

Bahrain

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 28

Political Environment: 35

Economic Environment: 21

Total Score: 84

Survey Edition	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total Score, Status	71,NF	71,NF	71,NF	71,NF	72, NF

In 2011, restrictions on press freedom increased significantly, as the government cracked down on members of the media covering peaceful prodemocracy protests that began in February. Several journalists and bloggers were harassed, assaulted, imprisoned, and allegedly tortured as a result of their work. In addition, the government stepped up the filtering and blocking of websites that published criticism of the regime and news about the protests.

Despite constitutional protections guaranteeing freedom of expression and of the press, in 2011 the government 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 had put forward proposals to reform the harshest provisions of the Press Law, but the conservative elected lower chamber has thus far refused to consider the proposed amendments. In February 2010, several members of parliament expressed support for the amendments in principle, but they were not passed before the rise of prodemocracy protests in February 2011.

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. The government has imposed restrictions on satellite network Al-Jazeera, and in May 2010 the MOCI temporarily shut down its local bureau after it aired a broadcast on poverty in Bahrain. In November 2011, journalist Reem Khalifa faced defamation charges as part of Bahrain's systematic campaign against independent voices. In addition to press and defamation laws, the government uses counterterrorism legislation to curtail the activities of opposition groups and restrict freedom of expression.

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 addressing "sensitive" issues such as sectarian tensions, relations with surrounding Gulf countries, governmental corruption, demonstrations, and human rights violations.

In 2011, journalists and bloggers came under increased pressure and faced harassment, arrests, and torture for their writings about the ongoing protests. They also faced charges of incitement for covering demonstrations or working for foreign news organizations. Karim Fakhrawi, a founder of the leading opposition daily *Al-Wasat*, died in April after being arrested

and detained under charges of “deliberate news fabrication.” Blogger Abduljalil al-Singace was released in early 2011, but was then rearrested, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison in June, along with several others, for participating in peaceful prodemocracy protests. Ali Abdulemam, who was also released shortly after protests began in February 2011, has avoided being rearrested; however, he was tried in absentia and handed a 15-year sentence. Both bloggers were accused of belonging to terrorist organizations trying to overthrow the government. Blogger and activist Zainab al-Khawaja was released on bail in late December, after being arrested earlier that month for participating in a peaceful protest in Manama. Her father, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a prominent human rights activist and former president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), had been among those jailed for life with al-Singace in June.

A group of Bahraini journalists founded the Bahrain Press Association in July in London to advocate on behalf of the media and the public regarding violations such as jeopardizing the personal safety of journalists, targeting private media organizations, attempting to impose the state media’s version of events on all outlets, fabricating charges against independent organizations and journalists, and preventing journalists from performing their mission.

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. In October, four *Al-Wasat* journalists were fined roughly \$2,700 for publishing false information and “news that defamed the image of Bahrain abroad.” The journalists claimed that these news articles had been planted as a means to discredit them.

Newspapers rely heavily on advertising revenue to sustain their operations, and some 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.

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. Approximately 55 percent of Bahrain’s population accessed the internet in 2011.

Website administrators are responsible for all content posted on their sites and are subject to the same libel laws as print journalists. As in previous years, the government in 2011 filtered thousands of websites 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. Despite restrictions on internet activity, Bahrain has a very active online community with at least 200 blogs; however, the government frequently arrests individual bloggers for commenting on controversial religious and political issues. As the prodemocracy protests gained strength in February—aided by communication and the posting of videos and photos on social media networks such as Facebook and YouTube—the government increased its efforts to filter and block content. On July 9, Bahraini officials arrested Hussein Ali Makki, the

administrator the Facebook and Twitter pages of Rasad News, a chronicle of human rights violations in Bahrain. Officials reportedly took over the site's Facebook and Twitter pages to post anti-protest and pro-regime updates on the social media sites. Rasad News opened a new Facebook page to resume its work.