Bahrain

NOT FREE

Political Rights 2/40
Civil Liberties 10/60

LAST YEAR’S SCORE & STATUS
11/100 Not Free

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

Bahrain’s Sunni-led monarchy dominates state institutions, and elections for the lower house of parliament are no longer competitive or inclusive. Since violently crushing a popular prodemocracy protest movement in 2011, the authorities have 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 2020

• Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa—the king’s uncle and the country’s only prime minister since independence—died in November at age 84. The king appointed the crown prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, to replace him.
• Confirmed cases of COVID-19 during the year were concentrated disproportionately among migrant workers, who tended to live in crowded accommodations and were also the most vulnerable to losing their jobs, housing, and residency. By year’s end, roughly 94,000 cases and more than 350 deaths had been reported overall.
• In September, the government agreed to normalize relations with Israel in a pact brokered by the United States. The deal prompted protests by some Bahrainis.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1  0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?  O / 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. Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the uncle of the current king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, was the country’s only prime minister between independence from Britain in 1971 and his death in November 2020. The crown prince and eldest son of the king, Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, was appointed as the new prime minister.

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 adopted earlier that year prohibited the candidacy of anyone who belonged to 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.

Voters’ passports are stamped to indicate that they have voted, and there is a widespread belief that people who do not have these stamps are at a higher risk of being prevented from travelling. The government has previously punished people who call for election boycotts.

**B. Political Pluralism and Participation**

**B1 0-4 pts**

| 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 |

Formal political parties are illegal. A 2005 law makes it illegal to form political associations based on class, profession, or religion, while a 2016 amendment prohibits 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 and jailed many of their leaders. The most popular, the Shiite Islamist society Al-Wefaq, was forcibly disbanded that year for allegedly encouraging violence. The 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. In 2019, the country’s top court upheld a
sentence of life in prison that had been imposed on Al-Wefaq’s general secretary, Ali Salman, in 2018 for alleged espionage on behalf of Qatar. He had been in detention on various charges since 2014.

B2 0-4 pts

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

The ruling family maintains a monopoly on political power, with members holding many cabinet seats directly. The system’s structure excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections, and the parliament has been dominated by progovernment lawmakers since the dissolution of the main opposition parties.

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 extrapoltical means?  O / 4

The monarchy generally excludes the public from any meaningful or genuinely independent 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, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?  O / 4

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. The regime, which is controlled by a Sunni ruling family, is committed to preventing
Shiites from organizing independently to advance their political interests. However, the dominant role of the monarchy means that even Sunnis face restrictions on their ability to engage in independent political activity. Senior positions in politics and government are often allocated to members of the royal family and a number of affiliated Sunni tribes. Certain wealthy Shiite families also enjoy a privileged position.

Women formally enjoy full political rights, but they are typically marginalized in practice. 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. One woman serves in the cabinet as minister of health; the first woman minister was appointed in 2004.

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

There are no elected officials with executive authority. 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, the body has become silent on politically sensitive topics, even if it does feature some debate on economic reforms, austerity measures, and public services. When the government agreed to normalize
relations with Israel in September 2020, the parliament welcomed the move, though it was not consulted beforehand.

Bahrain is fiscally and economically dependent on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which gives their governments significant influence over its foreign policy.

**C2** 0-4 pts

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

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 2013–18 national anticorruption strategy called for the creation of a national anticorruption authority, but this has not been implemented. The generally pliant parliament is unable to serve as an effective check on malfeasance, and the media are not sufficiently free to independently air allegations of corruption against powerful figures. Civil society anticorruption efforts are also restricted; activists who highlight such problems have been prohibited from traveling or otherwise harassed.

**C3** 0-4 pts

*Does the government operate with openness and transparency?* 0/4

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. No law guaranteeing public access to government information has been adopted, and officials are not obliged to disclose their assets or income.
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 political balance in favor of another group? -2

Over the past two decades, 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. No data on the sectarian makeup of the population are made public, but the annual rate of growth in the number of citizens has slowed significantly since 2016. This may indicate that the unofficial policy of rapidly naturalizing selected Sunni Muslims from other countries has eased, though it could also reflect other factors, such as reduced birth rates or migration abroad for economic reasons.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Bahrainis have had their citizenship revoked in recent years, including a large number of Shiite leaders and activists. After a mass revocation in 2019 prompted an international outcry, the king decreed that citizenship would be restored to 551 people, and courts reinstated another 147 people as citizens. By late that year, according to the United Kingdom–based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, nearly two-thirds of the people whose citizenship had been revoked over the previous seven years had had it restored, leaving nearly 300 denationalized. Citizenship was not restored to the most prominent opposition activists affected by the practice, and the government retains the authority to revoke citizenship without meaningful due process.

Score Change: The score improved from -3 to -2 due to recent restorations of citizenship to many Shiite residents whose rights had been revoked, as well as a lack of clear evidence that foreign-born Sunnis were being recruited and granted citizenship at the same rate as in previous years, though both practices were believed to continue.

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 blocked online access to Qatari news outlets since diplomatic relations with Qatar broke down in 2017.

Journalists face legal and bureaucratic obstacles to their work in practice. The authorities have refused to renew the credentials of several Bahraini journalists working with foreign media outlets. Six journalists remained behind bars as of late 2020, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, and one imprisoned journalist was temporarily moved to solitary confinement in April after he shared a video in which he disputed official claims about measures being taken to protect prisoners from COVID-19. 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
Islam is the state religion, and the penal code criminalizes blasphemy-related offenses. However, non-Muslim minority groups are generally free to practice their faiths. Both 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, 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.

Most religious gatherings and processions were suspended in the spring of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mosques gradually reopened for group prayer during the second half of the year, though some safety measures remained in place.

**D3 0-4 pts**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?</th>
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Academic freedom is not formally restricted, but scholars who criticize the government have in the past been subject to dismissal, and universities are affected by a broader climate in which criticism is frequently equated with disloyalty. 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

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?  1/4

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. Authorities have also warned against online expression that contradicts the foreign policy priorities of Bahrain and its regional allies. In 2019, the Interior Ministry warned that Bahrainis could be found guilty of cybercrimes simply for following or sharing content from social media 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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1  0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?  0/4

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. Some protests were held without permission in 2020, mostly in opposition to the government’s September agreement to normalize relations with Israel. Organizers and participants were reportedly summoned by authorities and compelled to sign pledges that they would cease their activities.
E2  0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?

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 2020. Nabeel Rajab, leader of the banned Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was released on probation in June, having been in detention since 2016.

E3  0-4 pts

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

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?

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.

**F2 0-4 pts**

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

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. Prominent defense lawyers who represent dissidents have themselves been prosecuted on various charges. One such attorney, Abdullah al-Shamlawi, was convicted in June 2020 and sentenced to eight months in prison over 2019 social media posts in which he criticized certain Shiite religious traditions; after an appeal, the penalty was reduced to a six-month suspended sentence in September.

In 2017, the government restored the National Security Agency’s power to make arrests, despite widespread allegations that it had engaged in torture and other abuses, and the constitution was amended to permit military trials for civilians in security-related cases, further weakening due process rights.

**F3 0-4 pts**

| Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? | 0/4 |

Torture is criminalized, but detainees frequently report mistreatment by security forces and prison officials, who are rarely held accountable. The Interior Ministry ombudsman’s office has failed to provide a meaningful check on such impunity. Political prisoners have alleged denial of medical care and religious discrimination against Shiite inmates. In March 2020, nearly 1,500 prisoners were released amid
concerns about the spread of COVID-19, but the releases did not include activists, opposition leaders, human rights defenders, or journalists.

Three executions in 2017 marked the first uses of the death penalty since 2010, and another three men were put to death in 2019. UN special rapporteurs and experts have raised concerns that individuals sentenced to death were forced to confess under torture, among other flaws in their cases.

Police have been targeted in small bombings and armed attacks in recent years, though no major incidents were reported in 2019 or 2020.

**F4** 0-4 pts

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

Women enjoy legal equality on some issues, and gender-based discrimination in employment is prohibited, but discrimination is common in practice.

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

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<th>G1</th>
<th>0-4 pts</th>
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<td>Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?</td>
<td>1/4</td>
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Authorities sometimes 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.

A contact-tracing mobile application promoted by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was criticized by human rights groups for its intrusive features, including centralized, real-time location tracking; the app was mandatory for those ordered to self-isolate.

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<th>G2</th>
<th>0-4 pts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?</td>
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Although registered businesses are largely free to operate, obtaining approval can be difficult in practice. 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 |

Personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and child custody are governed by a 2017 unified family law applying to both Sunni and Shiite Muslim families. The law’s provisions are based on Sharia (Islamic law) principles that put women at a disadvantage on many topics.

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

| 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 significant steps to combat human trafficking in recent years, but its enforcement efforts focus mainly on sex trafficking rather than forced labor, according to the US State Department.

Migrant workers reportedly accounted for a disproportionate share of COVID-19 cases in 2020. While the government made efforts to ensure less crowded temporary accommodations for some and encouraged voluntary repatriation for others, migrants who lost their jobs often faced eviction, denial of services, or deportation. Migrant workers also received fewer emergency benefits than citizens.
Revenues from oil and gas exports are used to fund public employment and services that benefit all citizens, but access to public-sector jobs and promotion opportunities often depends on one’s social and sectarian background and personal connections.

Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

12 / 100  Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

29 / 100  Not Free

Other Years

2020

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