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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Bahrain

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The media in Bahrain continued to face violent repression during 2012, as journalists, photographers, and bloggers covering ongoing antigovernment demonstrations faced beatings, arrest, and torture. Widespread, peaceful prodemocracy protests, led mainly by members of the economically and politically disadvantaged Shiite Muslim majority, had begun in February 2011, but the government cracked down brutally on the protesters and journalists, and Bahrain became one of the harshest media environments in the Middle East. Despite the government's pledge to respect human rights in response to a November 2011 report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry on the abuses earlier that year, authorities in 2012 continued to repress the media. The domestic press suffered ongoing censorship and persecution, and many foreign journalists were denied access to the kingdom to cover the first anniversary of the protests and the annual Formula One Grand Prix competition in April.

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 2012. 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. 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 dinars (\$530). 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 changes. 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.

In July 2012, writer Nabil Rajab—head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), the main domestic human rights group—was sentenced to three months in prison for libel after he posted comments on a Twitter microblog accusing the prime minister of corruption and calling for his resignation. In August, Rajab was sentenced to three years in prison for participating in demonstrations against the government. Abduljalil al-Singace, a blogger and online journalist, was sentenced to life in prison in 2011 for plotting to overthrow the regime after he wrote about the prodemocracy demonstrations. His sentence was upheld in September 2012 after an appeal. In November, Sayed Yousif al-Muhafdhah, vice president of the BCHR, was arrested while investigating an injury sustained by a bystander when security forces attacked a protest in Duraz. One month earlier, al-Muhafdhah had provided information to the UN Human Rights Council on alleged rights violations by the Bahraini government.

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.

After inviting a group of nongovernmental organizations to assess the state of freedom of expression in Bahrain in April 2012, the government reneged and

denied access to these groups later in the month. The government attributed the denial to a shift in policy that would only grant one group per week entry into the country.

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 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, and while some, such as *Al-Wasat*, were eventually reopened, they remain the targets of legal harassment and public intimidation.

The only alternative space for public expression in Bahrain is online. However, the internet is heavily monitored, with the government spending tens of millions of dollars on surveillance and cybersecurity. Various opposition publications have survived on the web but are forced to operate clandestinely from outside the country. The government is a major shareholder in Batelco, the country's principal telecommunications company, which monitors e-mail and filters internet content by routing traffic through proxy or cache servers. The government blocks 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. Internet platforms used for video streaming or for holding online seminars are blocked, as are the sites of human rights groups operating within Bahrain.

In 2012, the authorities continued efforts to control the country's image by severely restricting international media. Ahead of the one-year anniversary of the February 14, 2011, demonstrations, several foreign journalists were denied entry visas, including reporters from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Al-Jazeera. Others, including journalists from Japan and Australia, were turned back at Bahrain International Airport. Furthermore, foreign journalists wishing to cover April's Formula One Grand Prix—Bahrain's most prestigious international

event—were vetted before admission and denied entry if they had any background in covering political topics. When demonstrations coincided with the race, foreign journalists who reported on them were detained, had their permissions to report from within Bahrain revoked, and were expelled from the country.

Throughout 2011, the government of Bahrain had used killings, targeted attacks, and harassment to silence the local press. These tactics continued to be employed in 2012, but were rarely necessary, as many journalists practiced self-censorship. In March 2012, Ahmed Ismael Hassan al-Samadi, a citizen journalist, was fatally shot by plainclothes security forces while filming the violent crackdown on a peaceful protest in Salmabad. In May, Ahmed Radhi, a freelance journalist who had worked for the progovernment newspaper *Al-Ayyam*, was arrested and detained for four months after making comments during an interview with the Arabic service of the BBC that were critical of a hypothetical union between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. He had also posted his comments on social media. In October, a Manama court acquitted a police officer of the torture and mistreatment of Nazeeha Saeed, a Bahraini journalist with France 24 and Radio Monte Carlo Doualiya, in May 2011 as she was questioned by authorities after reporting on the demonstrations. She was accused of being a spy for foreign governments.

There are six privately owned daily newspapers, four in Arabic and two in English. While some of these papers are critical of the government, only *Al-Wasat* is considered truly independent of government influence. Although the government does not own any newspapers, the IAA maintains significant control over private publications. 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 shape public perceptions of the prodemocracy movement and characterize it as sectarian extremism. 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. Foreign radio and television broadcasts are generally received without interference, and the majority of households have access to satellite stations; Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya, based in the United Arab Emirates, remain Bahraini citizens' main sources of news. In addition, around 88 percent of Bahrain's population accessed the internet in 2012.

## 2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

**Not Free**

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**86**

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**28**

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**37**

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**21**

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