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## Freedom Of The Press - Bahrain (2011)

**Status: Not Free**  
**Legal Environment: 25**  
**Political Environment: 27**  
**Economic Environment: 20**  
**Total Score: 72**

Despite constitutional protections guaranteeing freedom of expression and of the press, the government has continued to enforce the 2002 Press Law to restrict the rights of the media. The Press Law includes 17 categories of offenses and allows for up to five years imprisonment for publishing material criticizing Islam or the king, inciting actions that undermine state security, or advocating for change in the government. Journalists may be fined up to 2,000 dinars (\$5,300) for an additional 14 offenses. In 2008, the appointed upper chamber of parliament put forward proposals to reform the harshest provisions of the Press Law, but the elected lower chamber—which has a more conservative slant—has thus far refused to consider the proposed amendments. In February 2010, several members of parliament expressed support for the amendments in principle, but the suggested revisions were still pending at the end of the year.

There is no law guaranteeing freedom of information, and the Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI) has the authority 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. The government frequently invokes restrictive press laws to deter the media from criticizing government policies. In February 2010, the government pressed defamation charges against the Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, a Shiite political group with substantial parliamentary representation, for issuing statements that criticized the ruling family and other public figures. In August, the independent newspaper *Al-Wasat* reported that the information minister suspended its online audio reports after the website featured interviews with detainees who were allegedly mistreated in Jaw prison. The government also imposed restrictions on the Al-Jazeera satellite channel, and its local bureau was temporarily shut down in May after airing a broadcast on poverty in Bahrain.

In addition to press and defamation laws, the government used counterterrorism legislation to curtail the activities of opposition groups and restrict freedom of expression. In August, human rights groups warned that Bahrain's anti-terrorism law was being utilized to silence dissenting opinions in the lead-up to October parliamentary elections, and robust political debate was largely missing from all types of media during this period. In September, Bahrain's leading human rights organization was placed under administrative management by the government. This occurred after it made its headquarters available for a press conference in which family members of detained terror suspects accused the police of mistreating the prisoners, all of whom were members of Bahrain's disadvantaged Shiite minority.

The government continues to exert pressure on individual journalists and bloggers who publish controversial articles through gag orders, arrests, and physical violence. In August, Muhannad Abu Zeitoun, an editor at the progovernment newspaper *Al-Watan*, was attacked by two men who wounded his hand. Later the same month, the public prosecutor issued a gag order banning journalists from reporting on the detentions of dozens of opposition activists, including many Shiites. Among the activists targeted in the crackdown was leading blogger Abduljalil Alsingace, an opposition figure who has used his popular website as a platform for criticizing government policies aimed at marginalizing the Shiite community. In August, state security forces arrested Alsingace upon his return from London, and subjected him to physical and psychological torture for several weeks. Authorities continued to issue gag orders throughout the year, including one on March 25 that barred local media from reporting on a multimillion-dollar money-laundering scandal involving a former minister.

Despite these threats and restrictions, as well as widespread self-censorship stemming largely from a fear of legal battles over slander or false reporting, the Bahraini media's coverage of news and politics is more critical and independent than reporting in most other Gulf countries. Nonetheless, newspapers tend to avoid covering "sensitive" issues such as sectarian tensions, relations with surrounding Gulf countries, governmental corruption, demonstrations, and human rights violations. 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 MOCI maintains significant control over private publications. Newspapers, which rely heavily on advertising revenue to sustain their operations, practice self-censorship to avoid offending advertisers who do not want their businesses associated with critical reporting. The government maintains a monopoly on all broadcast media, and 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. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, based in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, respectively, remain Bahraini citizens' main sources of news.

Approximately 55 percent of Bahrain's population accessed the internet in 2010, but internet usage was subject to restrictions and government intervention. Under the 2002 Telecommunications Law, the government has considerable authority to regulate internet activity. All websites are required to register with the MOCI, 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 internet activity through proxy/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 thousands of websites annually under the pretense of protecting citizens from pornography and other offensive material; however, many of the filtered sites were reportedly targeted for their politically sensitive

content. In January 2010, the OpenNet Initiative reported that the government was filtering Twitter feeds associated with opposition activists, and the feed @FreeBahrain was temporarily blocked in early January. Despite these 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. In September 2010, authorities arrested and reportedly tortured a leading blogger, Ali Abdulemam, for allegedly disseminating "false news" through the online portal BahrainOnline.org. The portal has been censored by the Bahraini government because of its reputation as a forum for political and human rights activists.