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Qatar

Country:

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Year:

2018

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

5

Aggregate Score:

24

Freedom Rating:

5.5

Overview:

Qatar's hereditary emir holds all executive and legislative authority, and ultimately controls the judiciary as well. Political parties are not permitted, and the only elections are for an advisory municipal council. While Qatari citizens are among the wealthiest in the world, more than four-fifths of the population are noncitizens with no political rights, few civil liberties, and limited access to economic opportunity.

Explanatory Note:

Due to a methodological change affecting certain monarchies, Qatar's aggregate score for political rights declined by two points; for more information see the [report methodology](#).

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 7 / 40 (-2)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 2 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The emir appoints the prime minister and cabinet, and selects an heir-apparent after consulting

with the ruling family and other notables. In 2013, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicated as emir, handing power to his fourth-born son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser al-Thani, a member of the ruling family, became prime minister as well as interior minister.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The 2003 constitution stipulated that 30 of the 45 seats on the Advisory Council (Majlis al-Shura) should be filled through elections every four years, with the emir appointing the other 15 members. However, elections have been repeatedly postponed, so all members are still appointed. In November 2017, the emir renewed the membership of some members and appointed 28 new members.

Nonpartisan elections have been held since 1999 for the 29-member Central Municipal Council, a body designed to advise the minister for municipal affairs. Members serve four-year terms. In the most recent elections, held in 2015, turnout rose substantially to 70 percent of registered voters, from 43 percent in 2011, but the actual number registered fell by 40 percent to a record low of 21,735, out of roughly 150,000 eligible voters.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

Electoral laws currently in force cover only the Central Municipal Council elections, and the absence of a legal framework for Advisory Council elections has been a factor in their repeated postponement. Qatari citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote, except those in the military or working for the Interior Ministry.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 2 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4

The government does not permit the existence of political parties or other political groupings. All candidates for the municipal council elections run as independents.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

The ruling family maintains a monopoly on political power, and the system excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections.

As part of the diplomatic clash between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt that began in June 2017, dissident members of the Qatari ruling family based in Saudi Arabia and Europe emerged to advocate political change in Qatar, though they did not appear to have any organized public support within the country.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is

not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

Public participation in the political arena is extremely limited. Voters and candidates who do take part in the municipal elections are often influenced by tribal and family ties.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Up to 90 percent of Qatar's population is composed of noncitizens, including expatriates and migrant workers, who have no political rights or electoral opportunities. Citizenship is inherited exclusively from a Qatari father; residents can apply for citizenship after 25 years in the country, but this is rarely granted.

Qatari women enjoy some political rights, though they have little opportunity to organize independently and advocate for their interests. In the 2015 municipal council elections, five of the 130 candidates were women, and two of them won seats, up from one in the previous council. Four women were among the new Advisory Council members appointed in 2017, becoming the first women to serve on the council.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 3 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

Decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of the emir and his family, and there is no elected legislature to offset executive power.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

The authorities regularly punish lower-level public officials for bribery and embezzlement, but corruption remains a concern, and the country lacks genuinely independent anticorruption mechanisms that can hold senior officials and members of the ruling family publicly accountable for the allocation of state resources. Qatar has been accused of employing corrupt tactics in its successful bid to host soccer's 2022 World Cup, and allegations of bribery surrounding the 2010 decision continued to emerge during 2017.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Official information is tightly controlled, and critics complain of a lack of transparency in state procurement. Although the State Audit Bureau prepares budgets and accounts for government institutions, it does not share their full details with the public or the appointed Advisory Council. A 2016 law empowered the bureau to make some aspects of its findings public, but the security ministries remained exempt from its oversight.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 17 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 7 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

Both print and broadcast media are influenced by leading families and subject to state censorship. The international television network Al-Jazeera is privately held, but the government has reportedly paid to support its operating costs since its inception in 1996. All journalists in Qatar practice a degree of self-censorship and face possible jail sentences for defamation and other press offenses. Access to the independent English-language website Doha News has been blocked in Qatar since late 2016 on the grounds that it did not have the required operating permit.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

Islam is the official religion, though the constitution explicitly provides for freedom of worship. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs oversees the construction of mosques, the hiring of imams, and guidance for sermons. Churches have been built for Qatar's growing Christian community, but non-Muslims are not allowed to proselytize or worship in public.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

The constitution guarantees academic freedom, but scholars often self-censor on politically sensitive topics. Foreign universities have established branches in Qatar under a program to strengthen the country's educational institutions.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 2 / 4

While residents enjoy some freedom of private discussion, security forces reportedly monitor personal communications, and noncitizens often self-censor to avoid jeopardizing their work and residency status. Social media users can face criminal penalties for posting politically sensitive content. After Saudi Arabia and its allies imposed their diplomatic and trade sanctions on Qatar in June 2017, citizens and residents became more active in debating current affairs and regional developments, without apparent retribution.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 2 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

The constitutional right to freedom of assembly is limited by restrictive laws and does not apply to noncitizens. Organizers of public events must obtain a permit from the Interior Ministry, and protests are rare in practice.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 0 / 4

All nongovernmental organizations need state permission to operate, and the government closely monitors their activities. There are no independent human rights organizations, though a government-appointed National Human Rights Committee investigates alleged abuses. Independent activists are subject to state harassment. The authorities imposed a travel ban on human rights lawyer Najeeb al-Nuaimi in January 2017, and it remained in place at year's end.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1

/ 4

A 2005 labor law expanded worker protections, but the rights to form unions and to strike remain restricted. The only trade union allowed to operate is the General Union of Workers of Qatar, and the law prohibits membership for noncitizens, government employees, and household workers. Foreign workers who engage in labor protests risk deportation.

F. RULE OF LAW: 4 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Despite constitutional guarantees, the judiciary is not independent in practice. Many judges are foreign nationals serving under temporary contracts that are renewed annually. The Supreme Council of the Judiciary, composed of senior judges, administers the courts and plays a role in nominating judges for appointment by the emir.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Certain laws allow lengthy detentions without charge or access to a lawyer for suspects in cases involving national security or terrorism. Even under normal criminal procedure, judges can extend pretrial detention for up to half of the maximum prison term allowed for the alleged crime. Many laws contain ill-defined offenses and other language that gives prosecutors and judges broad discretion to determine guilt. For example, a 2014 law on cybercrimes has been criticized for the vague wording of offenses that carry prison sentences of up to three years, including online dissemination of “false news” or content that undermines “general order.”

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4

There have been some allegations of torture and other mistreatment of detainees in recent years, but legal bans on such abuse are generally respected. Prison conditions reportedly meet international standards. Corporal punishment in the form of flogging can be imposed on Muslim defendants for certain offenses under Sharia (Islamic law), including alcohol consumption and extramarital sex.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

Noncitizens reportedly face discrimination in the courts and from police. While the constitution bars gender-based discrimination, women do not receive equal treatment under a number of laws, and their testimony is worth less than that of men in certain types of cases. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people are subject to legal and societal discrimination; vague wording in the penal code can be interpreted to criminalize same-sex sexual activity, and Sharia prohibits any sexual acts outside of heterosexual marriage. Same-sex relationships must be hidden in practice.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 4 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4

Qataris face no major restrictions on freedom of movement within the country or on type or place of employment. Such freedoms, however, are not extended to noncitizens and foreign workers, who face a variety of constraints. A reform law that took effect in December 2016 eased foreign workers' ability to change employers at the end of a contract and leave the country without an employer's permission, but an amendment in early 2017 effectively meant that employers could still hamper workers' attempts to obtain exit visas.

As part of the diplomatic clash that began in June 2017, Saudi Arabia and its allies closed Qatar's only land border, closed their airspace to Qatari flights, expelled Qatari nationals, and banned their nationals from visiting Qatar.

In August, the cabinet approved a draft law that, if enacted, would allow children of Qatari mothers and foreign fathers to obtain permanent residency. It would also grant permanent residency to foreigners who "provide outstanding services to Qatar," which could include citizens of Saudi Arabia and allied countries who chose to remain despite the diplomatic crisis. Permanent residents would have access free state education and health care, and enjoy greater rights to own property and run businesses. The law had yet to be ratified by the emir at year's end.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

Qataris are permitted to own property and start private businesses, although the process of obtaining necessary commercial permits can be cumbersome. Noncitizens are generally barred from owning property and require Qatari partners to own and operate businesses.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

There are a number of legal constraints on marriage, and women are typically at a disadvantage to men under laws on personal status matters. Marriage contracts require the consent of the woman's male guardian, and citizens must obtain government permission to marry foreigners. The foreign wives of Qatari men can obtain citizenship, but foreign husbands of Qatari women are eligible only for residency. Domestic violence and spousal rape are not specifically criminalized. Extramarital sex is illegal.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Many foreign nationals face economic abuses including the withholding of salaries, contract manipulation, poor living conditions, and excessive working hours. However, fear of job loss and deportation often prevents them from asserting their limited rights. Female household workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. International organizations have drawn attention to the harsh working conditions of migrants building the infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup.

The government undertook a number of reforms in 2017 to address some of these problems. In August, the emir ratified a new law that provided labor rights to household workers, guaranteeing a maximum 10-hour working day, one rest day a week, three weeks of annual leave, and an end-of-service payment, among other provisions, though it failed to set out enforcement

mechanisms to ensure compliance. Its standards are also weaker than those in the main labor law. In October, the government pledged to make a series of sweeping legal improvements for migrant workers, including a minimum wage; further development of those initial commitments was expected in 2018.

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