



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Bahrain

11

NOT FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	1 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	10 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

12 /100 **Not Free**

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



Overview

Bahrain was once viewed as a promising model for political reform and democratic transition, but it has become one of the Middle East's more 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 concentrated among the Shiite population.

Key Developments in 2019

- The government continued to revoke citizenship as a political and criminal punishment, even when it left people stateless. However, after a series of reviews ordered by the king under international pressure, nearly two-thirds of the people whose citizenship had been revoked over the past seven years had it restored by late in the year.
- In January, the country's highest court upheld the sentence of life in prison given in 2018 to Ali Salman, leader of the disbanded opposition party Al-Wefaq, for supposedly spying for Qatar during the antigovernment protests of 2011.
- Three men were executed in July, two of them for terrorism-related offenses, despite concerns raised by UN experts about flawed trials and the apparent use of coerced confessions.
- Political prisoners went on hunger strike in August to protest mistreatment in custody, including the alleged denial of medical care and religious discrimination against Shiites.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

The 2002 constitution gives the king power over the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities. The monarch appoints and dismisses the prime minister and cabinet members, who are responsible to him rather than the legislature. However, since independence from Britain in 1971, the country has had only one prime minister, Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the uncle of the current king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

1/4

The king appoints the 40-member 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. Formal political parties are not permitted, but members of “political societies” have participated in elections in practice.

Lower house elections were held in November 2018, with a runoff round in December, but with bans on the country’s main opposition groups in place, the exercise featured little meaningful competition. A law passed several months before the elections prohibited the candidacy of anyone who belonged to the dissolved political societies, had boycotted or been expelled from the parliament, or had received a prison sentence of at least six months. Most seats went to independents, though small Sunni Islamist groups won several seats and a leftist group won two. As in previous years, turnout figures were disputed amid a lack of independent election monitoring.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

1/4

Bahrain’s electoral framework is unfair, with electoral districts deliberately designed to underrepresent Shiites, who form a majority of the citizen population but have never been able to obtain majority representation in the parliament. The government has also allegedly drawn district borders to put certain political societies, including leftist and Sunni Islamist groups, at a disadvantage. The government directorate responsible for administering elections is headed by the justice minister, a member of the royal family, and is not an independent body.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

<p>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?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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Formal political parties are illegal, and a 2005 law makes it illegal to form political associations based on class, profession, or religion. A 2016 amendment bans serving religious clerics from engaging in political activity. The law permits “political societies,” with some of the functions of a political party, to operate after registering with the government, but the authorities have closed down almost all opposition political societies since 2016. The most popular, the Shiite Islamist society Al-Wefaq, was forcibly disbanded that year for allegedly encouraging violence. Bahrain’s second-largest opposition group, the secularist National Democratic Action Society (Wa’ad), was banned in 2017.

Individual opposition leaders and activists routinely face harassment, and the regime has forced many into prison or exile. Al-Wefaq’s general secretary, Ali Salman, was arrested on various incitement charges in 2014 and fought a series of legal battles, receiving a four-year prison sentence from the Court of Cassation in 2017. In January

2019, the country's top court upheld a life sentence Salman received in November 2018 for alleged espionage on behalf of Qatar.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	0 / 4
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The ruling family maintains a monopoly on political power, and the system's structure excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections. Shiite opposition forces have taken part in parliamentary elections in the past but boycotted the 2014 legislative elections rather than participate in an unfair process. Ahead of the 2018 elections, the main opposition groups were banned and their former members barred from running.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	0 / 4
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The monarchy generally excludes the public from any meaningful political participation. Since 2011 it has used the security forces to isolate the country's Shiite population and suppress political dissent. There have also been repeated allegations that the royal court uses its patronage networks to influence candidates and elections.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	0 / 4
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Although Shiites make up a majority of the country's citizens, they have tended to be underrepresented in both chambers of the National Assembly and the cabinet. One

of the main drivers of discontent in the Shiite community is the widespread perception that its members are treated as second-class citizens, both politically and economically. The regime, which is dominated by a Sunni ruling family, is committed to preventing Shiites from organizing independently to advance their political interests, though it is keen to ensure that at least some progovernment Shiites and members of religious minorities are present in the legislature and cabinet. The dominant role of the monarchy means that even Sunnis face restrictions on their ability to engage in independent political activity.

Women formally enjoy full political rights, but they are typically marginalized in practice; political societies rarely select female candidates. Six women were elected to the lower house in 2018, up from three, and a woman was chosen as speaker for the first time; nine women were named to the upper house.

Noncitizens make up just over half of the total population, and most have no political rights, but the minority of expatriates who own property in the kingdom are allowed to vote in municipal elections. Citizenship generally must be inherited from a Bahraini father, and foreign men married to Bahraini women do not have access to naturalization.

LGBT+ identity is generally not recognized openly, including in political contexts.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	0/4
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The king and other unelected officials hold most authority over the development and implementation of laws and policies. Most major cabinet posts are held by members of the ruling family. 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. With the main opposition groups no longer present

in the National Assembly following successive boycotts and legal bans, the body has become silent on politically sensitive topics, even if it does feature some debate about economic reforms, austerity measures, and public services.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the parliament's ability to serve as a meaningful check on the executive has seriously eroded over the past decade, with opposition groups largely absent from the body.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	2/4
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There are some laws in place to combat corruption, but enforcement is weak, and high-ranking officials or members of the royal family who are suspected of corruption are rarely punished. The media are not sufficiently free to independently air allegations of corruption against such figures. Civil society anticorruption efforts are also restricted; the current and former chairs of the Bahrain Transparency Society have periodically been banned from travel.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	0/4
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Parliamentary proceedings are public, and the parliament is entitled to scrutinize the government budget, but in practice the executive issues orders and laws without providing insight or allowing meaningful public consultation on their development. The limited availability of data on actual expenditures, as opposed to annual spending targets, hinders scrutiny. There is no law guaranteeing public access to government information, and officials are not obliged to disclose their assets or income.

ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION

Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the	-3
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political balance in favor of another group?

The government has made concerted efforts to erode the Shiite citizen majority and tip the country's demographic balance in favor of the Sunni minority, mostly by recruiting foreign-born Sunnis to serve in the security forces and become citizens. Since 2011, the government has maintained a heavy security presence in primarily Shiite villages.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Bahrainis have had their citizenship revoked in recent years, including a large number of Shiite leaders and activists. Among other revocations during 2019, a group of 138 Bahrainis had their citizenship removed on a single day in April as part of a mass trial. After an international outcry, the king decreed later the same month that citizenship would be restored to 551 people who had previously had it revoked, and he asked the Interior Ministry to review other cases. By late in 2019, according to data compiled by the United Kingdom-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, nearly two-thirds of the people whose citizenship had been revoked over the past seven years had had it restored, leaving 292 denationalized. Citizenship was not restored to the most prominent opposition activists affected by the practice.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0/4

The government owns all national broadcast media outlets, and the private owners of Bahrain's main newspapers have close ties to the state. The only independent newspaper, *Al-Wasat*, was banned in 2017. Self-censorship is encouraged by the

vaguely worded Press Law, which allows the state to imprison journalists for criticizing the king or Islam or for threatening national security. Insulting the king is punishable by up to seven years in prison. A 2016 edict requires newspapers to apply for a one-year renewable license to publish online. The government selectively blocks online content, including opposition websites and content that criticizes religion or highlights human rights abuses. Authorities have also blocked online access to Qatari news outlets since diplomatic relations with Qatar broke down during 2017.

Journalists continue to face legal and bureaucratic obstacles to their work in practice. Bahraini authorities have refused to renew the credentials of several Bahraini journalists working with foreign media outlets. Six journalists remained behind bars as of December 2019, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, and some journalists have had their citizenship revoked. International journalists often face difficulty obtaining a visa to enter Bahrain.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	1/4
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Islam is the state religion, and the penal code criminalizes blasphemy-related offenses. Some media material and websites are censored on religious grounds. However, non-Muslim minorities are generally free to practice their faiths. Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups are required to register with government ministries. Muslim religious groups register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs through the Sunni or Shiite awqaf (endowments) that oversee mosques and prayer houses; their directors are appointed by royal decree and paid by the government.

Although Shiite communities are free to carry out religious observances, such as the annual Ashura processions, Shiite clerics and community leaders often face harassment, interrogation, prosecution, and imprisonment. An estimated 45 Shiite religious sites were demolished or vandalized in 2011 in apparent reprisal for the role of Shiite opposition groups in that year's protests. The Islamic Ulema Council, a group of Shiite clerics, was banned in 2014. The government revoked the citizenship of

senior Shiite cleric Isa Qassim in 2016, and he was given a suspended one-year prison sentence for money laundering in 2017; he left Bahrain in 2018. Other Shiite clergy have been detained or questioned for taking part in protests or being suspected of doing so. Protests and police restrictions periodically obstruct access to mosques.

D3 0-4 pts

<p>Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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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 were expelled. Those who remained were forced to sign loyalty pledges.

D4 0-4 pts

<p>Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?</p>	<p>1 / 4</p>
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The penal code includes a variety of punishments for offenses such as insulting the king or state institutions and spreading false news. Many Bahrainis have been convicted and jailed for political speech, including on social media. In 2017, when Bahrain joined a regional boycott of Qatar, the Interior Ministry said expressions of sympathy or support for that country were prohibited, with a penalty of up to five years in prison. Criticism of the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen on social media can also lead to jail time. In May 2019, the Interior Ministry warned that Bahrainis could be found guilty of cybercrimes simply for following or sharing content from Twitter accounts deemed to promote “sedition.”

The security forces are believed to use networks of informers, and the government monitors the personal communications of activists, critics, and opposition members. In 2018, several exiled Bahraini opposition activists brought a court case against a

British spyware company that they accused of helping the Bahraini authorities to hack and surveil their computers.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0/4
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A permit is required 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. Participants can face long jail terms, particularly if the demonstrations involve clashes with security personnel. In July 2019, police used tear gas while forcibly dispersing protests that followed the execution of two Shiite activists.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	0/4
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Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are prohibited from operating without a permit, and authorities have broad discretion to deny or revoke permits. The government also reserves the right to replace the boards of NGOs. Bahraini human rights defenders and their family members are subject to harassment, intimidation, and prosecution. Many of them were either in prison or in exile as of 2019.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	1/4
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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. Domestic, agricultural, and temporary workers do not have the right to join or form unions.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	0 /4
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The king appoints all judges and heads the Supreme Judicial Council, which administers the courts and proposes judicial nominees. The courts are subject to government pressure in practice. The country's judicial system is seen as corrupt and biased in favor of the royal family and its allies, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Once made, judicial decisions are generally enforced.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	1 /4
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Law enforcement officers reportedly violate due process during arrests and detention, in part by obstructing detainees' access to attorneys. Detainees are sometimes held incommunicado. Judicial proceedings often put defendants at a disadvantage, with judges denying bail requests or restricting defense attorneys' attendance or arguments without explanation.

In 2017, the government restored the National Security Agency's power to make arrests. This reversed one of the key reforms undertaken in 2011 after an inquiry into human rights abuses. The agency has been accused of torture and other abuses. Also

in 2017, the constitution was amended to permit military trials for civilians in security-related cases, further weakening due process rights.

F3 0-4 pts

<p>Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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Torture is criminalized, but detainees frequently report mistreatment by security forces and prison officials, who are rarely held accountable for abuse. The Interior Ministry ombudsman's office has failed to provide a meaningful check on such impunity. Political prisoners went on hunger strike in August 2019 to protest poor treatment in custody, including the alleged denial of medical care and religious discrimination against Shiite prisoners, who said they were punished and mocked for trying to practice their faith.

Three executions in 2017 marked the first uses of the death penalty since 2010, and another three men were put to death in July 2019. Two of the latest to be executed were Shiite activists who had been sentenced for terrorism-related offenses; five UN special rapporteurs and experts had appealed for their sentences to be halted given concerns about a flawed trial and the apparent use of coerced confessions.

Police have been targeted in small bombings and armed attacks in recent years. Four officers were killed during 2017, and multiple injuries were reported in 2018.

F4 0-4 pts

<p>Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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Women enjoy legal equality on some issues, and gender-based discrimination in employment is prohibited. Nevertheless, discrimination is common in practice, and women are generally at a disadvantage in matters of family law.

Shiites of both Arab and Persian ethnicity face de facto discrimination in matters including employment. They are largely excluded from the security forces, except when serving as unarmed community police officers. There is a general perception that Shiite public employees are relegated to nonsecurity ministries, like those focused on health and education, which may put Sunni applicants at a disadvantage in such sectors. The government does not publish socioeconomic data that are broken down by religious sect.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is common. The law does not provide protections against such bias, though same-sex sexual activity is not criminalized for those aged 21 and older. Public displays of same-sex affection could fall afoul of public decency laws.

Bahrain is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention and does not recognize refugee status.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1/4

Authorities restrict movement inside the country for residents of largely Shiite villages outside Manama, where the government maintains a heavy security presence. The government also obstructs foreign travel by numerous opposition figures and activists.

Bahrain established a “flexible” permit for foreign workers in 2017, aiming to ease the workers’ ability to change jobs; the traditional sponsorship system ties migrant workers to a specific employer. However, participation in the new scheme has been limited by numerical caps and other restrictions.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	2/4
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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 face bans on purchasing land. Much of the country's scarce land is occupied by royal properties and military facilities. Noncitizens can only own property in designated areas. Women may inherit property, but their rights are not equal to those of men.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2/4
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Personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and child custody are governed by a 2017 unified family law. Previously only a Sunni family code was in place, with Shiite personal status matters adjudicated by Shiite religious courts according to their interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. Some Shiite leaders objected to the new law. The law's provisions are still based on Sharia (Islamic law) principles that put women at a disadvantage on many issues.

Accused rapists can avoid punishment by marrying their victims, and spousal rape is not specifically outlawed. Adultery is illegal, and those who kill a spouse caught in the act of adultery are eligible for lenience in sentencing.

G4 0-4 pts

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Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1/4

Migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation. Some employers subject them to forced labor and withhold their salaries and passports, although this is illegal. The government has taken steps to combat human trafficking in recent years, and has begun on occasion to investigate and prosecute perpetrators.

Revenues from oil and gas exports, the main source of income for the government, are used to fund public-sector jobs and services. All citizens thus receive some benefit from the state-owned energy industry, but not to an equal degree. In particular there is discrimination in the allocation of public-sector jobs and promotion opportunities, depending on one's social and sectarian background and personal connections.



On Bahrain

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

11/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

29/100 Not Free

Other Years

2019

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