Bahrain

PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 28 / 30
(o=BEST, 30=WORST)

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT: 37 / 40
(o=BEST, 40=WORST)

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT: 22 / 30
(o=BEST, 30=WORST)

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE: 87 / 100
(o=BEST, 100=WORST)

QUICK FACTS

Population: 1,412,299

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 91.0%

Overview
Media houses and professionals operate in a highly restricted environment, and conditions for press freedom did not change significantly in 2015.

**Key Developments**

- New arrests and prosecutions of media professionals were reported during the year, and threats, intimidation, and harassment also continued.

- According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, there were five journalists in prison as of December.

- In February, authorities closed the Al-Arab television station just hours after it began operating because the outlet aired an interview with an official from the opposition group Al-Wefaq.

**Legal Environment: 28 / 30**

Although the constitution guarantees freedoms of expression and the press, the government uses the 2002 Press Law to restrict the rights of the media. The Press Law allows up to five years’ imprisonment for publishing criticism of Islam or the king, inciting actions that undermine state security, or advocating a change in government. Journalists may be fined up to 2,000 Bahraini dinars ($5,300) for a list of 14 other offenses. Libel, slander, and “divulging secrets” are criminal offenses punishable by terms of no more than two years in prison or a fine of no more than 200 Bahraini dinars ($530). The government also uses counterterrorism legislation to curtail the activities of opposition groups and restrict freedom of expression. In 2014, the government amended the penal code to specify a prison sentence of one to seven years and a fine of up
to 10,000 Bahraini dinars ($26,500) for anyone who publicly insults Bahrain’s king, flag, or national emblem.

There is no law guaranteeing freedom of information. The Information Affairs Authority (IAA) has the power to censor and prevent the distribution of local and foreign publications, close newspapers through court proceedings, ban books and films, block websites, and prosecute individuals. Under the 2002 Telecommunications Law, the government has considerable authority to regulate internet activity. All websites are required to register with the IAA, and religious and political content is heavily censored. Website administrators are responsible for all content posted on their sites and are subject to the same libel laws as print journalists.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, there were five reporters behind bars as of December 2015. Some, including photographer Ahmed Humaidan, remained subject to highly restrictive conditions, barred from visitation by family members.

**Political Environment: 37 / 40**

Prior to the protests of 2011, the Bahraini media’s coverage of news and politics was more critical and independent than in most other Gulf countries. Nonetheless, newspapers tended to avoid covering “sensitive” issues such as sectarian tensions, relations with surrounding countries, government corruption, demonstrations, and human rights violations. After the protests erupted in early 2011, media outlets and individual journalists came under increased pressure from the government. Media workers have reported being contacted directly by government representatives and warned not to report on subjects related to the prodemocracy demonstrations or other sensitive issues. Most domestic opposition publications have been shut down. Some, such as
*Al-Wasat*, were eventually reopened, but they remain targets of legal harassment and public intimidation.

In February, authorities closed the Manama-based television station Al-Arab just hours after it began operating because the outlet aired an interview with a leading official from the opposition group Al-Wefaq. Al-Waleed Bin Talal, a member of the Saudi ruling family, was the owner of the outlet, which employed more than 200 people.

When reporting on the arrests of journalists and activists, the mainstream media typically adhere to the accounts given in official press releases. One exception is *Al-Wasat*, which tends to provide more thorough coverage. *Al-Wasat* continued to face pressure from Bahraini authorities in 2015, facing a temporary suspension in August due to allegations that it had violated the nation’s press law by publishing false news.

Progovernment media sometimes engage in misinformation. A 2014 report from Bahrain Watch found 25 instances from 2011 through 2013 in which the Bahraini press had simply invented quotations from foreign officials to support government positions. For example, in October 2013, the sister papers *Akhbar al-Khaleej* and *Gulf Daily News* falsely quoted a former U.S. general as saying that antigovernment protests in Bahrain were instigated by Iran and formed part of an American conspiracy.

The only alternative space for public expression in Bahrain is online. However, the internet is closely monitored, with the government devoting considerable resources to surveillance and cybersecurity. Various opposition publications have survived on the web but are forced to operate clandestinely from outside the country. Through orders to internet service providers (ISPs), the government blocks thousands of websites, many of which are targeted for their politically sensitive content. Internet platforms used for video streaming or for holding online seminars are blocked, as are the sites of human rights groups.
operating within Bahrain. Because the mainstream press self-censors, bloggers and microbloggers have become more active to fill the void; many face government scrutiny as a result. Online critics of the Bahraini government’s support of the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, launched in 2015, have faced punitive measures.

Media workers have consistently faced difficulty covering antigovernment protests, and can face arrest or violence in the course of reporting. In November, photojournalist Sayed Ahmed al-Mousawi faced terrorism charges in court after covering antigovernment protests. He received a 10-year prison sentence and was stripped of his citizenship. Separately, in a mass court decision in February, four journalists were among a total of 72 Bahrainis stripped of their citizenship on questionable allegations of supporting terrorism.

In October, security forces threatened photographer Mohammed Al-Oraibi with arrest if he did not agree to cooperate as an informant. Al-Oraibi had been arrested in 2014, and had reported being tortured while in custody. Separately, authorities arbitrarily detained internationally renowned photographer Sayed Baqer Al-Kamel in December, but released him after two days.

The government has restricted foreign media access in recent years, particularly during sensitive periods like the anniversary of the landmark 2011 protests and the country’s Formula One Grand Prix. Many journalists have been denied entry, and several have been deported for covering antigovernment protests in the past. Authorities barred Nicolas Kristof, a columnist for the *New York Times*, from entering the country to cover the 2015 session of the Manama Dialogue, an annual meeting of officials from the Gulf countries.
**Economic Environment: 22 / 30**

Bahrain hosts six privately owned daily newspapers, four in Arabic and two in English. While some of these papers can be critical of the government, only *Al-Wasat* is considered independent of government influence; its editors nevertheless practice self-censorship. The government does not own any newspapers, but the IAA maintains significant control over private publications. Newspapers rely heavily on advertising revenue to sustain their operations and often tailor coverage to avoid offending advertisers that do not want their businesses associated with critical reporting.

The government maintains a monopoly on domestic broadcast media. Private broadcasting licenses are not awarded despite continued interest from media owners. Foreign radio and television broadcasts are generally accessible without state interference, and the majority of households have access to satellite stations. Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya, which is based in the United Arab Emirates, remain the main sources of news in Bahrain. The internet is also widely used as a news and information source. Some 93 percent of Bahrain’s population accessed the internet in 2015.