

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Bahrain

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The popular uprisings that broke out across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 also reached Bahrain. Widespread, peaceful protests began on February 14, when prodemocracy activists—inspired by successful demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia and mainly hailing from the economically disadvantaged Shiite majority—called for a “Day of Rage.” The government responded brutally to the protest movement, declaring martial law in March and bringing in military and security forces from regional allies, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The media were subject to violent suppression, as journalists, photographers, and bloggers covering the demonstrations faced beatings, arrest, and torture, leading to the death of two journalists and a dramatic decline in overall press freedom.

Despite constitutional protections guaranteeing freedom of expression and of the press, the government continued to use the 2002 Press Law to restrict the rights of the media in 2011. 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 dinars (\$5,300) for a list of 14 other offenses. In 2008, the appointed upper chamber of the National Assembly proposed amendments to reform the harshest provisions of the Press Law, but conservatives in the elected lower chamber have thus far refused to consider the proposals.

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. In addition to press and defamation laws, the government frequently uses counterterrorism legislation to curtail the activities of opposition groups and restrict freedom of expression.

Prior to the protests of 2011, the Bahraini media’s coverage of news and politics was more critical and independent than reporting 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. As the protests erupted in early 2011, media outlets and individual journalists came under increased legal pressure from the government.

In April, the independent daily *Al-Wasat* was shut down by security forces, and its editors, including cofounder and editor in chief Mansour al-Jamri, were forced to resign after allegedly publishing “false information” and “inciting the public” in their coverage of the prodemocracy demonstrations. When *Al-Wasat* reopened in August, its editorial staff had been replaced and ordered to adhere to state-imposed restrictions. However, al-Jamri was restored to his position as editor in chief by *Al-Wasat*’s board of directors. In October, al-Jamri and

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

84

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

28

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

35

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

21

fellow editor Walid Nuwayhid, along with two colleagues, were fined \$2,650 for “publishing news that defamed the image of Bahrain abroad.” The journalists claimed that the articles in question had been planted by Saudi Arabia as a means to discredit them. In addition to the continued harassment of *Al-Wasat*-affiliated journalists, several other journalists and photographers were arrested, charged, or fined during the year for covering the demonstrations or working for foreign news organizations. In November, journalist Reem Khalifa faced defamation charges as part of the regime’s systematic campaign against its critics.

Aside from such legal harassment, journalists were subjected to arrests, beatings, and torture for their writings about the unrest. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), two members of the media were killed in connection with their work in 2011, the first such deaths in Bahrain since CPJ began keeping statistics in 1992. On April 2, Zakariya Rashid Hassan al-Ashiri, who moderated and wrote for a local news website in Al-Dair, was arrested on charges of inciting hatred and spreading false information. On April 9, he died in custody, allegedly after being tortured. On April 12, Abdul Kareem Fakhrawi, a cofounder of *Al-Wasat*, was reportedly tortured to death while in the custody of the Bahrain National Security Agency (BNSA). Several days earlier, he had responded to a summons to answer charges of “deliberate news fabrication.” In other cases of violence against journalists, in May, Nazeeha Saeed, a Bahraini correspondent for France 24, was detained, beaten, and tortured for allegedly participating in demonstrations that she was covering. Bahrain’s Interior Ministry announced an investigation into the incident, but no report had been issued by year’s end. In September, Reuters reporter Hamad Mohamed Iqbal was hospitalized after being shot with rubber bullets by security forces while covering a peaceful protest in A’ali.

Several foreign journalists were either barred from entering Bahrain or ordered to leave, and many Bahraini journalists fled the country to escape prosecution. In July, a group of exiled Bahraini journalists organized the Bahrain Press Association in London to advocate on behalf of the media and the public regarding human rights violations. These violations include direct infringements on the personal safety of journalists, the targeting of private media organizations, attempts to impose the state media’s version of events, and the fabrication of charges against independent organizations and journalists.

There are six privately owned daily newspapers, four in Arabic and two in English. While several of these newspapers are critical of the government, only two, *Al-Wasat* and *Al-Waqt*, are considered truly independent. Although the government does not own any newspapers, the IAA maintains significant control over private publications. Media workers have reported being contacted directly by government representatives and warned not to report on subjects related to the prodemocracy demonstrations or sectarianism. Newspapers rely heavily on advertising revenue to sustain their operations, and often practice self-censorship to avoid offending advertisers that do not want their businesses associated with critical reporting. The government maintains a monopoly on broadcast media, allowing the regime to frame the official narrative of the February 2011 uprising and define it as a “sectarian conflict.” Private operating licenses are not awarded despite continued interest from media owners. However, there is some room for free expression on television call-in shows. Radio and television broadcasts are generally received without interference, and the majority of households have access to satellite stations; Qatar’s Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, based in the United Arab Emirates, remain Bahraini citizens’ main sources of news.

Approximately 77 percent of Bahrain’s population accessed the internet in 2011. 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. The government is a major shareholder in Batelco, the country’s principal telecommunications company. Batelco monitors e-mail and filters internet content by routing traffic through proxy or cache servers. Website administrators are responsible for all content posted on their sites and are subject to the same libel laws as print journalists. In previous years, the government has filtered out thousands of websites under the pretense of

protecting citizens from pornography and other offensive material, though many of the filtered sites were reportedly targeted for their politically sensitive content. Despite restrictions on internet activity, Bahrain has a very active online community, with at least 200 blogs. However, the government has arrested individual bloggers for commenting on controversial religious and political issues.

Bloggers were also among those targeted in the crackdown that followed the February 2011 uprising. Prominent blogger and opposition activist Abduljalil al-Singace—who had been detained since August 2010—was released in early 2011, then rearrested in March. In June he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison as a result of his writings on the antigovernment protests. Al-Singace was among 21 bloggers, human rights activists, and opposition leaders who were convicted and sentenced that month; all were accused of belonging to terrorist organizations trying to overthrow the government. Bahrain Online blogger Ali Abdulemam, who was arrested in September 2010, was released from detention shortly after the protests began, and soon went missing. He was later tried in absentia and given a 15-year prison sentence. In July, the authorities arrested Hussein Ali Makki, the administrator of *Rasad News*, a chronicle of human rights violations in Bahrain. Officials reportedly took over the publication's Facebook and Twitter pages and posted antiprotest and progovernment updates. *Rasad News* opened a new Facebook page to resume its work. In December, blogger and activist Zainab al-Khawaja—the daughter of prominent imprisoned human rights activist Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, who was among the 21 convicted in June—was arrested after participating in a peaceful protest, but was released five days later.

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