

Qatar | Freedom House

Political Rights: 9 / 40 (-1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12

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, ostensibly due to the transfer of power to Tamim.

The country held its first nonpartisan elections in 1999 for a 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 May 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 or 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.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

The government does not permit the existence of political parties. The system is dominated by the ruling family. While some members of the noncitizen majority work as senior government employees and judges, they have no political rights.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

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, and Qatar was ranked 22 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions

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Discretionary Political Rights Question A: 2 / 4 (-1)

Citizens can petition elected local government representatives who have limited powers over municipal services; these representatives report to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Urban Planning. 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: 18 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 8 / 16

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, both print and broadcast media are influenced by leading families and subject to state censorship. The top five 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.

Foreign journalists encountered official interference during 2015. In March, a German public broadcasting news crew that was filming a documentary on World Cup corruption was detained by authorities for 14 hours. In May, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news crew was detained for two days while investigating conditions for migrant workers. Both teams were subjected to travel bans lasting several days and had their equipment confiscated.

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. The government censors online content and blocks access to websites that are deemed pornographic or politically sensitive.

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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 2 / 12

While the constitution grants freedoms of assembly and association, these rights are limited 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, which prohibits membership for noncitizens, government employees, and household workers. Onerous administrative and financial requirements deter the formation of professional associations.

F. Rule of Law: 4 / 16

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 October 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. Qatar's attorney general announced plans to appeal the decision, which critics said reflected bias in favor of the defendants.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face legal and societal discrimination. Vague wording in the penal code can be interpreted to criminalize same-sex sexual activity, and Sharia, which applies only to Muslims, prohibits any sexual acts outside of heterosexual marriage. Same-sex relationships must be hidden in practice.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

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. In 2006, Qatar implemented a codified family law to regulate 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. The Qatar Foundation for Child and Women Protection operates a shelter for abused women and children and, in cooperation with the public prosecutor's office, facilitates the legal response to cases of abuse. However, it is unclear how many domestic abuse charges were filed in 2015.

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. 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 reform law signed in October 2015, once implemented in late 2016, would ease foreign workers' ability to change employers at the end of a contract and leave the country without an employer's permission. Separately, a system requiring employers to pay workers electronically began functioning in November.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)