from his demand for the gathering to go home.

"I said it was up to him and that he should not use violence, but if he does, the marchers wouldn't react because violence wasn't the solution."

The officer gave them five minutes to disperse. In fact, the attack began 90 seconds later.

Riot police started beating people with batons. Tear gas canisters started flying all over the place, spewing what many protesters have started to call "toxic gas", because the new gas being used by security forces has effects far stronger than that employed earlier in the protest. Rajab saw some canisters; none had any company names or other labels.

Rajab tried to get to his car as other protesters sought shelter in houses from the continuous baton charges and tear gas smoke. He only made it 500 metres. Several riot policemen cornered him in an

alley. He felt two hard baton blows on his back, then one of the officers punched him in the face, knocking him to the ground. The riot police then started to kick him as he hid his face in his hands. As they verbally abused him, he shouted his name and said that he was a human rights activist.

That altered the riot police's behaviour immediately --- the kicks and punches started to fall harder and more frequently.

But then an officer who was not taking part in the beating, possibly overhearing Rajab's identity, came to his "rescue". He asked the others to stop beating Rajab and reached out to the activist.

"He insisted on holding my hand and walking with me to an ambulance. I asked him how soon this 'gesture of kindness' might appear on Bahrain's state TV." Rajab did not get a reply.

As they walked towards the ambulance, Rajab sized up the riot police accompanying him. He recognised several were of South Asian background, verifying the large number of foreigners from Pakistan, India and Arab states in the security forces.

"I asked the officer in English why I was being beaten? Why he had come to Bahrain to beat a Bahraini and how he would feel someone came to his country to beat him in front of his children? I told him, 'You are from India. You have a democracy. Why do you come here to repress our movement for democracy?'"

The officer denied he was Indian and insisted he was Bahraini.

"I said, then I am fighting for you and your children's rights. Why do you beat me?"

He did not get an answer.

As they drew closer to the ambulance, the officer told someone on his walkie talkie that they had picked up Nabeel Rajab, lying on the street.

"I asked him to tell whomever he was talking to over the walkie talkie that Nabeel Rajab was beaten, but he didn't."

They finally reached the ambulance, about 500 metres from the spot where he had been assaulted. As he entered the ambulance, a Bahraini riot policeman snuck in and said, "If you were not inside an ambulance right now, I would kill you," then left. An unmarked car with what Nabeel described as intelligence agents followed them all the way to Salmaniya Hospital.

He finally got a chance to call his family to tell them he would soon be at the hospital. "By the time I arrived, there were a lot of security forces there. Accessing the CIA building would be easier than accessing Salmaniya Hospital with the number of security forces there now."

His face and head bruised, bleeding from his mouth, and aching on his back and limbs, Rajab was x-rayed. The doctors told him everything was fine and told him to go home in three to four hours. As he was being treated, his house was hit with tear gas.

Home now, Rajab still has trouble walking and chewing food because of the pain in his back, legs and jaw. Although the doctors assured him he was fine, "I doubt they would tell the truth so I'm going to have a check up again just to be sure."

Despite the pain, Rajab's resolve is still strong. He plans on going back to Manama next week to walk with the protesters. He also plans on asking others to join him.

"This is for democracy and justice, it's not easy, but it's democracy. It costs you."

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