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Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2018 - Bahrain

Key Developments:

June 1, 2017 - May 31, 2018

- In July 2017, the partial internet shutdown in Diraz came to halt after over one year, without any acknowledgment from the regulatory authority to consumers (see Restrictions on Connectivity).
- The license of one ISP was revoked for failing to implement the unified filtering solution (see Regulatory Bodies).
- Forced self-censorship remained a problem, with authorities interrogating and threatening local journalists, bloggers, and activists (see Content Removal and Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).
- At least 27 people were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their online activities, seven of whom received prison sentences totalling 207 months (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).
- For the first time, some users received prison sentences of five to six years for retweets. In August 2017, a man was sentenced to six years in prison for retweeting an alleged insult to the king, the harshest sentence ever for the crime (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).
- Online anonymity was compromised when authorities set a deadline for the annual re-registration of all SIM cards before mid-2018 to avoid disconnection (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).

Introduction:

Internet freedom in Bahrain improved slightly in 2018 due to the lifting of the partial internet shutdown in Diraz. However, the continued censorship of human rights defenders, online journalists, and opposition websites, as well as the jailing and torture of activists for social media posts, posed serious restrictions to online freedom and human rights.

Although Bahrain has among the highest internet penetration rates in the world, government efforts to quell unrest have impinged on internet freedom. In 2011, the government initiated a violent crackdown, with the support of Saudi Arabia's military, on peaceful protests that called for greater representation of the majority Shiite population in the country's Sunni-led government. Since then, authorities have suppressed online dissidents with censorship, arrests, intimidation, and torture. In June 2016, the government renewed its widespread crackdown on Shiite leaders and the political opposition, dissolving the main opposition groups of al-Wefaq and Waad, imprisoning opposition leaders, and interrogating and threatening internet users who are critical of the government.

Hundreds of websites remained blocked. The list of banned topics for online discussion continues to grow, and includes discussions on regional politics as well as criticism of the royal family. The authorities have cracked down on online criticism of the Saudi-led war in Yemen, as well as expressions of support for Qatar since the government severed diplomatic relations in June 2017.

Bahrainis still use social media to call attention to human rights abuses, but the government has severely restricted media coverage relating to human rights. *Al-Wasat*, the only independent newspaper in the country, has remained suspended since June 2017, leaving internet users increasingly dependent on foreign news sites. The authorities have used interrogations and intimidation to force some users to delete content, alter the tone of online posts, or even leave the country for their safety.

While social media has proven more difficult to censor, authorities often use social media posts as evidence in prosecutions against opposition leaders. From June 2017 to May 2018, seven internet users were sentenced to a total of 207 months in prison. One user was sentenced to six years in prison for retweeting an alleged insult of the king, the harshest sentence ever handed down for the crime. Arrests and prosecutions for insulting the king or defaming the government under the country's harsh penal code continued. Human rights groups have documented multiple instances of torture used against online activists, often to extract confessions.

Obstacles to Access:

Bahrain is one of the most highly connected countries in the world. Competitive prices for broadband data services have led to high levels of mobile internet penetration. A partial internet shutdown in Diraz that continued for over a year was lifted in July 2017 without any acknowledgment from the regulator. The license of one internet service provider (ISP) was also revoked for failing to implement the unified filtering solution.

Availability and Ease of Access

Bahrain has risen rapidly in the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) ICT Development Index (IDI),¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote1sym>) and ranked first in the Arab region in 2017.² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote2sym>) Internet penetration stood at nearly 96 percent by the end of 2017, according to the ITU. Bahrain had 2.36 million mobile subscriptions at the end of 2017, a penetration rate of 163 percent. Broadband penetration was at 164 percent or 2.37 million subscriptions, of which 93 percent consisted of mobile broadband.³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote3sym>)

Prices for mobile broadband are among the lowest in the region (US\$21 for 10GB).⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote4sym>) Fixed-line broadband subscriptions with a 20 Mbps connection cost BHD 20 (US\$26), less than one percent of the average Bahraini's monthly income, with similar prices for mobile internet.⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote5sym>) Speeds have also increased, and the current average download speed is 37.3 Mb/s; 74 percent of files are downloaded with a speed exceeding 10 Mb/s, according to a 2017 report.⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote6sym>) An audit indicated that 100 percent of the population is within reach of 3G and 4G mobile networks.⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote7sym>) Batelco, a state-controlled ISP, began offering "superfast" 500 Mbps speeds to residential subscribers in 2016,⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote8sym>) while 4G LTE mobile subscriptions have been available since 2013.

Internet access is widely available in schools, universities, shopping malls, and coffee shops, where Bahrainis often gather to work and study. Adult literacy is at nearly 95 percent, and Bahrainis possess a high level of English language proficiency.⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote9sym>) The government provides free computer training programs, which had served nearly 17,000 citizens by September 2017.¹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote10sym>)

Restrictions on Connectivity

From June 23, 2016 to July 30, 2017, authorities implemented an "internet curfew" in the town of Diraz. The curfew was imposed when security forces besieged the town after protestors staged a sit-in around the house of Shiite cleric Issa Qassem.¹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote11sym>) A violent crackdown on the sit-in on May 23, 2017¹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote12sym>) left at least five dead and dozens injured.¹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote13sym>) Mobile data connections were disabled and fixed-line connectivity was heavily disrupted every day between 7pm and 1am.¹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote14sym>) ISPs initially claimed the disruptions were due to a technical error, but later advised customers to contact the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA).¹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote15sym>)

One report estimated that residents spent over US\$900,000 on telecommunications services that they never received over the 13 months of the daily internet shutdowns.¹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote16sym>) The report did not calculate the additional impact on small businesses, which could not process payments during the hours when service was blocked.¹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote17sym>) No action was taken by the TRA to address consumer complaints about the shutdowns, despite widespread criticism from the media¹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote18sym>) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).¹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote19sym>)

Although there is no centralized internet backbone in Bahrain, all ISPs are indirectly controlled by the government through orders from the TRA. Service providers connect to numerous international cables and gateways provided by Tata, Flag, Saudi Telecom, Etisalat, and Qatar Telecom, among others, making the country less prone to unintentional internet outages.²⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote20sym>) TRA is working with the telecom companies to establish the National Broadband Network (NBN), which is supported by a single fixed fiber-optic network. The TRA aims to have the NBN ready by 2019.²¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote21sym>)

ICT Market

Batelco, Zain, and VIVA are the three mobile phone operators, and also serve as the main ISPs, along with Menatelecom, the fourth largest ISP. In December 2017, VIVA acquired Menatelecom.²² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote22sym>) In total, around 15 ISPs operated at the end of 2017.²³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote23sym>) The government has a controlling stake in the largest ISP, Batelco, while other ISPs are owned by investors from the private sector, including non-Bahraini investors.

In April 2017, the chairperson of the TRA board announced a plan to establish a national fiber-optic broadband network, allowing all service providers to share fiber-optic infrastructure built by Batelco.²⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote24sym>) The plan includes splitting Batelco into two entities: one that will continue its retail services, and another that will become the National Ground Cables Company, which will own the infrastructure and provide wholesale services to the licensed telecom operators.²⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote25sym>) The splitting process is being monitored by a committee that includes members of the Ministry of Interior, National Security Apparatus (NSA), and the Defense Force.²⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote26sym>)

Regulatory Bodies

Mobile phone services and ISPs are regulated by the TRA under the 2002 Telecommunications Law. The TRA is responsible for licensing telecommunication providers and for developing “a competition-led market for the provision of innovative communications services, available to all.”²⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote27sym>) Although the TRA is theoretically an independent organization, in practice its members are appointed by the government and its chairman reports to the Minister of State for Telecommunications. The Information Affairs Authority, which regulates the press and publications,²⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote28sym>) merged with the Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA) in December 2016.²⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote29sym>) In August 2016, the TRA issued a decision ordering all telecommunication companies in Bahrain to purchase and use a unified technical system for blocking websites (see Blocking and Filtering).

There have been no reported instances of ISPs being denied registration permits. In February 2016, the TRA revoked the license of the small mobile and fixed-line provider 2Connect.³⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote30sym>) Among other issues, the company had failed to “provide a lawful access capability plan,”³¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote31sym>) which would allow security forces to access metadata about communications sent over its network.³² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote32sym>) In December 2017, the TRA revoked the license of another small ISP, Bahrain Broadband,³³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote33sym>) following a notice period, for failure to comply with several TRA regulations, including failure to implement the unified technical solution for filtering and blocking, and failure to remain continuously connected to the central management system.³⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote34sym>)

Limits on Content:

A significant level of coerced self-censorship was noted during the coverage period, with users curtailing their online activities after being interrogated and threatened by authorities. With the ongoing suspension of the country's only independent newspaper, independent journalism continued online, but outlets often avoided covering controversial topics. Online journalists who criticize the government face intimidation and potential arrest.

Blocking and Filtering

Political content is widely blocked, and authorities ramped up censorship after the 2011 prodemocracy protests, in which online media played an important role. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available, although authorities have blocked a number of messaging and livestreaming apps.

In May 2017, authorities blocked several websites, including the Qatari outlets Al Jazeera, *Al Sharq*, and *Al Raya*.³⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote35sym>) In June 2017, the website of Qatar Airways was also blocked.³⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote36sym>) The move took place in the wake of a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and several Middle Eastern countries after hackers posted a fake report on the Qatar News Agency website and social media accounts, in which the emir of Qatar appeared to praise Hamas and call Iran an “Islamic power.” Several countries, including Bahrain, severed diplomatic relations with Qatar following the incident.³⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote37sym>)

In June 2016, authorities blocked the communications app Telegram, which was popular among independent media, political opposition, and protest groups in Bahrain.³⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote38sym>) Lualua TV, an opposition news outlet based overseas, had four URLs associated with its website blocked within one week.³⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote39sym>) The same month, authorities banned two Shiite organizations and blocked⁴⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote40sym>) their websites: Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, the country's main Shiite opposition group, and the Islamic Enlightenment Society (Al-Taweya), a prominent Shiite religious organization.⁴¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote41sym>)

Several livestreaming services remained blocked during the coverage period,⁴² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote42sym>) such as PalTalk and Matam.tv, which have been used to conduct political seminars⁴³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote43sym>) and broadcast Shiite religious ceremonies, respectively.⁴⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote44sym>) The live-streaming service Periscope was still available in mid-2018. A crowdsourced list of 367 blocked websites indicated that 39 percent of sites blocked as of August 2018 were political in nature, while 23 percent related to the use of tools to bypass blocking and censorship, such as anonymizers and web proxies.⁴⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote45sym>)

Other blocked websites include Bahrain Online, a prominent online forum;⁴⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote46sym>) the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI); the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR); *Bahrain Mirror*, a popular news site; and *Al-Quds Al-Araby*, a London-based newspaper.⁴⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote47sym>) A report from November 2015 indicated that more than 85 percent of Bahraini websites are hosted outside of the country,⁴⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote48sym>) despite excellent infrastructure. Even if they are blocked, websites hosted overseas are less vulnerable to being removed at the behest of the government and remain accessible to Bahrainis with access to censorship circumvention tools.

Multiple state organizations, including the MIA and the Ministry of Interior, can order the blocking of a website without a court order. The MIA blocks websites that violate articles 19 and 20 of the Press Rules and Regulations, which include material judged as “instigating hatred of the political regime, encroaching on the state's official religion, breaching ethics, encroaching on religions and jeopardizing public peace or raising issues whose publication is prohibited by the provisions of this law.”⁴⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote49sym>) The publication of false news is deemed a crime according to article 70 of the same law. The Press Rules and Regulations were originally drafted for print media and do not specifically address online content, although they are referenced in regulating the internet. Thus, any site that criticizes the government or the royal family is

vulnerable to blocking. An updated list of blocked websites is regularly sent to ISPs, which are instructed to "prohibit any means that allow access to sites blocked."⁵⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote50sym>) Licenses of ISPs may be revoked by the TRA for failing to cooperate with the MIA's blocking orders.⁵¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote51sym>)

In August 2016, the TRA ordered all telecommunications companies to employ a centralized system for blocking websites managed by the TRA.⁵² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote52sym>) The order is related to a US\$1.2 million contract awarded in 2016 to Canadian company Netsweeper to provide a "national website filtering solution."⁵³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote53sym>) Netsweeper has since been identified on nine ISPs in the country, and filters political content on at least one.⁵⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote54sym>)

The decision-making process and government policies behind the blocking of websites are not transparent. The list of all blocked websites is not available to the public. In addition, webmasters do not receive notifications or explanations when their websites are banned. When trying to access a blocked site, users are only informed that the website has been "blocked for violating regulations and laws of Kingdom of Bahrain." Although the law does technically allow affected individuals to appeal a block within 15 days, no such case has yet been adjudicated.

Content Removal

Website administrators can be held legally responsible for content posted on their platforms, including alleged libel. In February 2016, the Interior Ministry stated that WhatsApp group administrators may be held liable for spreading false news if they fail to report incidents that occur in their group.⁵⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote55sym>) The spread of false news that damages national security or public order is a criminal offense punishable by up to two years in prison.⁵⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote56sym>)

In May 2017, an article about the deadly crackdown on the protest in Diraz was removed from the website of Turkish news outlet TRT World one day after it was published, in the wake of a complaint made by Bahrain's Foreign Ministry to the Turkish government.⁵⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote57sym>) In November 2017, the progovernment newspaper *Akhbar-Alkhaleej* removed an op-ed article about corruption from its website after its print publication.⁵⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote58sym>)

In January 2017, the government claimed that it had met with Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat to remove unidentified "inappropriate content." According to transparency reports, neither Google, Facebook, Twitter, nor Snapchat removed any content based on requests from the Bahraini authorities. Twitter did receive two removal requests in the first half of 2017, but did not withhold any content.⁵⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote59sym>)

Authorities also use extralegal measures to forcibly remove online content. Through arrests,⁶⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote60sym>) prosecutions,⁶¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote61sym>) and torture,⁶² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote62sym>) security forces have coerced many online forum moderators to permanently shut down their websites.⁶³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote63sym>) After being interrogated by security forces in May 2017, activist Adel Al-Marzooq deleted all content he posted on Twitter between March and May 2017. He had reported extensively on the Diraz protest and crackdown (see Restrictions on Connectivity).⁶⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote64sym>) Opposition lawyer Ebrahim Sarhan also deleted all of his tweets between February and May 2017 following an interrogation, and later fled Bahrain to continue his activism abroad.⁶⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote65sym>) Twitter accounts operated by the opposition have also been temporarily or permanently shut down due to government supporters reporting them for violating the platform's policies, including 15 accounts that were targeted in February 2018.⁶⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote66sym>)

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Newspapers must obtain licenses from Bahrain's mass media directorate in order to disseminate electronic media on websites or social media, according to Decree 68/2016.⁶⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote67sym>) The law does not detail what criteria is used to grant or renew the one-year license. Additionally, newspapers may not

post videos over two minutes in length and are forbidden from live streaming video. The law also stipulates that electronic media must reflect the same content as their printed counterparts, effectively limiting other multimedia content. Furthermore, outlets must provide a list of their social media accounts and website addresses, as well as the names of those who oversee them as part of the license application, exposing employees to possible monitoring and coercion. Under the existing press law, media professionals face six months of imprisonment and/or a fine of BHD 5,000 (US\$ 13,260) for publishing without a license.

In June 2017, the MIA ordered the indefinite suspension of *Al-Wasat*, Bahrain's only independent newspaper.⁶⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote68sym>) The MIA initially temporarily barred the outlet from using electronic media tools in January 2017, effectively shutting down its website and social media accounts for three days.⁶⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote69sym>) The move occurred one day after *Al-Wasat* published a headline story about the execution of three political prisoners. The MIA claimed the outlet was "inciting a spirit of division and harming national unity." At the end of the reporting period, the outlet remained offline and some of *Al-Wasat*'s reporters had begun reporting news on their own social media accounts, including on Instagram.⁷⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote70sym>)

The authorities are known to manipulate online content in order to fabricate greater public support for government policies. According to the watchdog group Bahrain Watch, the government has hired 18 public relations (PR) firms for promotional campaigns since February 2011, representing at least US\$32 million in contracts.⁷¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote71sym>) At least one PR agency was contracted to provide "web optimization and blogging" services,⁷² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote72sym>) while others were hired for online reputation management.⁷³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote73sym>) The *New Yorker* reported in 2018 that the PR firm Bell Pottinger provided its Bahraini clients with a list of the most effective dissidents and activists on social media "at a time when Bahraini officials were imprisoning and torturing people who spoke out against the regime."⁷⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote74sym>) In October 2014, another PR company tried to persuade the *Huffington Post* not to write about the United Kingdom's investigation of torture allegations against the king's son.⁷⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote75sym>)

Progovernment blogs like *Citizens for Bahrain* also spread propaganda.⁷⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote76sym>) Authorities have urged progovernment users to post about certain topics.⁷⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote77sym>) In January 2014, the prime minister and the minister of telecommunications held several public meetings with progovernment users to encourage them to "defend Bahrain's ruling system."⁷⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote78sym>) In December 2017, the government launched a Twitter campaign celebrating the anniversary of the king's accession to the throne, during which a king emoji was automatically added to posts, including tweets using #Bahrain.⁷⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote79sym>)

Similarly, an "army of trolls" has been active on Twitter since 2011,⁸⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote80sym>) when hundreds of accounts suddenly emerged to collectively harass and intimidate online activists,⁸¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote81sym>) commentators, and journalists who voiced support for protests and human rights.⁸² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote82sym>) Progovernment trolls have been moderately effective in silencing or reducing the activity of opposition voices both inside Bahrain⁸³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote83sym>) and abroad.⁸⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote84sym>) The commentators have also played a role in spreading information that is controversial or false, in order to distort the image of protesters, spread hate and conflict, or discredit information posted on social networks.⁸⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote85sym>) For example, in October 2017 trolls hijacked a Twitter campaign raising awareness about Bahraini child prisoners. Unknown users posted messages to justify the imprisonment of children, accusing them of being trained by their families to be terrorists.⁸⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote86sym>) In another example, in June 2016 trolls defended the decision to revoke the nationality of Isa Qassim, the foremost Shiite religious authority in Bahrain. Researchers said 50 percent of tweets distributed using #Bahrain were bots and trolls tweeting anti-Shiite messages. In a period of 12 hours, over 5,000 sectarian tweets were registered on the hashtag.⁸⁷

(<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote87sym>) Twitter suspended 1,800 bot accounts related to the manipulation campaign.⁸⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote88sym>)

Research from 2013 also revealed connections between the Bahraini government and "extremist" accounts on Twitter and Facebook, which advocated violence against both the government and protesters.⁸⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote89sym>) It was also revealed that the government impersonates opposition figures on social media in order to send malicious links, such as IP trackers, to anonymous government critics that can be used to identify and prosecute them.⁹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote90sym>)

The state also issues official statements warning against the discussion of certain subjects and the "misuse" of social media.⁹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote91sym>) In June 2017, the Ministry of Interior warned against "any show of sympathy or favoritism for the Qatar government or objection to Bahrain's action" over social media, and warned that such displays could lead to a jail term of up to five years and a fine.⁹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote92sym>) The MIA issued a similar warning to media outlets against publishing anything that "condones or justifies Qatari policies by any means."⁹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote93sym>) Previously, in January 2016, the Ministry of Interior threatened to take action against any insult or "negative discussion" of the Saudi executions of Nimr Al-Nimr, a prominent Shiite cleric, and 42 other men.⁹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote94sym>)

There are some government restrictions on online advertising, but many opposition websites continue to operate nonetheless. While it is difficult for blocked websites to secure advertising, popular sites such as *Bahrain Mirror* (390,000 views monthly) have not faced significant financial pressures. This is due to the fact that most Bahraini opposition websites are run with limited resources and are often self-funded. Furthermore, the websites continue to receive large amounts of traffic from users within Bahrain through the use of proxy services, dynamic IP addresses, and virtual private network (VPN) applications. While the government blocks access to circumvention tools, including workarounds such as Google Page Translate, Google cached pages, and online mobile emulators, internet-savvy Bahrainis are often able to bypass the restrictions.

The internet remains the main source of information and news for many Bahrainis, particularly those active on Twitter and Facebook.⁹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote95sym>) For example, in May 2017, social media users were the only sources to cover the attack on the Diraz sit-in. However, internet users often exercise a high degree of self-censorship, particularly as investigations of users' online activities have been launched at workplaces and universities.⁹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote96sym>) On Twitter, online forums, and comment sections, most people use pseudonyms for fear of being targeted by the authorities.⁹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote97sym>) Many share content privately on social media instead of publicly. Activists often stop tweeting following detentions and interrogations, and those who return to the platform after being detained frequently avoid controversial subjects.⁹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote98sym>)

Digital Activism

Activists rely on digital tools to bring attention to protests and human rights violations, given restrictions on press freedom and the lack of international media coverage on issues within Bahrain, which is compounded by the fact that many prominent journalists are barred from the country.⁹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote99sym>) In August 2017, online activist Yousif Al-Jamri shared to Twitter a video appeal to the king to end the interrogation sessions he endured from the NSA, which included death and rape threats, and to protect him from further threats of arrest. He also shared evidence of the NSA summoning him for further interrogation. His posts gained wide attention and were circulated across social media,¹⁰⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote100sym>) and, eventually, the inspector general of the NSA announced an investigation into Yousif's allegations (see Intimidation and Violence).

In addition, the Coalition of February 14 Youth protest movement continues to use social networks¹⁰¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote101sym>) to organize protests and bring international attention to local causes.¹⁰² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote102sym>) YouTube videos are uploaded to document police attacks on civilians and testimonies of torture,¹⁰³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote103sym>)

net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote103sym) and relatives or friends of detainees regularly use Twitter to campaign for their release and to provide updates about prison conditions.¹⁰⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote104sym>)

Violations of User Rights:

Violations of user rights in Bahrain were rampant, with at least 27 users arrested, detained, or prosecuted over the coverage period for their online activities. In a troubling development, users were prosecuted and convicted to harsh sentences for retweets. Collectively, 207 months of prison sentences were handed down to seven users, while others remain on trial or in detention. There was also an increase in incidents of torture against online activists to force them to suspend their activity.

Legal Environment

Bahrain's legal environment presents many obstacles to internet freedom. According to article 23 of the constitution, freedom of expression is guaranteed, "provided that the fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine are not infringed, the unity of the people is not prejudiced, and discord or sectarianism is not aroused."¹⁰⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote105sym>) Article 26 states that all written, telephonic, and electronic communications "shall not be censored or their confidentiality be breached except in exigencies specified by law and in accordance with procedures and under guarantees prescribed by the law."¹⁰⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote106sym>) The Press and Publications Law of 2002 promises free access to information "without prejudice to the requirements of national security and defending the homeland." Bahraini journalists have argued that these qualifying statements and loosely-worded clauses allow for arbitrary interpretation and, in practice, the negation of the rights they claim to uphold.¹⁰⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote107sym>)

In February 2018, the cabinet endorsed a draft amendment to the penal code that would increase the maximum prison sentence for posting private news, comments, or images deemed defamatory from one year to three years, and would increase the maximum fine from BD 500 (US\$1,327) to BD 10,000 (US\$26,533). The amendment has been referred to the Council of Representatives for their review.¹⁰⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote108sym>) The Council's Foreign Affairs, Defense, and National Security Committee has in turn reviewed the amendment and recommended its passage in May 2018.¹⁰⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote109sym>) However, it was still under discussion at the Council at the end of the reporting period.

In April 2017, the king approved a constitutional amendment to allow civilians to be tried in military courts.¹¹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote110sym>) When military courts last operated in this manner during a state of emergency in 2011, judges handed down long prison sentences of 15 years to life for bloggers. In addition, the public prosecutor has begun using a legal provision that calls for the prosecution of parents when their children are arrested for criminal activities, such as "misusing social media."¹¹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote111sym>)

Online censorship and criminal penalties for online speech are currently enforced under the 2002 Press and Publications Law,¹¹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote112sym>) which does not specifically mention online activities, but has been applied to digital media. The law allows for prison sentences from six months to five years for repeat offenders, for publishing material that criticizes Islam, its followers, or the king, as well as content that instigates violent crimes or the overthrow of the government.¹¹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote113sym>) In addition, the 2002 Telecommunications Law contains penalties for several online activities, such as the transmission of messages that are offensive to public policy or morals.¹¹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote114sym>)

However, sentences can be longer if users are tried under the penal code or terrorism laws, especially in relation to social media, where the press and publication law is not used.¹¹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote115sym>) For instance, under the penal code, any user who "deliberately disseminates a false statement" that may be damaging to national security or public order may be imprisoned for up to two years.¹¹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote116sym>) Under article 309 of the penal code, any "expression against one of the recognized religious sects" or ridicule of their rituals may be punished by a fine of BHD 100 (US\$266) or prison term of one year. The government has used these vague clauses to interrogate and prosecute several bloggers and online commentators.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Between June 2017 and May 2018, at least 27 individuals were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their online activities. While many were still on trial as of May 2018, 207 months of prison sentences were collectively passed down on seven Bahraini users during the coverage period.

The Electronic Crimes Directorate publishes official statistics on cybercrime cases each year, although it is difficult to determine which cases are related to political, social, or religious speech protected under international law. There were 697 cases brought forward in 2017, including 80 cases of defamation, 301 cases of electronic fraud, and 299 cases of "misuse of electronic devices."¹¹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote117sym>)

Nabeel Rajab, one of Bahrain's most prominent human rights defenders and an active Twitter user,¹¹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote118sym>) has been in and out of prison since 2012 for his online speech. In February 2018, he was sentenced to five years in prison, after a trial that lasted more than a year, on charges that included "spreading false news during a time of war," "insulting a neighboring country," and "insulting a statutory body" (article 216).¹¹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote119sym>) The charges were based on 2015 Twitter posts, including retweets of posts by human rights organizations,¹²⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote120sym>) about the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen and the alleged torture of detainees at Jaw prison.¹²¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote121sym>) The court handed down the sentence despite the prosecution's failure to prove Rajab's ownership of the Twitter account in question.¹²² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote122sym>) Separately, in July 2017, Rajab was sentenced to two years in prison for "disseminating false news, statements, and rumors about the internal situation in the kingdom that would undermine its prestige and status," in relation to television interviews he had granted. The Court of Appeal has upheld both sentences.¹²³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote123sym>)

Moreover, on September 12, 2017, Rajab was interrogated for Twitter and Instagram posts he allegedly made in January 2017, even though he has been held in prison since June 2016 with no internet access.¹²⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote124sym>) He was charged with "spreading false news," "inciting hatred against the regime," and "inciting non-compliance with the law."¹²⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote125sym>) Rajab is the president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, an NGO that remains active despite a 2004 government order to close it.¹²⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote126sym>)

Other opposition leaders continued to face arrest and interrogation for their online activities:

- In February 2018, the general secretary of the political society National Democratic Assemblage was interrogated for hours over his tweets on allegations of "tweeting to incite protesters to demonstrate."¹²⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote127sym>) He was later released.
- In October 2017, opposition leader Ebrahim Sharif was charged with "insulting the Ministry of Information" on social media in relation to a tweet he posted in August 2017.¹²⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote128sym>) In January 2017, he was interrogated for criticizing the executions of young men on Twitter.¹²⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote129sym>) And in March 2017, he was also charged with "inciting hatred" against the regime and against "factions of society"¹³⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote130sym>) for a tweet criticizing authorities for dissolving political opposition societies.¹³¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote131sym>)

Other individuals were also subject to arrests, fines, and prison sentences for their online posts, including on social issues:

- In June 2017, opposition activist Hasan Abdulnabi was fined BHD 50 (US\$132) for "misuse of telecommunication devices."¹³² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote132sym>) Abdulnabi has lived outside Bahrain since 2011 and had his nationality revoked in 2015.

- In January 2018, a man was sentenced to three years in prison for posting 27 tweets that were deemed insulting to a judge who had previously ordered him to pay a fine in a separate case.¹³³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote133sym>)

In February 2018, the twitter account @Emp_Bahrain, known as Repentant Deputy, garnered attention for criticizing the prime minister and his associates.¹³⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote134sym>) The account claimed to be supported by several government officials, and praised the royal court minister while calling for the prime minister to resign and for the king's son, Nasser bin Hamad, to succeed him.¹³⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote135sym>) In February and March 2018, six people, including a progovernment television broadcaster and an employee of the Electronic Crimes Directorate, were arrested for running the Twitter account.¹³⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote136sym>) However, they were later released because the account remained active while they were detained.¹³⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote137sym>) In March 2018, the prime minister implicated government employees as running the account,¹³⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote138sym>) and the minister of interior announced strict measures to address social media accounts that were "spreading rumors and putting the social fabric and civil peace at risk."¹³⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote139sym>) Following this, six people were arrested, including one who was detained previously,¹⁴⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote140sym>) for "creating malicious accounts to publish abusive comments of people"¹⁴¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote141sym>) and for "misuse of telecommunication tools and the disseminating of data and information through social media sites that affect the personal lives of others."¹⁴² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote142sym>) Despite the arrests, the account remained active until July 2018, when it shared that it was hacked and controlled by allies of the prime minister.¹⁴³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote143sym>) At the end of the reporting period, the accused in the case had not yet stood trial.

At least seven other internet users are still serving prison sentences for earlier online activities, including Ahmed Humaidan, Hussain Hubail, Sayed Ahmed Al-Mousawi,¹⁴⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote144sym>) Hussain Khamis, Yousif Al-Amm,¹⁴⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote145sym>) and Abduljalil Al-Singace. Al-Singace, a prominent human rights defender and blogger, has been serving a life sentence since 2011 on charges of possessing links to a terrorist organization aiming to overthrow the government,¹⁴⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote146sym>) disseminating false news, and inciting protests against the government.¹⁴⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote147sym>)

In November 2017, former member of parliament Khalid Abdulaal posted an apology on Twitter to the king, the crown prince, and the prime minister after years of legal harassment and paying large fines to suspend a two-year prison sentence.¹⁴⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote148sym>) He had been sentenced in June 2016 to one year in prison for "insulting the Ministry of Interior" on Twitter in 2014 and received another one-year sentence in May 2015 for denouncing the use of torture to extract confessions. As a member of parliament, he was immune from prosecution at the time he published the statements.¹⁴⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote149sym>)

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Several reports have documented the government's use of spyware against dissidents. In November 2015, new evidence showed that Bahrain had used the Remote Control Systems (RCS) from Italian cybersecurity firm Hacking Team. The spyware allows remote monitoring, including recording phone calls, logging keystrokes, taking screenshots, and activating cameras, among other functions.¹⁵⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote150sym>) Malicious links are often sent from Twitter and Facebook accounts impersonating well-known opposition figures, friends,¹⁵¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote151sym>) or the accounts of arrested users.¹⁵² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote152sym>) In October 2015, at least four cases were recorded in which opposition members received emails containing malicious spyware.¹⁵³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote153sym>)

Given that the authorities have been quick to identify social media users who operate under a pseudonym, many users are concerned about restrictions on the ability to use ICTs anonymously. The TRA requires users to provide identification when registering new telecom connections, and the

government prohibits the sale or use of unregistered prepaid mobile SIM cards.¹⁵⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote154sym>) In July 2017, a TRA regulation that allows individuals to purchase no more than 10 prepaid SIM cards from a single service provider came into force. Under the regulation, people must be physically present when registering SIM cards directly with service providers,¹⁵⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote155sym>) who must verify the identity of all subscribers on an annual basis, including through fingerprinting,¹⁵⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote156sym>) which is justified as a security measure to help solve crimes.¹⁵⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote157sym>) Service was cut for unregistered users in June 2018 for postpaid services, and will be cut by March 2019 for prepaid services.¹⁵⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote158sym>)

In January 2017, the government ratified the Arab Treaty on Combating Cybercrime, a set of standards developed to stem the misuse of telecommunications devices, financial fraud, the promotion of terrorism, and access to pornographic content online. While Bahrain passed a computer crimes law containing many of the provisions in 2014, the treaty establishes new rules on the retention of user data and real-time monitoring of activities, as well as a mechanism for sharing information between signatories to help combat transnational crime. The lack of strong human rights standards in the treaty may increase the scope for privacy infractions once it is transposed into local law.¹⁵⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote159sym>)

Since 2009, the TRA has mandated that all telecommunications companies keep a record of customers' phone calls, emails, and website visits for up to three years. The companies are also obliged to provide security forces access to subscriber data upon request from the public prosecution, while the provision of the data content requires a court order.¹⁶⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote160sym>)

Cybercafes are also subject to increasing surveillance. Oversight of their operations is coordinated by a commission consisting of members from four ministries, who work to ensure strict compliance with rules that prohibit access for minors and require that all computer terminals are fully visible to observers.¹⁶¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote161sym>)

A Cyber Safety Directorate at the Ministry of State for Telecommunications Affairs was launched in November 2013 to monitor websites and social media networks, ostensibly to “ensure they are not used to instigate violence or terrorism and disseminate lies and fallacies that pose a threat to the kingdom's security and stability.”¹⁶² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote162sym>) Officials had earlier created a unit to monitor social media and foreign news websites to “respond to false information that some channels broadcast” in 2011.¹⁶³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote163sym>)

A 2014 computer crimes law (60/2014) criminalizes the illegal access of information systems, illegal eavesdropping over transmission, and the access and possession of pornographic electronic materials.¹⁶⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote164sym>) It also criminalizes the encryption of data with criminal intentions. Observers contend that “criminal intentions” could include criticism of the government.

According to company transparency reports, Bahrain submitted one user data request to Google,¹⁶⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote165sym>) six user data requests to Twitter,¹⁶⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote166sym>) and three user data requests to Facebook¹⁶⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote167sym>) in the first half of 2017. The companies refused all the requests.

Access to websites of popular VPNs like Hotspot Shield, Express VPN, and the Tor Project are blocked, which makes it difficult to download client applications. However, the connectivity and functioning of the VPN clients and Tor browsers remained unaffected during the coverage period.

Intimidation and Violence

Violence and torture against online activists and journalists at the hands of authorities is common in Bahrain:¹⁶⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote168sym>)

- In February 2018, blogger Sayed Ali Al-Durazi was arrested for “inciting hatred against the government” and the royal family. Authorities allegedly beat him and forced him to delete his social media accounts. He was found guilty in May 2018 and sentenced to two years in prison.¹⁶⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote169sym>)

- In August, 2017, online activist Yousif Al-Jamri published a video alleging that he was subjected to physical and psychological torture at the NSA, threatened with rape and reprisals against his family, and forced to insult religious figures he reveres.¹⁷⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote170sym>) He was subjected to further intimidation after posting the video and the NSA repeatedly summoned him for further interrogation, which he refused.¹⁷¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote171sym>) Authorities then requested that Al-Jamri log an official complaint about his treatment, which apparently was not been acted upon by the end of the reporting period.¹⁷² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote172sym>) Fearing reprisals, he reportedly fled Bahrain.
- In September 2017, Rawan Sanqoor was arrested for tweets about the alleged denial of medical care to her imprisoned brother, Ali Sanqoor, and her communications with the International Committee of the Red Cross.¹⁷³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote173sym>) She was held in detention for about a month, was allegedly isolated from others, and was denied visitation rights.¹⁷⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote174sym>) She was released in October 2017, and has since made her Twitter account private.
- Rights activist Ebtisam Al-Saegh, who documents government torture and other abuses with the advocacy group Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, has endured reprisals for her work. In May 2017, Al-Saegh was detained at the NSA and allegedly blindfolded, beaten, and sexually assaulted; her attackers also interrogated her about other activists and her association with the UN Human Rights Council, and attempted to coerce her to use her Twitter account to announce her retirement as a human rights activist.¹⁷⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote175sym>) Instead, in July, she denounced the abuse of women by NSA agents and criticized the king on Twitter.¹⁷⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote176sym>) Hours later, plainclothed officers, without a warrant, raided her home, confiscated her phone and national ID card, and took her into custody. She was released in October 2017, but now faces terrorism charges in connection with her July tweets.¹⁷⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote177sym>)

Progovernment internet users frequently post photos of protestors on social media in order to identify and punish them in "electronic witch hunts." Government services and housing can be withheld from those accused of participating in protests, and some have seen their employment terminated for their political activities.¹⁷⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote178sym>)

Technical Attacks

Cyberattacks against both the opposition and government supporters are common in Bahrain. In June 2017, hackers took over the foreign minister's Twitter account for approximately four hours and posted a stream of photos of casualties from the government's crackdown on prodemocracy protests in 2011, along with the caption "What the petrodollar media doesn't show you."¹⁷⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote179sym>) Opposition news sites *Bahrain Mirror* and *Bahrain Al-Youm* came under cyberattack in August 2016¹⁸⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote180sym>) and January 2017, respectively, in apparent reprisal for their coverage of political events.¹⁸¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote181sym>) In April 2017, the website of the only remaining opposition party, the National Democratic Action, was subjected to repeated cyberattacks.¹⁸² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote182sym>)

Government institutions are also targeted. Authorities observed around 23,000 hacking attempts and 23 million malicious emails sent to government systems during the first quarter of 2017.¹⁸³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote183sym>) In April 2017, the website of the Bahraini Football Association was compromised by a Palestinian hacker who criticized Bahrain for hosting a representative from Israel during the FIFA Congress in May 2017.¹⁸⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote184sym>)

Notes:

¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote1anc>) International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "ITU releases annual global ICT data and ICT Development Index country rankings", November 12, 2015, <https://goo.gl/doj1lc> (<https://goo.gl/doj1lc>).

- 2 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote2anc>) International Telecommunication Union, "CT Development Index 2017", accessed August 2018, <http://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2017/index.html> (<http://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2017/index.html>).
- 3 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote3anc>) Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Bahrain (TRA), "Quarterly Market Indicators – Q4 2017," <https://bit.ly/2vJUojj> (<https://bit.ly/2vJUojj>).
- 4 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote4anc>) TRA, "Bahrain Telecom Pricing International Benchmarking", July 2018, <https://bit.ly/2KBRxhj>. (<https://bit.ly/2KBRxhj>).
- 5 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote5anc>) Batelco, "Mobile Internet Packages," accessed February 10, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2njoS89> (<https://bit.ly/2njoS89>), and Batelco, "Home Internet Packages," accessed February 10, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FzctbM>. (<https://bit.ly/2FzctbM>).
- 6 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote6anc>) TRA, "Outdoor Mobile Coverage at 99% of Population in The Kingdom, TRA Publishes 2017 Mobile Network Quality of Service Report," Jan 07, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MtcZXY> (<https://bit.ly/2MtcZXY>).
- 7 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote7anc>) TRA, "4G Download Speed increases to 23% Compared to 2014 According to TRA's latest Kingdom-wide Mobile Audit Reports," December 19, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2hQEwo1> (<http://bit.ly/2hQEwo1>).
- 8 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote8anc>) "Batelco First and Only Telecom to Provide Superfast Fibre Internet 500Mbps," *BizBahrain*, August 2, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2qsjMVY> (<http://bit.ly/2qsjMVY>).
- 9 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote9anc>) International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Measuring The Information Society", 2014 <http://bit.ly/1xrVMi8> (<http://bit.ly/1xrVMi8>).
- 10 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote10anc>) Bahrain e-government, "Qudurat Training Program", accessed February 10, 2018, <http://bit.ly/1IQ1YMI> (<http://bit.ly/1IQ1YMI>).
- 11 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/bahrain#sdfootnote11anc>) Amnesty International, "Bahrain: at least one dead and hundreds injured as government violently cracks down on opposition," May 23, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2w0r5tG> (<https://bit.ly/2w0r5tG>).
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