



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2022

# Bahrain

**12**

NOT FREE

**/100**

|                         |               |
|-------------------------|---------------|
| <u>Political Rights</u> | <b>2</b> /40  |
| <u>Civil Liberties</u>  | <b>10</b> /60 |

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

**12 /100**    **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



# Overview

Bahrain's Sunni-led monarchy dominates state institutions, and elections for the lower house of the parliament are neither competitive nor inclusive. Since violently crushing a popular prodemocracy protest movement in 2011, the authorities have systematically eliminated a broad range of political rights and civil liberties, dismantled the political opposition, and cracked down on persistent dissent concentrated among the Shiite population.

## Key Developments in 2021

- In January, Bahrain restored diplomatic ties with Qatar; Manama cut relations in 2017 after accusing the Qatari government of interfering in internal matters and backing terrorism in Bahrain.
- Small protests held in February marked the 10th anniversary of the 2011 prodemocracy protests. Police, who maintained a large public presence, arrested at least 29 people, including 11 children. In March, police were accused of physically beating and threatening some of the children they had detained.
- In September, the authorities allowed 30 prisoners—most of them political prisoners—to enter home detention. Hassan Mushaima, a high-profile opposition leader, rejected a conditional release offer, however.

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

The 2002 constitution gives the king power over the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities. The monarch appoints and dismisses the prime minister and cabinet members, who are responsible to him rather than the legislature. Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the uncle of the current king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, was the country's only prime minister between independence from Britain in 1971 and his death in November 2020. The crown prince and eldest son of the king, Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, was appointed prime minister that year.

**A2** 0-4 pts

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?</b> | <b>1/4</b> |
|---|------------|

The king appoints the 40-member Consultative Council, the upper house of the National Assembly. The lower house, or Council of Representatives, consists of 40 elected members serving four-year terms. Formal political parties are not permitted, but members of “political societies” have participated in elections.

Lower-house elections were held in November 2018, with a runoff round in December. The polls were uncompetitive due to bans on major opposition groups. A law adopted earlier that year prohibited the candidacy of anyone who belonged to dissolved political societies, had boycotted or been expelled from the parliament, or had received a prison sentence of at least six months. Most seats went to independents, though small Sunni Islamist groups won several seats, and a leftist group won two. As in previous years, turnout figures were disputed amid a lack of independent election monitoring.

**A3** 0-4 pts

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| <b>Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?</b> | <b>1/4</b> |
|--|------------|

Bahrain's electoral framework is unfair, with electoral districts deliberately designed to underrepresent Shiites, who form a majority of the citizen population but have

never been able to obtain majority representation in the parliament. The government has also allegedly drawn district borders to put certain political societies, including leftist and Sunni Islamist groups, at a disadvantage. The government directorate responsible for administering elections is headed by the justice minister, a member of the royal family, and is not an independent body.

Voters' passports are stamped to indicate that they have voted, and there is a widespread belief that people who do not have these stamps are at a higher risk of being prevented from travelling. The government has previously punished people who call for election boycotts.

## B. Political Pluralism and Participation

**B1** 0-4 pts

**Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?**

**0/4**

Formal political parties are illegal. A 2005 law makes it illegal to form political associations based on class, profession, or religion, while a 2016 amendment prohibits serving religious clerics from engaging in political activity. The law permits “political societies,” with some of the functions of a political party, to operate after registering with the government, but the authorities have closed down almost all opposition political societies since 2016 and jailed many of their leaders. The most popular, the Shiite Islamist society Al-Wefaq, was forcibly disbanded that year for allegedly encouraging violence. In 2018, the monarch banned individual members of dissolved groups from competing in elections. In December 2021, Lebanon deported non-Lebanese Al-Wefaq members after Manama criticized the group’s activity there. The second-largest opposition group, the secularist National Democratic Action Society (Wa’ad), was banned in 2017.

Individual opposition leaders and activists routinely face harassment, and the regime has forced many into prison or exile. In 2019, the country's top court upheld a life sentence against Al-Wefaq general secretary Ali Salman, who was jailed in 2018 for alleged espionage on behalf of Qatar. He had been in detention on various charges since 2014. In September 2021, Hassan Mushaima, secretary-general of the Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy, rejected a conditional release offer; Mushaima was imprisoned in 2011.

**B2** 0-4 pts

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|---|------------|
| <b>Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?</b> | <b>0/4</b> |
|---|------------|

The ruling family maintains a monopoly on political power, with members holding many cabinet seats directly. The system's structure excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections, and the parliament has been dominated by progovernment lawmakers since the dissolution of the main opposition parties and imprisonment of many of their leaders.

**B3** 0-4 pts

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|--|------------|
| <b>Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?</b> | <b>0/4</b> |
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The monarchy generally excludes the public from any meaningful or genuinely independent political participation. Since 2011 it has used the security forces to isolate the country's Shiite population and suppress political dissent. The royal court allegedly uses its patronage networks to influence candidates and elections.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0/4

Although Shiite Muslims make up a majority of the citizenry, they have tended to be underrepresented in the cabinet and the parliament. The regime, which is controlled by a Sunni ruling family, has tended to view Shiites with some suspicion and has sought to prevent Shiites from organizing to advance their political interests. Senior positions in politics and government are often allocated to members of the royal family and a number of affiliated Sunni tribes. Certain wealthy Shiite families also enjoy a privileged position.

Women formally enjoy full political rights but are marginalized in practice. Six women hold lower-house seats, while nine hold upper-house seats. One woman serves in the cabinet as minister of health; the first woman minister was appointed in 2004.

Noncitizens make up about half of the total population, and most have no political rights, but the minority of expatriates who own property in Bahrain can vote in municipal elections. Citizenship generally must be inherited from a Bahraini father, and foreign men married to Bahraini women do not have access to naturalization.

LGBT+ identity is generally not recognized openly, including in political contexts.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

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| <b>Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?</b> | <b>0/4</b> |
|--|------------|

There are no elected officials with executive authority. The National Assembly may propose legislation, but the government drafts and submits the bills for legislative consideration. As major opposition groups are absent from the National Assembly, the body has become silent on politically sensitive topics, though it does feature debate on economic reforms, austerity measures, subsidy reforms, and public services. The parliament formally welcomed Bahrain's 2020 agreement to normalize relations with Israel, though it was not consulted beforehand.

Bahrain is fiscally and economically dependent on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which gives their governments significant influence over its foreign policy.

**C2** 0-4 pts

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|---|------------|
| <b>Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?</b> | <b>2/4</b> |
|---|------------|

There are some laws in place to combat corruption, but enforcement is weak, and high-ranking officials or members of the royal family who are suspected of corruption are rarely punished. The 2013–18 national anticorruption strategy called for the creation of a national anticorruption authority, though legislators subsequently decided not to enact that proposal. The generally pliant parliament does not check malfeasance effectively, and the media are not sufficiently free to independently air allegations of corruption against powerful figures. Civil society anticorruption efforts are also restricted; activists who highlight such problems have been prohibited from traveling or otherwise harassed.

**C3** 0-4 pts

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| <b>Does the government operate with openness and transparency?</b> | <b>0/4</b> |
|--|------------|

Parliamentary proceedings are public, and the parliament is entitled to scrutinize the government budget, but in practice the executive issues orders and laws without providing insight or allowing meaningful public consultation. The government does not publish regular and timely income or expenditure data. No access-to-information law has been adopted, and officials are not obliged to disclose their assets or income.

**Add Q**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group?</b> | <b>-2</b> |
|---|-----------|



Over the past two decades, the government has made concerted efforts to erode the Shiite citizen majority and tip the country's demographic balance in favor of the Sunni minority, mostly by recruiting foreign-born Sunnis to serve in the security forces and become citizens. No data on the sectarian makeup of the population are made public.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Bahrainis have had their citizenship revoked in recent years, including a large number of Shiite leaders and activists. After a mass revocation in 2019 prompted an international outcry, the monarch and courts restored the citizenship of 698 people, though nearly 300 remained denationalized as 2019 ended. Citizenship was not restored to the most prominent opposition activists, and the government retains the authority to revoke citizenship without meaningful due process.

## Civil Liberties

### D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

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| Are there free and independent media? | 0/4 |
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The government owns all national broadcast media outlets, and the private owners of Bahrain's main newspapers have close ties to the state. The only independent newspaper, *Al-Wasat*, was banned in 2017. Self-censorship is encouraged by the vaguely worded Press Law, which allows the state to imprison journalists for criticizing the king or Islam or for threatening national security. Insulting the king is punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment. A 2016 edict requires newspapers to apply for a one-year renewable license to publish online. The government has blocked access to Qatari news outlets since 2017, when diplomatic relations with



Qatar were severed. While ties were restored in January 2021, Qatari outlets such as Al Jazeera remained inaccessible as of November.

Journalists face legal and bureaucratic obstacles to their work in practice. The authorities have refused to renew the credentials of several Bahraini journalists working with foreign outlets. Six journalists remained imprisoned in 2021 according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). International journalists face difficulty obtaining an entry visa.

**D2** 0-4 pts

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|---|------------|
| <b>Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?</b> | <b>1/4</b> |
|---|------------|

Islam is the state religion, and the penal code criminalizes blasphemy-related offenses. However, non-Muslim minority groups are generally free to practice their faiths. Both Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups are required to register with government ministries. Muslim religious groups are required to register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs through the Sunni or Shiite awqaf (endowments) that oversee mosques and prayer houses; their directors are appointed by royal decree and paid by the government.

Although Shiite communities are free to carry out religious observances like Ashura, Shiite clerics and community leaders face harassment, interrogation, prosecution, and imprisonment. Shiite religious sites were demolished or vandalized in 2011 in apparent reprisal for the role of Shiite opposition groups in that year's protests. The Islamic Ulema Council, a group of Shiite clerics, was banned in 2014. Shiite cleric Isa Qassim lost his citizenship in 2016, received a suspended sentence for money laundering in 2017, and left Bahrain in 2018. Other Shiite clergy have been detained or questioned for their actual or suspected involvement in protest activity. In August 2021, Al-Wefaq reported that Bahraini authorities investigated about 100 people and arrested 3 during Ashura.

**D3** 0-4 pts

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**Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?**

**0/4**

Academic freedom is not formally restricted, but scholars who criticize the government have in the past been subject to dismissal, and universities are affected by a broader climate in which criticism is frequently equated with disloyalty. In 2011, a number of faculty members and administrators were fired for supporting the call for democracy, and hundreds of students were expelled. Those who remained were forced to sign loyalty pledges.

**D4** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?**

**1/4**

The penal code includes a variety of punishments for offenses such as insulting the king or state institutions and spreading false news. Many Bahrainis have been convicted and jailed for political speech, including on social media. Authorities have also warned against online expression that contradicts the foreign policy priorities of Bahrain and its regional allies. Following accounts deemed to promote sedition can constitute a cybercrime.

Security services are believed to employ networks of informers, and the government monitors the personal communications of activists, critics, and opposition members. In August 2021, Citizen Lab reported that the mobile phones of nine Bahraini political activists were hacked using the Pegasus spyware suite in 2020 and 2021.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights**

**E1** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom of assembly?**

0/4

A permit is required to hold demonstrations, and a variety of onerous restrictions make it difficult to organize a legal gathering in practice. Participants can face long jail terms, particularly if the demonstrations involve clashes with security personnel. Police regularly use force to break up political protests, most of which occur in Shiite villages.

Police maintained a large public presence during the 10th anniversary of the 2011 protests in February 2021, which was marked by small rallies. The Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) reported that at least 29 people, including 11 children, were arrested ahead of the anniversary. In April, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights called for an investigation over reports that demonstrators protesting conditions in Jau prison were forcefully dispersed. In June, several hundred people in Diah protested the COVID-19-related death of a prisoner. In October, demonstrators opposed the opening of an Israeli embassy; authorities fired tear gas to disperse one of the rallies.

**E2** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?**

0/4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are prohibited from operating without a permit, and authorities have broad discretion to deny or revoke permits. The government also reserves the right to replace the boards of NGOs. Bahraini human rights defenders and their family members are subject to harassment, intimidation, and prosecution. Many were either in prison or in exile as of 2021.

**E3** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?**

1/4

Bahrainis have the right to establish independent labor unions, but workers must give two weeks' notice before a strike, and strikes are banned in a variety of economic sectors. Trade unions cannot operate in the public sector, and collective-bargaining rights are limited even in the private sector. Harassment and firing of unionist workers occurs in practice. Domestic, agricultural, and temporary workers do not have the right to join or form unions.

## F. Rule of Law

**F1** 0-4 pts

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|---|------------|
| <b>Is there an independent judiciary?</b> | <b>0/4</b> |
|---|------------|

The king appoints all judges and heads the Supreme Judicial Council, which administers the courts and proposes judicial nominees. The courts are subject to government pressure in practice. The country's judicial system is seen as corrupt and biased in favor of the royal family and its allies, particularly in politically sensitive cases.

**F2** 0-4 pts

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|--|------------|
| <b>Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?</b> | <b>1/4</b> |
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Due process is particularly problematic in politically sensitive cases. Law enforcement officers reportedly violate due process during arrests and detention, in part by obstructing detainees' access to attorneys. Detainees are sometimes held incommunicado. Judicial proceedings often put defendants at a disadvantage, with judges denying bail requests or restricting defense attorneys' attendance or arguments without explanation. Prominent defense lawyers who represent dissidents have themselves been prosecuted on various charges.

In 2017, Bahrain allowed prisoners to complete their sentences via alternative means through a new law. In September 2021, 30 prisoners, most of them political prisoners, were released under this law, in favor of home detention and monitoring. Hassan Mushaima declined conditional release under this law.

In 2017, the constitution was amended to permit military trials for civilians in security-related cases, further weakening due process rights.

**F3** 0-4 pts

**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?**

**0/4**

Torture is criminalized, but detainees frequently report mistreatment by security forces and prison officials, who are rarely held accountable. The Interior Ministry ombudsman's office has failed to provide a meaningful check on such impunity. Political prisoners have alleged denial of medical care and religious discrimination against Shiite inmates. In April 2021, prisoner Abbas Malallah died in custody; Al-Wefaq blamed his death on negligence, while the government reported he died of a heart attack. In June, prisoner Husain Barakat died of COVID-19, though the Interior Ministry reported he had been vaccinated. In October, Ali Qamber, a political prisoner who was diagnosed with cancer but reportedly did not receive appropriate treatment while in custody, died.

Bahraini authorities were accused of physically attacking and threatening children during 2021. In March, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the BIRD accused police of beating and threatening to electrocute children detained after detaining them during the previous month's protests.

A moratorium on executions ended in 2017, though no prisoners have been executed since 2019. UN special rapporteurs and experts have raised concerns that individuals sentenced to death were forced to confess under torture, among other flaws in their cases. Bangladeshi workers are heavily represented among this population; in July 2021, NGO Reprieve reported that 8 of the 13 foreigners who received death sentences between 2011 and 2020 were Bangladeshi.

Police have sometimes been targeted in small bombings and armed attacks in recent years, though no major incidents were reported in 2021.

**F4** 0-4 pts

**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?**

**0**/4

Women enjoy legal equality on some issues, and gender-based discrimination in employment is prohibited, but discrimination is common in practice. Unlike men, Bahraini women who marry non-Bahrainis cannot pass their citizenship to their children, a long-standing issue highlighted by an online campaign in August 2021.

Shiites of both Arab and Persian ethnicity face de facto discrimination in matters including employment. They are largely excluded from the security forces, except when serving as unarmed community police officers. The government does not publish socioeconomic data that are broken down by religious sect.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is common. The law does not provide protections against such bias, though same-sex sexual activity is not criminalized for those aged 21 and older. Public displays of same-sex affection could fall afoul of public decency laws.

Bahrain is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention and does not recognize refugee status.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights**

**G1** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?**

**1**/4

Authorities sometimes restrict movement inside the country to prevent protests by residents of largely Shiite villages outside Manama. The government also obstructs foreign travel by numerous opposition figures and activists.

Bahrain established a “flexible” permit for foreign workers in 2017, aiming to ease the workers’ ability to change jobs; the traditional sponsorship (*kafala*) system ties migrant workers to a specific employer. However, participation in the newer scheme has been limited by numerical caps and other restrictions.

In 2020, the government introduced the BeAware contract-tracing application as part of its COVID-19 mitigation efforts; human rights groups criticized its intrusive features, including real-time GPS location tracking. In February 2021, BeAware was updated to act as a vaccine passport.

**G2** 0-4 pts

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|--|------------|
| <b>Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?</b> | <b>2/4</b> |
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Although registered businesses are largely free to operate, obtaining approval can be difficult in practice. For the wealthy elites who dominate the business sector, property rights are generally respected, and expropriation is rare. Shiite citizens encounter difficulties obtaining affordable housing and in some cases face de facto bans on purchasing land. Much of the country’s scarce land is occupied by royal properties and military facilities. Noncitizens can only own property in designated areas. Women may inherit property, but their rights are not equal to those of men.

**G3** 0-4 pts

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?</b> | <b>2/4</b> |
|--|------------|



Personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and child custody are governed by a 2017 unified family law applying to both Sunni and Shiite Muslim families. The law's provisions are based on Sharia (Islamic law) principles that put women at a disadvantage on many topics.

Accused rapists can avoid punishment by marrying their victims, and spousal rape is not specifically outlawed. Adultery is illegal, and those who kill a spouse caught in the act of adultery are eligible for lenience in sentencing.

**G4** 0-4 pts

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?</b> | <b>1/4</b> |
|---|------------|

Migrant workers, who make up a large portion of the population, can be subjected to forced labor or have their salaries and passports withheld, although this is illegal. Migrant workers faced a disproportionate risk of contracting the novel coronavirus when the pandemic began in 2020. While the government made efforts to ensure less crowded temporary accommodations for some and encouraged voluntary repatriation for others, migrants who lost their jobs often faced eviction, denial of services, or deportation. Migrant workers also received fewer emergency benefits than citizens.

The US State Department noted that Manama made serious efforts to address human trafficking in its *Trafficking in Persons Report 2021*, highlighting the government's creation of a specialized prosecutor's office and court. The State Department noted that no traffickers were convicted during its reporting period, however.

Revenues from oil and gas exports are used to fund public employment and services that benefit all citizens, but access to public-sector jobs and promotion opportunities often depends on one's social and sectarian background and personal connections.





### On Bahrain

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### Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

**12/100** Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

**29/100** Not Free

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