Bahrain

Country: Bahrain
Year: 2016
Freedom Status: Not Free
Political Rights: 7
Civil Liberties: 6
Aggregate Score: 14
Freedom Rating: 6.5

Overview:

After the opposition’s boycott of the 2014 parliamentary elections and unsuccessful attempts at compromise, relations between Bahrain’s government and the opposition remained tense in 2015. The opposition groups Al-Wefaq and the National Democratic Action Society, among others, faced heightened harassment during the year. In June, a Bahraini court sentenced Al-Wefaq president Ali Salman to four years in prison on a number of serious charges, including promotion of violent political change. Security forces arrested Ibrahim Sharif, former leader of the National Democratic Action Society, on similar charges in July, a month after releasing him from a prison sentence for his involvement in the 2011 uprising. Separately, authorities punished a range of critics, dissidents, and suspected extremists—including 72 people in January alone—by stripping them of citizenship.

Attacks on freedom of speech and the press continued during the year. In February, the government shuttered the satellite television station Al-Arab, owned by a Saudi prince, just hours after its launch because the station aired an interview with a leading member of Al-Wefaq. In August, authorities temporarily shuttered Al-Wasat, one of Bahrain’s five Arabic daily newspapers, after it published criticism of the government.

Protesters and security forces clashed on several occasions. Police abuse, including arbitrary arrests and torture in custody, continued during the year, as did bomb attacks by...
civilians against police. In an exceptional case in May, six police officers were convicted for having tortured prisoners suspected of drug smuggling, one of whom had died.

The government continued its long-standing policy of naturalizing expatriates in an effort to tip the demographic weight of the country away from its Shiite majority.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

**Political Rights: 4 / 40 (−1) [Key]**

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12

The National Action Charter of Bahrain was approved in 2001, and the country was proclaimed a constitutional kingdom the following year. The 2002 constitution gives the king power over the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities. He appoints cabinet ministers and members of the 40-seat Consultative Council, the upper house of the National Assembly. The lower house, or Council of Representatives, consists of 40 elected members serving four-year terms. The National Assembly may propose legislation, but the cabinet drafts the laws.

Al-Wefaq, the country’s leading Shiite opposition society, withdrew its 18 members from the Council of Representatives in 2011 and boycotted the interim elections to protest the government’s crackdown on Shiite Muslims. As a result, all 40 seats went to government supporters. Al-Wefaq boycotted the 2014 legislative elections as well, allowing progovernment candidates to sweep the legislature once more. Largely progovernment independents won 37 of the 40 lower house seats. The remaining seats went to major Sunni societies.

The government touted the 2014 elections as a success, with a reported 51.5 percent voter turnout for the first round despite the opposition boycott. Al-Wefaq, however, estimated voter turnout at less than 30 percent. The government appears to have manipulated the vote by redrawing electoral districts and making monitoring more difficult in order to undercut the rise of potentially populist political networks, such as Islamist groups.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

While formal political parties are illegal, the government has generally allowed political societies or groupings to operate after registering with the Ministry of Justice.

Bahrain has been in political crisis since 2011, when Bahraini activists, mostly from economically depressed Shiite communities, galvanized widespread support for political reform and against sectarian discrimination. The government declared martial law in response to the uprising and instituted a prolonged and violent crackdown.

While the government claims that political societies remain free to operate, it has imprisoned key opposition leaders. In addition to Salman and Sharif, a number of other opposition figures faced pressure in 2015. In August, police arrested former lawmaker and
Al-Wefaq member Hassan Isa after he returned from a trip to Iran, accusing him of financing terrorism. The targeting of opposition figures follows several years of failed efforts to create cooperation. The government relaunched the so-called National Dialogue in 2013 in an attempt to engage the opposition in the political process but suspended it in 2014, when Al-Wefaq withdrew from the talks after one of its leaders was arrested for criticizing the government. After Al-Wefaq announced a boycott of the 2014 elections, a Bahraini court suspended the society’s operations for three months.

A 2005 law makes it illegal to form political associations based on class, profession, or religion. The majority Shiite population is underrepresented in government.

**C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12**

Bahrain has some anticorruption laws, but enforcement is weak, and high-ranking officials suspected of corruption are rarely punished. A source of frustration for many citizens is the perception that Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the king’s uncle and Bahrain’s prime minister since 1971, is both corrupt and a key opponent of reform.

Bahrain was ranked 50 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International’s 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

**Discretionary Political Rights Question B: −3 / 0 (−1)**

The government has made concerted efforts to erode Bahrain’s Shiite majority, mostly by promoting citizenship for foreign-born Sunnis. In 2015, the government maintained systemic sectarian discrimination, and continued recruiting Sunnis to become citizens and serve in the country’s security services. Since 2011, the government has maintained a heavy security presence in primarily Shiite villages. Security forces restrict the movements of Shiite citizens, periodically destroy their property, and arrest critics and activists.

**Civil Liberties: 10 / 60**

**D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16**

The government owns all broadcast media outlets, and the private owners of Bahrain’s three main newspapers have close ties to the state. Self-censorship is encouraged by the vaguely worded 2002 Press Law, which allows the state to imprison journalists for criticizing the king or Islam or for threatening national security. In 2014, the king enacted a law criminalizing insults against him, with offenses carrying steep fines and a prison term of up to seven years. The government continues to block a number of opposition websites, including those that broadcast live events.

The government and its supporters have used the press to smear human rights and opposition activists repeatedly since 2011, most notably in separate campaigns against
the opposition newspaper Al-Wasat and its editor, Mansoor al-Jamri. In August 2015, authorities suspended Al-Wasat after it ran an editorial criticizing the government and its supporters for routinely smearing opposition figures; the newspaper resumed operations after a week.

Several other individuals and outlets were targeted for exercising freedom of expression. In February, authorities closed the Manama-based television station Al-Arab just hours after it began operations because the outlet, which employed more than 200 people, aired an interview with a leading Al-Wefaq official. In November, photographer Sayed Ahmed Al-Mousawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison for allegedly supporting terrorism and stripped of his citizenship. Security forces arrested Al-Mousawi in 2014 after he photographed a series of protests, and held him for more than a year without formal charge. In December, police arrested Mahmoud al-Jaziri, a journalist covering parliamentary issues for Al-Wasat, on suspicion of involvement in terrorist activity. Media watchdogs denounced the arrest as unfounded; al-Jaziri was in detention without charge at year’s end.

Islam is the state religion. However, non-Muslim minorities are generally free to practice their faiths. All religious groups must obtain a permit from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs to operate legally, though the government has not punished groups that operate without permits.

Shiite religious and political figures face significant political hurdles to operating openly. In October, Shiite clerics lodged a complaint over the removal of black flags used in ceremonies for the Day of Ashura, which commemorates the death of the grandson of the prophet Muhammad. The identity of the perpetrators remained unclear at year’s end.

Academic freedom is not formally restricted, but scholars who criticize the government are subject to dismissal. In 2011, a number of faculty members and administrators were fired for supporting the call for democracy, and hundreds of students and some faculty were expelled. Those who remained were forced to sign loyalty pledges.

There are strong suspicions that security forces use networks of informers, and that the government monitors the telephone and online communications of activists, critics, and opposition members. Users of social-media platforms have faced charges of “misusing” them by posting content unfavorable to the regime.

**E. Associational and Organizational Rights:** 1 / 12

Citizens must obtain a license to hold demonstrations, which are banned from sunrise to sunset in any public arena. Police regularly use violence to break up political protests, most of which occur in Shiite villages. In 2013, in face of ongoing protests and rising levels of violence, King Hamad decreed additions to Bahrain’s antiterrorism law that imposed heavy penalties on those convicted of demonstrating unlawfully, including large fines and the stripping of citizenship.

The 1989 Societies Law prohibits any nongovernmental organization (NGO) from operating without a permit. In 2014, the Ministry of Justice ordered all groups and
associations to obtain permission before meeting with non-Bahraini diplomats and officials, limiting the contact of opposition and human rights networks with potentially supportive foreign governments and organizations. The order also required a government official to be present at any interaction. In August 2015, activist Maitham al-Salman of the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory was arrested after attending a meeting of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Bahraini human rights defenders continued to face harassment, intimidation, and prosecution on dubious grounds. Ghada Jamsheer, a prominent women’s rights activist, was sentenced to prison in June for alleging corruption against several members of the royal family. Also in June, a court extended the four-year prison sentence of activist Zainab al-Khawaja by an additional nine months. Al-Khajawa, daughter of the imprisoned activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, was originally sentenced in 2014 for tearing up a picture of King Hamad. In July, the king pardoned human rights activist Nabeel Rajab, who was serving a six-month prison sentence after being convicted of insulting state institutions.

Bahrainis have the right to establish independent labor unions, but workers must give two weeks’ notice before a strike, and strikes are banned in a variety of economic sectors. Private-sector employees cannot be dismissed for union activities, but harassment of unionist workers occurs in practice. Foreign workers lack the right to organize or seek help from Bahraini unions. Household servants remain particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

F. Rule of Law: 1 / 16

The king appoints all judges, and courts are subject to government pressure. Members of the royal family hold all senior security-related offices. Bahrain’s criminal courts and those responsible for personal status laws are largely beholden to political interests. The country’s judicial system is seen as corrupt and biased in favor of the royal family and its backers.

Although Bahrain has criminalized torture and claims it does not hold political prisoners, the country’s prisons are full of human rights and prodemocracy activists. While some detainees are periodically denied access to family and lawyers, others enjoy limited opportunities for phone calls and other amenities. Detainees report frequent maltreatment by prison officials, who are rarely held accountable for abuse. In an exceptional case in May 2015, six police officers were convicted for having tortured prisoners suspected of drug smuggling, one of whom had died.

In 2011, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) concluded that security personnel had used excessive force when dispersing protests that year. In 2013, at the recommendation of BICI, the government created a police ombudsman to investigate allegations of brutality and the excessive use of force by security personnel. While several police officers were sentenced to prison terms as a result, including one who received seven years for killing a protester in 2011, sentences for those convicted of killing protesters have been light compared to those for political activists.

Bahrain’s antiterrorism law prescribes the death penalty for members of terrorist groups and prison terms for those who use religion to spread extremism. Critics have argued that
the law’s definition of terrorist crimes is too broad, and that it has encouraged the use of torture and arbitrary detention. In November 2015, authorities arrested 47 people for allegedly having ties to Iran and planning terrorist attacks.

Bomb attacks continued to target police. In July 2015, an explosion in the village of Sitra killed two police officers and injured six others. A blast in August in the village of Karanah led to the death of an officer and injured seven others, including civilian bystanders.

The government uses revocation of citizenship as a punitive measure, particularly against critics and dissidents. While not all individuals who lose their citizenship are deported, they are forced to face the difficulties arising from a stateless status. In January, authorities stripped at least 72 people—among them Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, a member of the Bahrain Institute for Human Rights and Democracy, and Ali Abdulemam, an activist and blogger—of their citizenship on vague grounds related to national security and stability. An additional 56 people lost their citizenship in June after being convicted of operating a terrorist cell.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is common, and most LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people hide their gender identity. Same-sex sexual activity is not illegal, but individuals have reportedly been punished for it.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 6 / 16

The government continued to obstruct foreign travel by key opposition figures and activists in 2015. Authorities also restricted movement inside the country, particularly for residents of largely Shiite villages outside Manama. A tight security cordon blocked easy access to the capital.

Although registered businesses are largely free to operate, obtaining approval can be difficult due to high capital requirements and political influence on the economy. For the wealthy elites who dominate the business sector, property rights are generally respected and expropriation is rare. However, Shiite citizens encounter difficulties and in some cases bans on purchasing housing and land. The al-Khalifa family has gifted vast swaths of land to regime cronies.

Although women have the right to vote and participate in elections, they are underrepresented politically. Women won three parliamentary seats in the 2014 elections. Women are generally not afforded equal protection under the law. The government drafted a personal status law in 2008, but withdrew it in 2009 under pressure from Shiite clergy; the Sunni portion was later passed by the parliament. Personal status and family law issues for Shiite Bahrainis are consequently still governed by Sharia (Islamic law) court rulings based on the interpretations of predominantly male religious scholars, rather than by any formal statute.

According to the U.S. State Department’s 2016 Trafficking in Persons Report, Bahrain is a destination for victims of human trafficking for forced labor and sexual exploitation. Some employers subject migrant workers to forced labor, and there are reports that abusers withhold workers’ documentation in order to prevent them from leaving or reporting to the
authorities. The government has taken steps to combat trafficking in recent years, but efforts to investigate and prosecute perpetrators remain weak.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received
Y = Best Possible Score
Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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