FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2017

Bahrain

NOT FREE

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LAST YEAR’S SCORE & STATUS

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.
Overview

Once a promising model for political reform and democratic transition, Bahrain has become one of the Middle East’s most repressive states. Since violently crushing a popular prodemocracy protest movement in 2011, the Sunni-led monarchy has systematically eliminated a broad range of political rights and civil liberties, dismantled the political opposition, and cracked down harshly on persistent dissent in the Shiite population.

Key Developments in 2016

- In July, the courts approved a government request to formally disband Al-Wefaq, the country’s largest opposition group, which draws its support from the Shiite Muslim majority.
- The authorities continued to harass and detain leading political and human rights activists, including Nabeel Rajab, Ibrahim Sharif, and Ghada Jamsheer.
- In June, the government revoked the citizenship of Isa Qassim, the country’s most important Shiite cleric, and charged him with money laundering.
- Regular clashes between police and mostly Shiite protesters occurred throughout the year, and dozens of people were arrested or questioned for participating in a sit-in to show support for Qassim.

Executive Summary

The Bahraini authorities’ drive to outlaw peaceful political opposition intensified in 2016. In June, a court acting on a motion from the government suspended Al-Wefaq, a largely Shiite group that had long been the kingdom’s main opposition political society, and its assets were seized. The organization was accused of encouraging terrorism, extremism, and violence, as well as foreign interference in Bahraini affairs. A second court ruling formally dissolved Al-Wefaq in July. Its leader, Ali Salman, was sentenced by an appellate court in May to nine years in prison on charges including incitement of sectarian hatred. He had been arrested in 2014 and initially sentenced
to four years in prison in 2015. The harsher penalty was confirmed after another appeal in December.

The government also took aim at the country’s highest-ranking Shiite cleric, Isa Qassim. In June, the Interior Ministry announced that Qassim had been stripped of his Bahraini nationality, adding to a growing list of regime critics whose citizenship has been revoked in recent years. Authorities claimed that Qassim had incited sectarianism and served foreign interests, alluding to long-standing state allegations that the Bahraini Shiite community is politically aligned with Iran. Qassim was also charged with money laundering. His supporters gathered outside his home and maintained a vigil through the end of the year to prevent his arrest, at times clashing with police in the area.

Other violent confrontations between protesters and security forces continued in 2016, leading to widespread arrests and a militarized police presence in predominantly Shiite villages and neighborhoods.

Bahraini authorities maintained legal pressure on outspoken activists during the year. Zaynab al-Khawaja was ordered to prison in March to serve a sentence of three years and one month for various convictions related to her criticism of the regime. She was released early in May, partly as a result of pressure from the United States, but she then left the country for Denmark, where she holds dual citizenship. Prominent activists including Nabeel Rajab and Ghada Jamsheer were also imprisoned during the year. Others, including Abdulnabi al-Ekry and the journalist Nazeha Saeed, were forbidden from traveling.

In July, the minister of information issued strict new guidelines for newspapers’ use of internet or social media to disseminate content, further limiting the press’s freedom to operate.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process
The National Action Charter of Bahrain was approved by referendum 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 to the government, but it is the government that drafts and submits the bills for consideration by the legislature.

Al-Wefaq withdrew its 18 members from the Council of Representatives in 2011—and boycotted elections to fill the vacancies—to protest the government’s crackdown on that year’s prodemocracy demonstrations. The group boycotted the 2014 legislative elections as well, allowing progovernment candidates to dominate the legislature once more. Largely progovernment independents won 37 of the 40 lower house seats, and the remaining seats went to two Sunni Muslim political societies.

The government reported voter turnout of more than 50 percent, while the opposition estimated that less than 30 percent of eligible voters participated. The two sides also accused each other of engaging in voter intimidation, and the government allegedly redrew electoral districts to disfavor potentially populist political networks, including leftist and Sunni Islamist groups.

**B. Political Pluralism and Participation**

While formal political parties are illegal, the government has generally allowed political societies or groupings to operate after registering with the Ministry of Justice. A 2005 law makes it illegal to form political associations based on class, profession, or religion, and an amendment adopted in May 2016 bans serving religious clerics from engaging in political activity. The majority Shiite population remains underrepresented in government.
Bahrain has been in political crisis since 2011, when local activists, mostly from economically disadvantaged 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.

After years of failed attempts to reconcile with the opposition, the authorities have imprisoned key political leaders and taken formal steps to shutter opposition societies permanently. Al-Wefaq general secretary Ali Salman was arrested on various incitement charges in 2014, and after a trial judge imposed a four-year prison sentence in 2015, an appellate court sentenced Salman to nine years in prison in May 2016. Although the Court of Cassation overturned the decision and returned the case for reconsideration in October, the harsher sentence was confirmed in December. Meanwhile, Al-Wefaq itself was formally dissolved by the courts in July after the Justice Ministry moved to shut it down for allegedly encouraging violence.

Ibrahim Sharif, former leader of the leftist National Democratic Action Society (Wa’ad), was sentenced in February 2016 to a year in prison for “inciting hatred against the regime.” Although he was released in July, he was summoned by authorities in November and threatened with new criminal charges for his remarks to foreign media. Sharif had already spent four years in prison after the 2011 crackdown and was pardoned in 2015.

**C. Functioning of Government**

The king and other unelected officials hold most authority over the drafting and implementation of laws and government policies in Bahrain, and with the main opposition group no longer participating in the legislature, the body has become increasingly moribund. In February 2016 the Consultative Council announced that it was suspending its planned sessions for the first time since 1993 due to a lack of bills referred from the lower chamber, which in turn had frequently adjourned early because members' poor attendance denied it a quorum. The council reportedly resumed its operations in March, though both chambers closed for a five-month summer recess in May.
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 its independence from Britain in 1971, is both corrupt and a key opponent of reform.

The government has made concerted efforts to erode Bahrain’s Shiite majority, mostly by recruiting foreign-born Sunnis to become citizens and serve in the country’s security forces. Since 2011, the government has maintained a heavy security presence in primarily Shiite villages. These personnel restrict the movements of Shiite citizens, periodically destroy their property, and arrest critics and activists.

**Civil Liberties**

**D. Freedom of Expression and Belief**

The government owns all broadcast media outlets, and the private owners of Bahrain’s 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. A 2014 amendment to the penal code prescribes prison terms of up to seven years for insulting the king. The government continues to block a number of opposition websites. In July 2016 the information minister issued an edict regulating newspapers’ use of the internet and social media to disseminate content. Among other restrictions, the outlets must apply for a one-year renewable license and are barred
from live streaming, and their online content must match or “reflect” printed material.

Journalists continued to face obstacles including prosecution and deportation in 2016. In February, four U.S. journalists were arrested and subsequently deported for entering the country on tourist visas and covering unrest linked to the five-year anniversary of the 2011 protests. France 24 correspondent Nazeha Saeed received a travel ban in June, and in July she was charged with working for foreign outlets without a license, as her annual renewal had been rejected earlier in the year. In December, a military officer and member of the royal family shot and killed sports journalist Eman Salehi, a Shiite woman; the motive remained unclear. Seven journalists were behind bars in Bahrain as of December, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Islam is the state religion. However, non-Muslim minorities are generally free to practice their faiths. Muslim religious groups require a license from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs to operate legally, and non-Muslim groups must register with a different ministry, though the government has not actively punished groups that operate without permits. The Islamic Ulema Council, a Shiite group, was banned in 2014, and Shiite clerics and community leaders have often faced harassment, interrogation, prosecution, and imprisonment in recent years, typically due to allegations that they had incited sectarian hatred or violence. Some Sunnis have also been charged with such offenses. The government’s moves in June 2016 to revoke the citizenship of senior cleric Isa Qassim and charge with him money laundering prompted a sustained sit-in protest around his home, and other Shiite clergy were among those detained or questioned for allegedly participating in the action. Protests and police restrictions periodically obstruct access to mosques.

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 have faced criminal charges for their online activity. In March 2016, Ibrahim Karimi, a man whose citizenship was revoked in 2012, was sentenced to two years in prison for allegedly insulting the king on Twitter; despite being stateless, he faced deportation after completing his sentence.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

Citizens must obtain a permit to hold demonstrations, and a variety of onerous restrictions make it difficult to organize a legal gathering in practice. Police regularly use force to break up political protests, most of which occur in Shiite villages, and participants can face long jail terms, particularly if the demonstrations involve clashes with security personnel.

The 1989 Societies Law prohibits any nongovernmental organization (NGO) from operating without a permit, and authorities have broad discretion to deny or revoke permits. Bahraini human rights defenders continued to face harassment, intimidation, and prosecution on dubious grounds in 2016. Zainab al-Khawaja, daughter of the imprisoned activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, began a prison sentence of three years and one month in March for a series of convictions linked to her criticism of the regime. She was released early in May, though after years of activism and arrests, she left the country to live in Denmark. In June, Nabeel Rajab, head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested for criticizing the government and alleging the torture of political prisoners on Twitter. His trial was repeatedly delayed through the end of December, and he remained in custody at year’s end. After returning from a trip abroad in August, women’s rights and political activist Ghada Jamsheer was imprisoned to serve a series of sentences linked to her Twitter posts about alleged corruption at a local hospital. She was released in December due to poor health and
would serve the remaining four months of her sentences doing community work. She continued to face additional charges at the end of the year.

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. Trade unions cannot operate in the public sector, and collective-bargaining rights are limited even in the private sector. Harassment and firing of unionist workers occurs in practice. Household servants, agricultural workers, and temporary workers do not have the right to join or form unions.

F. Rule of Law

The king appoints all judges, and courts are subject to government pressure. The country’s judicial system is seen as corrupt and biased in favor of the royal family and its allies.

Although the government has criminalized torture and claims it does not hold political prisoners, scores of opposition figures, human rights and democracy advocates, and ordinary citizens have been jailed for their political views and activities. While some detainees are periodically denied access to family and lawyers, others enjoy limited opportunities for phone calls and other amenities. Detainees report frequent mistreatment by prison officials, who are rarely held accountable for abuse. A police ombudsman’s office began operating in 2013, but human rights organizations report that it has failed to investigate torture allegations, and that citizens fear retribution for filing complaints.

Police have been targeted in small bomb attacks in recent years. In April 2016, assailants reportedly threw firebombs at a patrol near Manama, killing one officer and injuring two. In December, a court upheld death sentences for three defendants and life prison terms for seven others accused of a 2014 bombing that killed an Emirati officer and two Bahraini policemen. Human rights groups argued that the defendants were denied due process and that their confessions were extracted under torture. As of 2016, Bahrain had not carried out an execution since 2010.
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, many are forced to face the difficulties arising from a stateless status. More than 200 Bahrainis have been stripped of their citizenship since 2014.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is common, and most LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people hide their status. Same-sex sexual activity is not illegal, but individuals have reportedly been punished for “obscene” or “indecent” acts.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

The government continued to obstruct foreign travel by key opposition figures and activists in 2016. Authorities also restricted movement inside the country, particularly for residents of largely Shiite villages outside Manama. Security forces maintained a heavy presence around Diraz, the home village of Isa Qassim, in the months after he was stripped of his citizenship and supporters gathered to protect him from arrest.

Although registered businesses are largely free to operate, obtaining approval can be difficult in practice. Legal reforms in recent years have sought to lower the capital requirements and other obstacles to registering and operating businesses. For the wealthy elites who dominate the business sector, property rights are generally respected and expropriation is rare. However, Shiite citizens encounter difficulties obtaining affordable housing and in some cases bans on purchasing land.

Although women have the right to vote and participate in elections, they are underrepresented politically. Women won three parliamentary seats in the 2014 elections, and nine women were appointed to the upper chamber. 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).
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 abuse to the authorities. The government has taken steps to combat trafficking in recent years, but efforts to investigate and prosecute perpetrators remain weak.

On Bahrain
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Country Facts
Global Freedom Score
11 / 100  Not Free

Internet Freedom Score
29 / 100  Not Free

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