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U.S. Department of State

Bahrain Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997

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BAHRAIN

Bahrain is a hereditary emirate with few democratic institutions and no political parties. The Al-Khalifa extended family has ruled Bahrain since the late 18th century and dominates its society and government. The Constitution confirms the Amir as hereditary ruler. The current Amir, Shaikh Isa Bin Sulman Al Khalifa, governs Bahrain with the assistance of a younger brother as Prime Minister, the Amir's son as Crown Prince, and an appointed cabinet of ministers. In 1975 the Government suspended some provisions of the 1973 Constitution, including those articles relating to the National Assembly, which was disbanded and never reconstituted. Citizens belong to the Shi'a and Sunni sects of Islam, with the Shi'a comprising over two thirds of the indigenous population. The Sunnis predominate because the ruling family is Sunni and is supported by the armed forces, the security service, and powerful Sunni and Shi'a merchant families. Bahrain experienced continued political unrest during the year, including bomb and arson attacks on public and private property. There are few judicial checks on the actions of the Amir and his government, and the courts are subject to government pressure.

The Ministry of Interior is responsible for public security. It controls the public security force (police) and the extensive security service, which are responsible for maintaining internal order. The Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) is responsible for defending against external threats. It did not play a role in internal security during the year. Security forces committed serious human rights abuses.

Bahrain has a mixed economy, with government domination of many basic industries, including the important oil and aluminum industries. Possessing limited oil and gas reserves, Bahrain is intensifying efforts to diversify its economic base companies doing business in banking, financial services, oil field

services, and light manufacturing. The Government has used its modest oil revenues to build an advanced transportation and telecommunications infrastructure. Bahrain has become a regional financial and business center. Tourism, particularly via the causeway linking Bahrain to Saudi Arabia, is also a significant source of income.

The country's human rights situation improved slightly during the year due to a decrease in the level of political unrest; however, there was no change in the Government's human rights practices and numerous serious problems remain. The main problems continue to include the denial of the right of citizens to change their government; political and other extrajudicial killings; torture; arbitrary arrest; incommunicado and prolonged detention; involuntary exile; limitations on or the denial of the right to a fair public trial, especially in the security court; infringements on citizens' right to privacy; and restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, and worker rights. The Government imposes some limits on freedom of religion and movement. Domestic violence against women and discrimination based on sex, religion, and ethnicity remain problems.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

On June 8, 25-year-old Abdul Zahra Ibrahim Abdullah, from the village of Sanabis, reportedly died from mistreatment he received during 2 days of detention. Although authorities cited ill health as the cause of death, there was no public inquiry into the allegations that he died from torture.

There were no investigations or prosecutions of any security forces personnel for alleged extrajudicial killings committed in earlier years.

Two Asian laborers died on July 5 when antigovernment protesters set fire to a store in the village of Sitra. On June 13, four Asian laborers died when a fire destroyed the business establishment directly below their residence. Credible sources consider it likely that antigovernment arsonists were responsible for the attack.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment are prohibited by law; however, there are credible reports that prisoners often are beaten, both on the soles of their feet and about the face and head, burned with cigarettes, forced to endure long periods without sleep, and in some cases subjected to electrical shocks. The Government has difficulty in rebutting allegations of torture and of other cruel, inhuman, or degrading practices because it permits incommunicado detention and detention without trial. There were no known instances of authorities being punished for human rights abuses committed either during the year or in any previous year.

Opposition and human rights groups allege that the security forces sometimes threaten female detainees with rape and inflict other forms of sexual abuse and harassment on them while they are in custody. These allegations are difficult either to confirm or deny.

On several occasions, security forces used force, including tear gas, to disperse public gatherings (see Section 2.b.).

At the Government's invitation, the ICRC continued the series of visits to prisons that it started in late 1996. The ICRC, by choice of working methods, traditionally does not make any of its findings public. Prisons are overcrowded, however the prison situation has significantly improved with the visits of the International Committees of the Red Cross (ICRC.) Local defense attorneys report that their clients are receiving improved care and treatment. In addition, the release of prisoners and the reduced number of arrest has helped to ease overcrowding.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

Arbitrary arrest and detention are problems. The Constitution states that "no person shall be arrested, detained, imprisoned, searched or compelled to reside in a specified place...except in accordance with the provisions of the law and under the supervision of the judicial authorities." In practice, however, in matters regarding arrest, detention, or exile, the 1974 State Security Act takes precedence. Under the State Security Act, persons may be detained for up to 3 years without trial for engaging in activities or making statements regarded as a threat to the broadly defined concepts of national harmony and security and the Government continued arbitrarily to arrest and detain citizens. The scope of the State Security Act extends to any case involving arson, explosions, or attacks on persons at their place of employment or because of the nature of their work. Detainees have the right to appeal such detentions after a period of 3 months and, if the appeal is denied, every 6 months thereafter from the date of the original detention.

Government security forces used the State Security Act regularly during the year to detain persons believed by the Government to be engaging in antigovernment activities, as well as those attempting to exercise their rights of free speech, association, or other rights deemed to be in opposition to the Government. Activities that also can lead to detention, questioning, warning, or arrest by the security forces include: membership in illegal organizations or those deemed subversive; painting antigovernment slogans on walls; joining antigovernment demonstrations (see Section 2.b.); possessing or circulating antigovernment writings; preaching sermons considered by the Government to have an antigovernment political tone; and harboring or associating with persons committing such acts.

In addition to overseeing the security service and police, the Ministry of Interior also controls the Office of the Public Prosecutor, whose officers initially determine whether sufficient evidence exists to continue to hold a prisoner in investigative detention. The Ministry is responsible for all aspects of prison administration. In the early stages of detention, prisoners and their attorneys have no recourse to any authority outside the Ministry of Interior. The authorities rarely permit visits to inmates who are incarcerated for security-related offenses and such prisoners may be held incommunicado for months, sometimes years. Prisoners detained for criminal offenses, however, generally may receive visits from family members, usually once a month.

Security forces are estimated to have held over 1,300 people in detention for security-related offenses during the year, including some who were arrested, released, and then arrested again. At year's end, as many as 1,100 persons still remained in detention. The Government pardoned as many as 200 persons detained in connection with antigovernment activities.

Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, a prominent Shi'a cleric, longtime opposition activist, and one of the original 14 signers of the 1994 petition to the Amir calling for the restoration of the National Assembly, was arrested in January 1996 and remained in custody throughout 1997. Although he is reportedly accused

by the Government of committing a wide variety of security-related crimes, including treason, Al-Jamri has not been brought to trial or publicly charged with any crime. Several other Shi'a clerics associated with Al-Jamri, Abdul Wahab Hussein, Hassan Mushaimaa, Hassan Sultan, Ali Bin Ahmed Al-Jedhafi, Haji Hassan Jarallah, and Ali Mirza Al-Nachas also were arrested at the same time as Al-Jamri and remain in jail. On June 29, the Government announced that Al-Nachas died in detention of natural causes.

While the authorities reserve the right to use exile and the revocation of citizenship to punish individuals suspected, or convicted, of antigovernment activity, there were no reports of exile orders issued during the year. In the past, the Government has revoked the citizenship of persons it considered security threats. The Government considers such persons to have forfeited their nationality under the Citizenship Act of 1963 because they accepted foreign citizenship or passports, or engaged in antigovernment activities abroad. Bahraini emigre groups and their local contacts have challenged this practice, arguing that the Government's revocation of citizenship without due process violates the Constitution. According to the emigre groups, as many as 500 citizens continue to live in exile. This total includes both those prohibited from returning to Bahrain and their family members who voluntarily live abroad with them.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, the courts are subject to government pressure regarding sentencing and appeals.

The civil and criminal legal system consists of a complex mix of courts, based on diverse legal sources including Sunni and Shi'a Shari'a (Islamic law), tribal law, and other civil codes and regulations. The 1974 State Security Act created a separate, closed security court system which has jurisdiction in cases of alleged antigovernment activity.

The Bahrain Defense Force maintains a separate court system for military personnel accused of offenses under the Military Code of Justice. Military courts do not review cases involving civilian criminal or security offenses.

Defense attorneys are appointed by the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs. Some attorneys and family members involved in politically sensitive criminal cases complain that the Government interferes with court proceedings to influence the outcome or to prevent judgments from being carried out. There are periodic allegations of corruption in the judicial system.

In past cases, the Amir, the Prime Minister, and other senior government officials all have lost civil cases brought against them by private citizens. The court-ordered judgments, however, are not always implemented expeditiously. Members of the ruling Al Khalifa family are well represented in the judiciary and do not generally excuse themselves from cases involving the interests of the Government.

A person arrested may be tried in an ordinary criminal court or, if recommended by the prosecution, in the Security Court. Ordinary civil or criminal trial procedures provide for an open trial, the right to counsel (with legal aid available when necessary), and the right to appeal. Criminal court proceedings generally do not appear to discriminate against women, children, or minority groups. However, there is credible evidence that persons accused of antigovernment crimes and tried in the criminal courts were denied fair trials. The accused are not permitted to speak with an attorney until their appearance before the judge at the preliminary hearing. Trials in the criminal courts for antigovernment activities were held in secret.

Security cases are tried in secret by the Supreme Court of Appeals, sitting as the Security Court. Family members are usually not permitted in the court until the final verdict is rendered. Procedures in the security courts do not provide for even the most basic safeguards. The Security Court is exempt from adhering to the procedural protections of the Penal Code. Defendants may be represented by counsel but seldom see their attorneys before the actual day of arraignment. Convictions may be based solely on confessions and police evidence or testimony that may be introduced in secret. The defense cannot review the evidence against the defendant prior to trial proceedings. Defense lawyers complain that they rarely are given sufficient time to develop witnesses. There is no right to judicial review of the legality of arrests. There is no judicial appeal of a State Security Court verdict, but the defendant may request clemency from the Amir. In March the Security Court tried 59 individuals on charges of being members of a terrorist organization aimed at overthrowing the Government. The Security Court ultimately convicted 33 individuals and acquitted 24.

The number of political prisoners is difficult to determine because the Government does not release data on security cases, such cases are not tried in open court, and visits to prisoners convicted of security offenses are strictly restricted. The Government denies that there are any political prisoners, and claims that all inmates incarcerated for committing security offenses were convicted properly of subversive acts such as espionage, espousing or committing violence, or belonging to terrorist organizations.

In accordance with tradition, the Government releases and grants amnesty to some prisoners, including individuals imprisoned for political activities, on major holidays. The Government pardoned over 150 prisoners in April during the Eid Al-Adha holiday.

f. Arbitrary Interference With Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Under the law, the Ministry of Interior is empowered to authorize entry into private premises without specific judicial intervention. Domestic and international telephone calls and correspondence are subject to monitoring. Police informer networks are extensive and sophisticated.

During the year, the Government frequently infringed on citizens' right to privacy, using illegal searches and arbitrary arrests as tactics to control political unrest. Security forces frequently raided villages at night, entered private homes without warrants, and took into custody residents who were suspected of either participating in or having information regarding antigovernment activities. While conducting these raids, security forces frequently confiscated, damaged, or destroyed personal property, for which owners were not compensated by the Government. Security forces also frequently set up checkpoints at the entrances to villages, requiring vehicle searches and proof of identity from anyone seeking to enter or exit. Whenever possible, the Government jams either in whole or in part foreign broadcasts that carry antigovernment programming or commentary. A government-controlled proxy prohibits user access to Internet sites considered to be antigovernment or anti-Islamic (see Section 2.a.).

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

Although the Constitution provides for the right "to express and propagate opinions," citizens are not, in practice, free to express their public opposition to the Government in speech or writing. Press criticism of ruling family personalities and of government policy regarding certain sensitive subjects--such as sectarian unrest and the dispute with Qatar over the Hawar Islands--are strictly prohibited. However, local press coverage and commentary on international issues is open, and discussion of local economic and commercial issues is also relatively unrestricted. Many individuals express critical opinions openly

on domestic political and social issues in private settings but do not do so to leading government officials or in public forums.

The Information Ministry exercises sweeping control over all local media. Newspapers are privately owned, but they routinely exercise self-censorship of stories on sensitive topics. The Government does not condone unfavorable coverage of its domestic policies by the international media and has occasionally revoked the press credentials of offending journalists. Since the Ministry also sponsors foreign journalists' residence permits, this action can lead to deportation. In July the Government revoked the press credentials of a resident Deutche Presse-Agentur correspondent and ordered her out of the country on grounds that she had endangered the country's national security by filing an unsubstantiated report on local political developments. The Government generally afforded foreign journalists access to the country and did not limit their contacts on the island.

The State owns and operates all radio and television stations. Radio and television broadcasts in Arabic and Farsi from neighboring countries and Egypt can be received without interference. However, international news services, including the Associated Press, United Press International, and Agence France Presse, frequently complain about press restrictions. The Cable News Network is available on a 24-hour basis by subscription and the British Broadcasting Corporation world news service is carried on a local channel 24 hours a day free of charge. However, the Government generally jams wholly or partially foreign broadcasts that carry antigovernment programming or commentary (see Section 1.f.).

Many senior government officials, ruling family members, and major hotels use satellite dishes to receive international broadcasts, as do well-to-do private citizens. The Ministry of Information closely controls access to satellite dishes, and the importation or installation of dishes without prior government approval is illegal.

Access to the Internet is provided through the National Telephone Company (BATELCO). A government-controlled proxy prohibits user access to sites considered to be antigovernment or anti-Islamic; E-mail access to information is unimpeded, although it may be subject to monitoring (see Section 1.f.).

Although there are no formal regulations limiting academic freedom, in practice academics try to avoid contentious political issues. University hiring and admissions policies appear to favor Sunnis and others who are assumed to be supportive of the Government, rather than focus on professional experience and academic qualifications.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Despite the Constitution's provision for the right of free assembly, the Government prohibits all public political demonstrations and meetings and controls religious gatherings that may take on political overtones. Permits are required for most other public gatherings and permission is not routinely granted. Unauthorized public gatherings of more than five persons are prohibited by law. The Government monitors gatherings that might take on a political tone and frequently disperses such meetings.

On numerous occasions during the year, the security forces used force, including tear gas, to disperse gatherings during which protesters called for the reestablishment of an elected parliament and the release of prisoners, objected to Al-Khalifa rule, denounced police brutality, protested foreigners in the security forces and in the labor force, or demanded increased employment opportunities. After each of these incidents, suspected leaders and active participants were arrested.

The Constitution provides for the right of free association; however, the Government restricts freedom of association. The Government prohibits political parties and organizations. Some professional societies and social/sports clubs have traditionally served as forums for discreet political discussion, but they are restricted by law from engaging in political activity. Only the Bahraini Bar Association is exempt from the regulations that require that the constitution of all associations include a commitment to refrain from political activity. The Bar Association successfully argued that a lawyer's professional duties may require certain political actions, such as interpreting legislation or participating in a politically sensitive trial. Other organized discussions and meetings are still actively discouraged.

c. Freedom of Religion

Islam is the state religion and the population is overwhelmingly Muslim. However, Christians and other non-Muslims, including Jews, Hindus, and Baha'is are free to practice their religion, maintain their own places of worship, and display the symbols of their religion. Bibles and other Christian publications are displayed and sold openly in local bookstores which also sell Islamic and other religious literature. Small groups worship in their homes. Notables from virtually every religion and denomination visit Bahrain and frequently meet with government and civic leaders. Religious tracts of all Islamic sects, cassettes of sermons delivered by Muslim preachers from other countries, and publications of other religions are readily available.

Proselytizing by non-Muslims is discouraged, anti-Islamic writings are prohibited, and conversions from Islam to other religions, while not illegal, are not well tolerated by society.

Both Sunni and Shi'a are subject to governmental control and monitoring. During the year, the Government frequently closed mosques and ma'tams (Shi'a community centers) in certain locations to prevent religious leaders from delivering political speeches during their Friday prayers and sermons. The High Council for Islamic Affairs is charged with review and approval of all clerical appointments within both the Sunni and Shi'a communities and maintains program oversight for all citizens studying religion abroad. Public religious events, most notably the large annual commemorative marches by Shi'a, are permitted but are closely watched by the police. There are no restrictions on the number of citizens permitted to make pilgrimages to Shi'a shrines and holy sites in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. However, due to conditions in Iraq, very few citizens make pilgrimages there. The Government monitors travel to Iran and scrutinizes carefully those who choose to pursue religious study there. Travel to Iran for pilgrimages, business trips, tourism, and family visits, however, is not forbidden.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

Citizens are free to move within the country and change their place of residence or work. Passports, however, may be denied on political grounds. Approximately 3 percent of the indigenous population, the "bidoon," or stateless persons, mostly Persian-origin Shi'a, do not have passports and cannot readily obtain them, although they may be given travel documents as Bahraini residents (see section 5). The Government occasionally grants citizenship to resident non-Bahrainis who are Sunni Muslims, mostly from the Arabian peninsula and Egypt.

Citizens living abroad who are suspected of political or criminal offenses may face arrest and trial upon return to Bahrain. Under the 1963 Citizenship Law, the Government may reject applications to obtain or renew passports for reasonable cause, but the applicant has the right to appeal such decisions before the High Civil Court. The Government has also issued temporary passports, good for one trip within a year, to individuals whose travel it wishes to control or whose claim to Bahraini nationality is questionable. Noncitizen residents, including bidoon of Iranian origin, may also obtain Bahraini laissez passers (travel

documents), usually valid for 2 years and renewable at Bahraini embassies overseas. Laissez passer holders also require visas to reenter Bahrain.

Bahrain does not usually accept refugees due to its small size and limited resources. In practice, however, refugees who arrive in Bahrain are not repatriated to countries from which they have fled. Many Iranian emigres who fled Iran after the Iranian Revolution have been granted permission to remain in Bahrain, but they have not been granted citizenship. Although the Government cooperates with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees to the maximum extent possible, it has not formulated a formal policy regarding refugees, asylees, or first asylum.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Citizens do not have the right or ability peacefully to change their government or their political system, and political activity is strictly controlled by the Government. Since the dissolution of the National Assembly in 1975, there have been no formal democratic political institutions. The Prime Minister makes all appointments to the Cabinet. All other government positions are filled by the relevant ministries. About one-third of the cabinet ministers are Shi'a Muslim, although they do not hold security-related offices. The ordinary citizen may attempt to influence government decisions through submission of personal written petitions and informal contact with senior officials, including appeals to the Amir, the Prime Minister, and other officials at their regularly scheduled public audiences, called majlises.

In 1992 the Amir established by decree a Consultative Council (Majlis Al-Shura). Its 40 members are divided evenly between Sunni and Shi'a and are appointed by the Amir. They are selected to represent major constituent groups, including representatives from the business, labor, professional, and religious communities. There are no members of the ruling Al-Khalifa family or religious extremists in the Majlis. In addition to legislation submitted for its review by the Cabinet, the Majlis also may initiate debate independently on non-political issues. The Majlis may also summon cabinet ministers to answer questions, but its recommendations are not binding on the Government. The Majlis held its fifth session from October 1996 to May and began a new session on October 7.

In 1997 the Majlis debated a number of contentious social and economic issues, including unemployment, privatization, and delivery of social services, drafting proposals on these and other subjects for government consideration. According to the Speaker of the Majlis, the Government responded favorably to the majority of the Majlis' recommendations by incorporating them into legislation or by taking other appropriate actions. In September the Consultative Council publicly rejected a European Parliament resolution that criticized the human rights situation in Bahrain.

There are no women either in the Consultative Council or at the ministerial levels of government. The majority of women who choose to work in government are in a support capacity and only a few have attained senior positions within their respective ministries or agencies.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There are no local human rights organizations. Because of the restrictions on freedom of association and expression, any independent, domestically-based investigation or public criticism of the Government's human rights policies faces major obstacles. A number of groups based abroad report on alleged human rights violations. These include the Damascus-based Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Bahrain, the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement, the Beirut-based Islamic Front for the

Liberation of Bahrain, and the Copenhagen-based Bahrain Human Rights Organization, formerly the Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners in Bahrain. These groups are composed of small numbers of emigres living in self-imposed exile and reportedly receive funding from sources hostile to the Government. They are viewed by many local observers as espousing a political, rather than a purely human rights, agenda.

The Government maintains that it is not opposed to visits by bona fide human rights organizations. In practice, however, international human rights organizations have found it difficult to conduct activities in Bahrain. In October 1996 the Government invited the ICRC to undertake visits to the country's prisons. The visits continued throughout 1997 and, while the ICRC has maintained its usual standards of confidentiality regarding its findings, credible reports indicate that conditions throughout the penal system have improved.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution states that "liberty, equality, security, tranquillity, education, social solidarity, and equal opportunities for citizens shall be pillars of society assured by the State." It further states that every citizen shall have the right to medical care, welfare, education, property, capital, and work. In practice, however, these rights are unevenly protected, depending on the individual's social status, ethnicity, or sex.

Women

Violence against women occurs, but incidents are usually kept within the family. In general there is little public attention to, or discussion of violence against women. No government policies explicitly address violence against women. Women's groups and health care professionals state that spouse abuse is common, particularly in poorer communities. There are very few known instances of women seeking legal redress for violence. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the courts are not receptive to such cases.

Cases are not uncommon in which foreign women working as domestic workers are beaten or sexually abused. Numerous cases have been reported to local embassies and the police. Most victims, however, are too intimidated to sue their employers. Those who do so appear to be received sympathetically in the courts.

Islamic law (Shari'a) governs the legal rights of women. Specific rights vary according to Shi'a or Sunni interpretations of Islamic law, as determined by the individual's faith, or by the court in which various contracts, including marriage, have been made.

While both Shi'a and Sunni women have the right to initiate a divorce, religious courts may refuse the request. Although local religious courts may grant a divorce to Shi'a women in routine cases, occasionally Shi'a women seeking divorce under unusual circumstances must travel abroad to seek a higher ranking opinion than is available in the country. Women of either sect may own and inherit property and may represent themselves in all public and legal matters. In the absence of a direct male heir, Shi'a women may inherit all property. In contrast, Sunni women--in the absence of a direct male heir--inherit only a portion; the balance is divided among brothers, uncles, and male cousins of the deceased.

In the event of divorce, the courts routinely grant Shi'a and Sunni women custody of daughters under the age of 9 and sons under age 7, although custody usually reverts to the father once the children reach those ages. In all circumstances except mental incapacitation, the father, regardless of custody, retains

the right to make certain legal decisions for his children such as guardianship of any property belonging to the child until the child reaches legal age. A non-Bahraini woman automatically loses custody of her children if she divorces their Bahraini father. Women may obtain passports and leave the country without the permission of the male head of the household. Women are free to work outside the home, to drive cars without escorts, to wear the clothing of their choice, and have increasingly taken jobs previously reserved for men. The Labor Law does not discriminate against women; however, in practice, there is discrimination in the workplace, including inequality of wages and denial of opportunity for advancement. Women constitute over 20 percent of the work force. The Government has encouraged the hiring of women, enacted special laws to promote female entry into the work force, and is a leading employer of women. The Labor Law does not recognize the concept of equal pay for equal work, and women are generally paid less than men. Generally, women work outside the home during the years between secondary school or university and marriage. Some women complain that admissions policies at the National University are aimed at increasing the number of male students at the expense of qualified female applicants, especially Shi'a women. Nevertheless, women make up the majority of students at the country's universities.

There are women's organizations that seek to improve the status of women under both civil and Islamic law. Some women have expressed the view that, despite their participation in the work force, women's rights are not significantly advancing and that much of the lack of progress is due to the influence of Islamic religious traditionalists. Other women, however, desire a return to more traditional values and support calls for a return to traditional Islamic patterns of social behavior.

Children

The Government has often stated its commitment to the protection of children's rights and welfare within the social and religious framework of this traditional society. It honors this commitment through enforcement of its civil and criminal laws and extensive social welfare network. Public education for children below the age of 15 is free. While the Constitution calls for compulsory education at the primary levels, authorities do not enforce attendance. Limited medical services for infants and pre-adolescents are provided free of charge.

The social status of children is shaped by tradition and religion to a greater extent than by civil law. Public discussion of child abuse is rare, and the preference of the authorities always has been to leave such matters within the purview of the family or religious groups. The authorities actively enforce the laws against prostitution, including child prostitution, procuring, and pimping. Violators are dealt with harshly and can be imprisoned, or if non-Bahraini, deported. In some cases, authorities reportedly will return children arrested for prostitution and other nonpolitical crimes to their families rather than prosecute them, especially for first offenses. Some legal experts have called on the Government to establish a separate juvenile court. Other citizens, however, insist that the protection of children is a religious, not a secular, function and oppose greater government involvement. Independent and quasi-governmental organizations such as the Bahraini Society for the Protection of Children and the Mother and Child Welfare Society play an active part in protecting children by providing counseling, legal assistance, advice, and, in some cases, shelter and financial support to distressed children and families.

Detentions and arrests of juveniles, some as young as 7 years old, were numerous during the year in connection with the political unrest. These children were generally released without charges within several days of their arrests. However, those juveniles charged with security offenses received the same treatment as adult prisoners, i.e., incommunicado detention and trial before a State Security Court.

People with Disabilities:

The law protects the rights of people with disabilities and a variety of governmental, quasi-governmental, and religious institutions are mandated to support and protect disabled persons. The regional (Arabian Gulf) Center for the Treatment of the Blind is headquartered in Bahrain and a similar Center for the Education of Deaf Children was established in 1994. Society tends to view people with disabilities as special cases in need of protection rather than as fully functioning members of society. Nonetheless, the Government is required by law to provide vocational training for disabled persons wishing to work and maintains a list of certified, trained disabled persons. The Labor Law of 1976 also requires that any employer of over 100 people must engage at least 2 percent of its employees from the Government's list of disabled workers. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs works actively to place people with disabilities in public sector jobs, such as in the