Bahrain Country Report | Freedom on the Net 2018

Introduction:
Internet freedom in Bahrain improved slightly in 2018 due to the lifting of the partial internet shutdown in Diraz. However, the continued censorship of human rights defenders, online journalists, and opposition websites, as well as the jailing and torture of activists for social media posts, posed serious restrictions to online freedom and human rights.

Although Bahrain has among the highest internet penetration rates in the world, government efforts to quell unrest have impinged on internet freedom. In 2011, the government initiated a violent crackdown, with the support of Saudi Arabia’s military, on peaceful protests that called for greater representation of the majority Shiite population in the country’s Sunni-led government. Since then, authorities have suppressed online dissent with censorship, arrests, intimidation, and torture. In June 2016, the government renewed its widespread crackdown on Shiite leaders and the political opposition, dissolving the main opposition groups of al-Wefaq and Waad, imprisoning opposition leaders, and interrogating and threatening internet users who are critical of the government.

Hundreds of websites remained blocked. The list of banned topics for online discussion continues to grow, and includes discussions on regional politics as well as criticism of the royal family. The authorities have cracked down on online criticism of the Saudi-led war in Yemen, as well as expressions of support for Qatar since the government severed diplomatic relations in June 2017. 

In July 2017, the partial internet shutdown in Diraz came to halt after over one year, without any acknowledgment from the regulatory authority to consumers (see Restrictions on Connectivity).

Key Developments:
June 1, 2017 - May 31, 2018

- In July 2017, the partial internet shutdown in Diraz came to halt after over one year, without any acknowledgment from the regulatory authority to consumers (see Restrictions on Connectivity).
- The license of one ISP was revoked for failing to implement the unified filtering solution (see Regulatory Bodies).
- Forced self-censorship remained a problem, with authorities interrogating and threatening local journalists, bloggers, and activists (see Content Removal and Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).
- At least 27 people were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their online activities, seven of whom received prison sentences totalling 207 months (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).
- For the first time, some users received prison sentences of five to six years for retweets. In August 2017, a man was sentenced to six years in prison for retweeting an alleged insult to the king, the harshest sentence ever for the crime (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).
- Online anonymity was compromised when authorities set a deadline for the annual re-registration of all SIM cards before mid-2018 to avoid disconnection (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).

Availability and Ease of Access
Bahrain has risen rapidly in the International Telecommunication Union’s (ITU) ICT Development Index (IDI) and ranked first in the Arab region in 2017. Internet penetration stood at nearly 96 percent by the end of 2017, according to the ITU. Bahrain had 2.36 million mobile subscriptions at the end of 2017, a penetration rate of 163 percent. Broadband penetration was at 164 percent or 2.37 million subscriptions, of which 93 percent were fixed-line subscriptions.

Prices for mobile broadband are among the lowest in the region (US$21 for 10GB). Speeds have also increased, and the current average download speed is 37.3 Mb/s, according to the 2017 report. An audit indicated that 100 percent of the population is within reach of 3G and 4G mobile networks. Batelco, a state-controlled ISP, began offering “superfast” 500 Mbps speeds to residential subscribers in 2016, while 4G LTE mobile subscriptions have been available since 2013.

Internet access is widely available in schools, universities, shopping malls, and coffee shops, where Bahrainis often gather to work and study. Adult literacy is at nearly 95 percent, and Bahrainis possess a high level of English language proficiency. The government provides free computer training programs, which had served nearly 17,000 citizens by September 2017.
Restrictions on Connectivity:

From June 23, 2016 to July 30, 2017, authorities implemented an “Internet curfew” in the town of Diraz. The curfew was imposed when security forces besieged the town after protesters staged a sit-in around the house of Shiite cleric Isa Qassim. A violent crackdown on the sit-in on May 23, 2017 left at least five dead and dozens injured. Mobile data connections were disabled and fixed-line connectivity was heavily disrupted every day between 7pm and 1am. ISPs initially claimed the disruptions were due to a technical error, but later advised customers to contact the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA).

One report estimated that residents spent over US$900,000 on telecommunications services that they never received over the 13 months of the daily internet shutdowns. The report did not calculate the additional impacts of blocking on individuals who could not process payments during the hours when service was blocked. No action was taken by the TRA to address consumer complaints about the shutdowns, despite widespread criticism from the media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Although there is no central internet backbone in Bahrain, all ISPs are indirectly controlled by the government through orders from the TRA. Service providers connect to various international cables and gateways provided by Tata, Flag, Saudi Telecom, Etisalat, and Qatar Telecom, among others, making the country less prone to unintentional internet outages. The TRA is working with the telecom companies to establish the National Broadband Network (NBN), which is supported by a single fixed-fiber optic network. The TRA aims to have the NBN ready by 2020.

ICT Market:

Bateko, Zain, and VIVA are the three mobile phone operators, and also serve as the main ISPs, along with Menatelcom, the fourth largest ISP. In December 2017, VIVA acquired Menatelcom. In total, around 15 ISPs operated at the end of 2017. The government has a controlling stake in the largest ISP, Bateko, while other ISPs are owned by investors from the private sector, including non-Bahraini investors.

In April 2017, the chairman of the TRA board announced a plan to establish a national fiber-optic broadband network, allowing all service providers to share fiber-optic infrastructure built by Bateko. The plan includes removing barriers to investing into two entities: one that will own its retail services, and another that will become the National Ground Cable Service Company, which will own the infrastructure and provide wholesale services to the licensed telecom operators.

The splitting process is being monitored by a committee that includes members of the Ministry of Interior, National Security Apparatus (NSA), and the Defense Forces.

Regulatory Bodies:

Mobile phone services and ISPs are regulated by the TRA under the 2004 Telecommunications Law. The TRA is responsible for licensing telecommunications providers and for developing a “competition-led market for the provision of innovative communications services, available to all.” Although the TRA is theoretically an independent organization, in practice its members are appointed by the government and its chairman reports to the Minister of State for Communications. The Information Affairs Authority, which regulates the press and publications, merged with the Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA) in December 2018. In August 2016, the TRA issued a decision ordering all telecom service companies in Bahrain to purchase and use a unified technical system for blocking websites (see Blocking and Filter).

There have been no reported instances of ISPs being denied registration permits. In February 2016, the TRA revoked the license of the small mobile and fixed-line provider Zincom. Among other issues, the company had failed to “provide a lawful access capability,” which would allow security forces to access metadata about communications sent over its network. In December 2017, the TRA revoked the license of another small ISP, Bahrain Broadband, following a notice period, for failure to comply with several TRA regulations, including failure to implement the unified technical solution for filtering and blocking, and failure to remain continuously connected to the central management system.

Limits on Content:

A significant level of covered self-censorship was noted during the coverage period, with users curtailing their online activities after being interrogated and threatened by authorities. With the ongoing suspension of the country’s only independent newspaper, independent journalism continued online, but outlets often avoided covering controversial topics.

Online journalists who criticize the government face intimidation and potential arrest.

Blocking and Filtering:

Political content is widely blocked, and authorities ramped up censorship after the 2011 democracy protests, in which online media played an important role. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available, although authorities have blocked a number of messaging and livestreaming apps.

In May 2017, authorities blocked several websites, including the Qatari outlets Al Jazeera, Al Sheba, and Al Rayyan. In June 2017, the website of Qatar Airways was also blocked. The move took place in the wake of a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and several Middle Eastern countries after hackers posted a fake report on the Qatar News Agency website and social media accounts, in which the emir of Qatar appeared to praise Hamas, the main Shiite opposition group, and the Islamic Enlightenment Society (Al-Taweya), a prominent Shiite religious organization.

Several livestreaming services remained blocked during the coverage period, such as Periscope and Mastam, which have been used to conduct political seminars and broadcast Shiite religious ceremonies, respectively. Periscope was still blocked in mid-2018. A crosschecked list of 357 blocked websites indicated that 39 percent of sites blocked as of August 2018 were political in nature, while 23 percent related to the use of tools to bypass blocking and censorship, such as anonymizers and web proxies.

Other blocked websites include Bahrain Online, a prominent online forum; the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI); the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR); Bahrain Mirror, a popular news site; and Al-Ajd Ali Al-Jarby, a London-based newspaper. A report from November 2015 indicated that more than 85 percent of Bahraini websites are hosted outside of the country, despite excellent infrastructure. Even if they are blocked, websites hosted overseas are less vulnerable to being removed at the behest of the government and remain accessible to Bahrainis with access to censorship circumvention tools.

Multiple state organizations, including the MIA and the Ministry of Interior, can order the blocking of a website without a court order. The MIA Blocks website that violate articles 19 and 20 of the Press Rules and Regulations, which include material judged as “instigating hatred of the political regime, inciting on the state’s official religion, breaching ethics, extinguishing on religions and jeopardizing public peace or raising issues whose publication is prohibited by the provisions of this law.” The publication of false news is deemed a crime according to article 70 of the same law. The Press Rules and Regulations were originally drafted for print media and do not specifically govern online content, although they are referenced in regulating the internet. Thus, any site that criticizes the government or the royal family is vulnerable to blocking. An updated list of blocked websites is regularly sent to ISPs, which are instructed not to “provide any means that allow access to sites blocked by the TRA.” Licenses of ISPs may be revoked by the TRA for failing to cooperate with the MIA’s blocking orders.

In August 2016, the TRA ordered all telecommunication companies to employ a centralized system for blocking websites managed by the TRA. The order is related to a US$1.2 million contract awarded in 2016 to Canada-based company Netwitness to provide a “national website filtering system in the country, that effectively blocks offensive political content on behalf of the government.”

The decision-making process and government policies behind the blocking of websites are not transparent. The list of all blocked websites is not available to the public. In addition, webmasters do not receive notifications or explanations when their websites are blocked. When trying to access a blocked site, users are only informed that the website has been “blocked for violating regulations and laws of Kingdom of Bahrain.” Although the law does technically allow affected individuals to appeal a block within 15 days, no such case has yet been adjudicated.

Content Removal:

Website administrators can be legally compelled for content posted on their platforms, including alleged libel. In February 2016, the Interior Ministry stated that WhatsApp group administrators may be held liable for spreading false news if they fail to report incidents that occur in their group. The spread of false news that damages national security or public order is a criminal offense punishable by up to two years in prison.

In May 2017, an article about the deadly crackdown on the protest in Diraz was removed from the website of Turkish news outlet TRT World one day after it was published, in the wake of a complaint made by Bahrain’s Foreign Ministry to the Turkish government. In November 2017, the pro-government newspaper Akhbar Al-Akhbar removed an op-ed article about corruption from its website after its print publication.

In June 2017, the Government Information Affairs Authority did not allow a Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat account to remove unidentifiable “inappropriate content.” According to transparency reports, neither Google, Facebook, Twitter, nor Snapchat provided any content based on requests from the Bahraini authorities. Twitter did receive two removal requests in the first half of 2017, but did not withhold any content.

Authorities also use extralegal measures to forcibly remove online content. Through arrests, interrogations, threats, and torture, security forces have coerced many online forum moderators to permanently shut down their websites.

After being interrogated by security forces in May 2017, activist Adel Al-Marzooq deleted all content he posted on Twitter between March and May 2017. He had reported extensively on the Diraz protest and crackdown (see Restrictions on Connectivity). Opposition lawyer Ebrahim Sarhan also deleted all of his tweets between February and May 2017 following an interrogation, and later fled Bahrain to continue his activism.

Twitter accounts operated by the opposition have also been temporarily or permanently shut down due to government supporters reporting them for violating the platform’s policies, including 15 accounts that were targeted in February 2018.

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation:

Newspapers must obtain licenses from Bahrain’s mass media directorate in order to disseminate electronic media on websites or social media, according to Decree 68/2016. The law does not detail what criteria is used to grant or renew the one-year license. Additionally, newspapers may not post videos over two minutes in length and are forbidden from live streaming video. The law also stipulates that electronic media must reflect the same content as their printed counterparts, effectively limiting online content. Furthermore, outlets must provide a list of their social media accounts and website addresses, as well as the names of those who oversee them as part of the license application, exposing employees to possible monitoring and coercion. Under the existing press law, media professionals face six months of imprisonment and/or a fine of BHD 5,000 (US$ 13,260) for publishing without a license.

In June 2017, the MIA ordered the indefinite suspension of Al-Wasat, Bahrain’s only independent newspaper. The MIA initially temporarily barred the outlet from using electronic media tools in January 2017, effectively shutting down its website and social media accounts for three days. The move occurred one day after Al-Wasat published a headline story about the execution of three political prisoners. The MIA claimed the outlet was “acting a spirit of division and harming national unity.” All three outlets had ordered their offices and some of Al-Wasat’s reporters had begun reporting news on their own social media accounts, including on Instagram.

The authorities are known to manipulate online content in order to fabricate greater public support for government policies. According to the watchdog group Bahrain Watch, the government has given citizens public relations (PR) firms for promotional campaigns since February 2016, representing at least US$52 million in contracts. Al Jazeera PR agency was contracted to provide “web optimization and marketing services,” while others were hired to improve the group’s reputation management. The New Yorker reported in 2018 that the PR firm Bell Pottinger provided to Bahraini clients with a list of the most effective discontents and activists on social media “at a time when Bahraini officials were impressioning and intimidating people who spoke out against the regime.” In October 2014, another PR company tried to persuade the Huffington Post not to write about the United Kingdom’s investigation of torture allegations against the king’s son.
Prosecution and Detentions for Online Activities

between June and May 2018, more than 27 individuals were detained, at least 10 of whom were women, for alleged online activities. Women were among those summoned for questioning in June 2017 on suspicion of using social media to comment on a controversial incident involving a former prime minister and a relative of the ruler. In the same month, the government detained four women for sharing their opinions about the lack of women’s rights on social media.

An April 2017 report from Freedom House noted that the government continued to monitor and censor online communications, and that such practices were widespread. In December 2017, the government launched a Twitter campaign celebrating the 40th anniversary of the rule of the king. However, many of the tweets were later deleted by the government, and some were blocked.

The government has also continued to block access to websites, including those related to political opposition, and has limited access to social media platforms. The government has also detained individuals for alleged online activities, including sharing information on social media. In May 2017, the government detained two men for allegedly spreading false information about the government’s policies.

The government has also continued to use social media to influence public opinion and to spread misinformation. In December 2016, the government suspended social media accounts of political activists and organizations, and blocked access to websites.

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At least seven other internet users are still serving prison sentences for online activities, including Ahmed Almudani, Hussain Hubail, Sayed Al-Mousawi, and Abdallah Al-Singace. Al-Singace, a prominent human rights defender and blogger, has been serving a life sentence since 2011 on charges of possessing links to a terrorist organization aiming to overthrow the government. He was also convicted of disseminating false news, and inciting protests against the government.

In November 2017, former member of parliament Khalid Abdalab posted an apology on Twitter to the king, the crown prince, and the prime minister after years of legal harassment and paying large fines to suspend a two-year prison sentence. He had been sentenced in June 2016 to one year in prison for “insulting the Ministry of Interior” on Twitter in May 2017 for denouncing the use of torture to extract confessions. As a member of parliament, he was immune from prosecution at the time he published the statements.

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Several reports have documented the government’s use of spyware against dissidents. In November 2015, new evidence showed that Bahrain had used the Remote Control Systems (RCS) from Italian cybersecurity firm Hacking Team. The spyware allows remote monitoring, including recording phone calls, logging keystrokes, taking screenshots, and activating cameras, among other functions. Malicious links are often sent from Twitter and Facebook accounts impersonating well-known opposition figures, friends, or the accounts of arrested users. In October 2015, at least four cases were recorded in which opposition members received emails containing malicious spyware.

Given that the authorities have been quick to identify social media users who operate under a pseudonym, many users are concerned about restrictions on the ability to use ICTs anonymously. The TRA requires users to provide identification when registering new telecom connections, and the government prohibits the sale or use of unregistered prepaid SIM cards. In July 2017, a TRA regulation that allows individuals to purchase no more than 10 prepaid SIM cards from a single service provider came into force. Under the regulation, people must be physically present when registering SIM cards directly with service providers, and will be cut by March 2019 for prepaid services.

In January 2017, the government ratified the Arab Treaty on Combating Cybercrime, a set of standards developed to stem the misuse of telecommunications devices, financial fraud, the promotion of terrorism, and access to pornographic content online. While Bahrain passed a computer crimes law containing many of the provisions in 2014, the treaty establishes new rules on the retention of user data and real-time monitoring of activities, as well as a mechanism for sharing information between signatories to help combat transnational crime. The lack of strong human rights standards in the treaty may increase the scope for privacy infractions once it is transposed into local law.

Since 2009, the TRA has mandated that all telecommunications companies keep a record of customers’ phone calls, emails, and website visits for up to three years. The companies are also obliged to provide security forces access to subscriber data upon request from the public prosecution, while the provision of the data content requires a court order.

Cyberattacks are also subject to increasing surveillance. Oversight of their operations is coordinated by a committee consisting of members from four ministries, who work to ensure strict compliance with rules that prohibit access for minors and require that all computer terminals are fully visible to observers.

A Cyber Safety Directorate at the Ministry of State for Telecommunications Affairs was launched in November 2013 to monitor websites and social media networks, ostensibly to “ensure they are not used to instigate violence or terrorism and disseminate lies and fallacies that pose a threat to the kingdom’s security and stability.” Officials had earlier created a unit to monitor social media and foreign news websites to “respond to false information that some channels broadcast” in 2011.

A 2014 computer crimes law (50/2014) criminalizes the illegal access of information systems, illegal eavesdropping over transmission, and the access and possession of pornographic electronic materials. It also criminalizes the transmission of data with criminal intentions. Observers contended that “criminal intentions” could include criticism of the government.

According to company transparency reports, Bahrain submitted one user data request to Google, five user data requests to Twitter, and these user data requests to Facebook in the first half of 2017. The companies refused all the requests.

Access to websites of popular VPNs like Hotspot Shield, Express VPN, and the Tor Project are blocked, which makes it difficult to download client applications. However, the connectivity and functioning of the VPN clients were refused all the requests.

News applications are also blocked. The National Security Council, an advisory body charged with combatting terrorism, has been able to block apps like WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook Messenger, but social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube remain unaffected during the coverage period.

Intimidation and Violence

Violence and torture against online activists and journalists at the hands of authorities is common in Bahrain:

- In February 2018, blogger Sayed Ali Al-Durai was arrested for “inciting hatred against the government” and the royal family. Authorities allegedly beat him and forced him to delete his social media accounts. He was found guilty in May 2018 and sentenced to two years in prison.

- In August 2017, online activist Yousef Al-Jamri was banned after a video alleging that he was subjected to physical and psychological torture at the NSA, threatened with rape and repressals against his family, and forced to insult religious figures he reviews. He was subjected to further intimidation after posting the video and the NSA reportedly summoned him for further interrogation, which he refused. Authorities then requested that Al-Jamri log an official complaint about his treatment, which was not apparently acted upon by the end of the reporting period. Fearing repressions, he reportedly fled Bahrain.

- In September 2017, Rawan Sanqoor was arrested for tweets about the alleged denial of medical care to her imprisoned brother, Ali Sanqoor, and her communications with the International Committee of the Red Cross. She was held in detention for about a month, was allegedly isolated from others, and was denied violation rights. She was released in October 2017, and has since made her Twitter account private.

- Rights activist Ebtisam Al-Shehri, whose work includes covering both government torture and online abuse with the advocacy group Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, has endured repressions for her work. In May 2017, Al-Shehri was detained at the NSA and allegedly blindfolded, beaten, and sexually assaulted; her attackers also interrogated her about other activists and her association with the UN Human Rights Council, and attempted to coerce her to use her Twitter account to announce her retirement as a human rights activist. Instead, in July, she denounced the abuse of women by NSA agents and criticized the king on Twitter. Days later, plainclothes officials, without a warrant, raided her home, confiscated her phone and national ID card, and took her into custody. She was released in October 2017, but now faces terrorism charges in connection with her July tweets.

Programmation internet users frequently post photos of protestors on social media in order to identify and punish them in “electronic witch hunts.” Government services and housing can be withheld from those accused of participating in protests, and some have seen their employment terminated for their political activities.

Technical Attacks

Cyberattacks against both the opposition and government supporters are common in Bahrain. In June 2017, hackers took over the foreign minister’s Twitter account for approximately four hours and posted a stream of photos and videos of the opposition’s demonstration to alarm the government.

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Government institutions are also targeted. Authorities observed around 25,000 hacking attempts and 25 million malicious emails sent to government systems during the first quarter of 2017.

In April 2017, the website of the Bahrain Football Association was compromised by a Palestinian hacker who criticized Bahrain for hosting a representative from Israel during the FIFA Congress in May 2017.

Notes:


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- **76** Citizens for Bahrain website, accessed May 26, 2017,
- **74** Ed Caesar, “The Reputation-Laundering Firm that Ruined its own Reputation,”
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