

# Qatar | Freedom House

## [Freedom in the World 2017](#)

### Profile

### Freedom in the World Scores

#### 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 expatriates with no political rights, few civil liberties, and limited access to economic opportunity.

#### Key Developments:

- In June, the emir issued a decree that extended the term of the fully appointed Advisory Council by another three years, postponing the first elections for the council until at least 2019.
- In November, authorities blocked access to Doha News, a popular online outlet that had provided critical reporting on sensitive topics.
- Qatar continued to face international scrutiny over the alleged mistreatment of migrant workers, particularly those involved in construction projects related to soccer's World Cup, which the emirate was scheduled to host in 2022.

#### Executive Summary:

The government of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar's emir since 2013, continued to grapple with the effects of low oil and gas prices and a related slowdown in public spending in 2016. A cabinet shuffle in January, part of gradual process by which the emir was replacing officials appointed by his father, also featured the consolidation of several ministries to reduce costs. The country remained involved in Saudi-led military operations in Yemen and made efforts to repair relations with fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states after a serious rift in 2014 over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Qatari citizens have been spared from the brunt of austerity measures, whose impact has fallen hardest on the expatriate population. Spending continued in 2016 on preparations for the 2022 World Cup, which have drawn international attention to labor exploitation in Qatar. Large numbers of migrant workers reportedly faced abusive conditions that sometimes amounted to forced labor.

### [Political Rights](#)

The head of state is the emir, whose family holds a monopoly on political power. The

emir appoints the prime minister and cabinet, and also selects an heir-apparent after consulting with the ruling family and other notables. In 2013, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicated after serving as emir since 1995. His successor, Sheikh Tamim, was his fourth-born son. Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa al-Thani, the former head of state security and a member of the ruling family, became prime minister as well as interior minister.

The constitution, approved in a 2003 referendum, stipulates that 30 of the 45 seats of the Advisory Council (Majlis al-Shura) should be filled through elections every four years; the emir would appoint the other 15 members. However, elections have yet to take place, so all members are currently appointed. Elections scheduled for 2013 were postponed by three years, ostensibly due to the transfer of power to Tamim. In June 2016, the emir issued a decree extending the term of the existing council by another three years.

The country held its first nonpartisan elections in 1999 for the 29-member Central Municipal Council, a body designed to advise the minister for municipal affairs. Its members serve four-year terms. In the most recent council elections, held in 2015, five of the 130 candidates were women, and two of them won seats, up from one in the previous council. Although turnout rose substantially to 70 percent of registered voters, from 43 percent in 2011, the actual number registered fell by 40 percent to a record low of 21,735, out of roughly 150,000 eligible voters.

All Qatari citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote, with the exception of those in the military and those working for the Interior Ministry. However, more than 80 percent of the country's population is composed of foreign nationals, who are not eligible to vote.

The government does not permit the existence of political parties. All candidates for municipal elections run as independents, and tribal and family ties continue to play an influential role in political affairs. The system as a whole is dominated by the ruling family. While some members of the noncitizen majority work as senior government employees and judges, they have no formal political rights.

Decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of the emir and his family. Critics continue to complain of a lack of transparency in state procurement, which allegedly depends on personal connections. Qatar has been accused of corrupt practices in its bid to host the 2022 World Cup. Official information in general is very tightly controlled. Nevertheless, the authorities regularly punish lower-level public officials for bribery and embezzlement. More than a dozen such cases were reported during 2016, and in October the emir signed a law empowering the State Audit Bureau to make some aspects of its findings public, though the security ministries remained exempt from its oversight.

For traditional monarchies that have no parties or electoral process, does the system provide for genuine, meaningful consultation with the people, encourage public discussion of policy choices, and allow the right to petition the ruler?

1. Is there a non-elected legislature that advises the monarch on policy issues?
2. Are there formal mechanisms for individuals or civic groups to speak with or petition the monarch?

### 3. Does the monarch take petitions from the public under serious consideration?

Citizens can petition elected local government representatives who have limited powers over municipal services; these representatives report to the Ministry of Municipality and Environment. However, the record low rate of registration for the 2015 municipal council elections suggested waning public confidence in the ability of existing institutions to communicate citizens' concerns, particularly in light of the continued failure to hold Advisory Council elections.

## **Civil Liberties**

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, both print and broadcast media are influenced by leading families and subject to state censorship. The main daily newspapers are privately owned, but their owners and boards include members of the ruling family. In 1996, the emir permitted the creation of Al-Jazeera, a television network that has achieved a global reach. Although it is privately held, the government has reportedly paid for the network's operating costs since its inception. Al-Jazeera generally does not cover Qatari politics. All journalists in Qatar practice a high degree of self-censorship and face possible jail sentences for defamation and other press offenses. Social media users can also face criminal penalties for posting politically sensitive content. In March 2016, the emir pardoned a poet who had been sentenced in 2013 to 15 years in prison for poems posted online that were critical of Qatari and other Arab leaders.

Foreign journalists continued to encounter official interference during 2016. Three journalists working for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation were detained in May after filming a soccer tournament for migrant workers outside Doha. Before they were released, the crew were made to sign confessions that they had trespassed and filmed without permission.

A 2014 law on cybercrimes prescribes up to three years in prison for a range of vaguely worded offenses, including online dissemination of "false news" or content that undermines "general order." Publishing personal or family information can draw prison time and fines even if the content is accurate. In October 2016, Doha News, a local English-language website that has reported on sensitive topics, published an editorial arguing that the cybercrimes law was being "exploited by criminals and individuals with personal agendas to silence others," noting that one of its own reporters had been detained for questioning in July over an article that identified a convicted child molester by name. In November, Doha News reported that access to its site had been blocked indefinitely by Qatar's two internet service providers, allegedly due to problems with its license.

Islam is the official religion, though the constitution explicitly provides for freedom of worship. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs regulates clerical matters and the construction of mosques. Several churches have been built for Qatar's growing Christian community. The constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and academic research, but scholars often self-censor on politically sensitive topics. Several foreign universities have established branches in Qatar under a program to strengthen the country's educational institutions.

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.

While the constitution grants freedoms of assembly and association, these rights are limited by law and in practice. Protests are rare, with the government restricting the public's ability to organize demonstrations. 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, which includes members of civil society and government ministries, investigates alleged abuses.

A 2005 labor law expanded some 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. Onerous administrative and financial requirements deter the formation of professional associations.

Despite constitutional guarantees, the judiciary is not independent in practice. The majority of Qatar's judges are foreign nationals who are appointed and removed by the emir. The judicial system consists of Sharia (Islamic law) courts, which have jurisdiction over a narrow range of issues including family law, and civil law courts, which have jurisdiction over criminal, commercial, and civil cases.

Although the constitution protects individuals from arbitrary arrest and detention and bans torture, a 2002 law allows the suspension of these guarantees for the "protection of society." The law empowers the interior minister to detain a defendant for crimes related to national security on the recommendation of the director general of public security.

The integrity of Qatar's judicial system became the focus of attention in 2015, when the Court of Appeal overturned convictions of involuntary manslaughter for several people, including a member of the ruling family, in connection with the 2012 Villaggio Mall fire, which killed 19 people. The decision was criticized for alleged bias in favor of the defendants. In February 2016, the Court of Cassation ordered a retrial before the Court of Appeal, but the latter ruled in April that the defendants would pay compensation to the victims' families rather than facing jail time. An appeal of that verdict was pending at year's end.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face legal and societal discrimination, and same-sex relationships must be hidden in practice. Vague wording in the penal code can be interpreted to criminalize same-sex sexual activity, and both criminal law and Sharia prohibit any sexual acts outside of heterosexual marriage. In June 2016, a non-Muslim Dutch woman received a one-year suspended sentence for extramarital sex and was deported after reporting that she had been drugged and raped. A Syrian Muslim man accused in the case received corporal punishment for extramarital sex and consumption of alcohol.

Qataris face no apparent restrictions on freedom of movement within Qatar or on type or place of employment. Such freedoms, however, are not extended to noncitizens and foreign workers. Unlike citizens, noncitizens must pay for services

including education and utilities, and face discrimination in housing and other areas. 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.

While the constitution treats women as full and equal persons, and gender-based discrimination is banned, women face de facto discrimination in the workforce. A 2006 family law regulates issues such as inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce. While the law expanded protections for women, they continue to face disadvantages, including societal discrimination, and have few effective legal mechanisms to contest incidents of bias.

Domestic violence is not specifically criminalized, though the 2011–16 National Development Strategy included plans for laws against domestic violence, increased legal protections for victims, and robust social support services. A small state-sponsored shelter serves abused women and children and, in cooperation with the public prosecutor's office, facilitates the legal response to cases of abuse.

Many foreign nationals, who make up over 90 percent of the workforce, 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. Migrants building the infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup continued to work in harsh conditions in 2016. There have been reports of workers not receiving wages for more than a year and being stranded in Qatar after the collapse of the contracting companies that employed them.

A modest 2015 reform law that took effect in December 2016 ostensibly eased foreign workers' ability to change employers at the end of a contract and leave the country without an employer's permission, but analysts noted that workers still could not change jobs during a contract period, and that employers could now hold workers' passports legally and remained empowered to block exit visas.