

BAHRAIN

Bahrain is a country comprising several islands in the Persian Gulf. It is a hereditary constitutional monarchy; the official language is Arabic and the state religion is Islam. As such, the *shari'ah* (Islamic legal code) is a principal source for legislation within the country. The nature, growth, and control of media in contemporary Bahrain can be understood through the Bahraini uprising of February 2011. Thus, this entry first discusses the Bahraini Uprising and then examines the media and its use by the state and the citizenry.

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The Bahraini Uprising

In February 2011, hundreds of thousands of Bahraini citizens took to the streets to call for the ouster of the ruling al-Khalifa family, which had ruled Bahrain since the 1780s. The date they chose—February 14—had great significance, as it marked the nine-year anniversary of Bahrain's 2002 constitution. The protests began shortly after mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, which collectively became known in the Western media as the beginnings of the Arab Spring. The revolutionary wave of protests in the Middle East and North Africa were directed against authoritarian regimes that regularly infringed citizens' basic civil liberties. Specifically, with the Bahraini uprising, Bahraini citizens called for sociopolitical reform in the form of democratic elections instead of hereditary succession, freedom of expression, political diversity, and an end to the discrimination of the Shi'i majority in Bahrain. A common tool used in the people's demonstrations was social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In response to the use of social media, the government of Bahrain exercised further control of media in the country.

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I mean discrimination of the Shi'i people i.e they were discriminated against.

Shi'i is usually used for plural words.

State Media and Censorship

The use of print, television, radio, and Internet continue to be major instruments to influence, control, and prevent public ideas and social reform. The Information Affairs Authority, which acts as the spokesperson for the government of Bahrain, is in charge of regulating the Bahraini news, radio and television networks as well as the print press. Private ownership of television channels is allowed, but channels are not permitted to broadcast anything that is deemed to be against the government of Bahrain. For example, Lualua TV, which operates from London, has had its signals blocked because it is considered as being critical of and in opposition to the government of Bahrain. Whilst television in Bahrain was originally established in 1973, radio has a slightly earlier history dating back to 1955. However, with the exception of a privately owned radio network that caters to Indian citizens, radio content is by and large controlled by the Information Affairs Authority.

Bahrain's print press is under similar restrictions. Major newspapers in Bahrain include *Al-Ayam*, *Akbar al-Khaleej*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Bilad* and *al-Waqt*, which are published in Arabic, and the *Gulf Daily News*, which is published in English. All of these newspapers are regarded as supportive of government policies. However, *al-Wasat*, which is published in Arabic, is an independent newspaper; it is regarded as opposing the Bahraini government and thus often faces harassment and political threats. In June 2017, it was indefinitely suspended.

Bahrain Watch, an advocacy organization, regularly criticizes the measure of control exercised by the state on freedom of expression in the media. In 2018, Freedom House reported that forced self-censorship remained a problem, with authorities interrogating and threatening local journalists, bloggers, and activists. Amnesty International has emphasized human rights violations by the government of Bahrain with regard to the imprisonment of members of the al-Khawaja family and Nabeel Rajab for speaking out against government policies.

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Social Media

In light of the state's highly restrictive control of the media, Bahraini citizens have resorted to social media to express their ideas and concerns about government policies. The increasing use of social media in Bahrain was concomitant with the rise of social media in the Arab world generally, particularly with regard to the Arab Spring. The Arab Social Media Report found that at the end of June 2012, the number of Facebook users in 22 countries within the Arab world had approximately tripled in the past 2 years (June 2010–June 2012), increasing from 16 million users to 45 million users. The estimated number of daily tweets in the Arab region at the end of June 2012 was 5,750,386 tweets per day, or 3,993 tweets a minute, or roughly 67 tweets every second. Finally, the total number of LinkedIn users in the Arab world stands at 8,445,515 at May 2014.

Among the most popular trending hashtags across the Arab region in March 2012 were #bahrain (with 2.8 million mentions in the tweets generated during this period), #syria (with 1.3 million mentions), #egypt (with 900,000 mentions), and #kuwait (with 860,000 mentions). Bahrain has ranked third, behind the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, as having the most LinkedIn users, at 7% of its population. In addition to these statistics, the Arab Social Media Report found that the use of social media in Bahrain has had a profound impact on the social outlook of its citizens. It found that 65% of Bahraini respondents are now more open to tolerating different points of view—the highest percentage in comparison to respondents from Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Moreover, 83% of Bahraini respondents believed social media enforced their national identity and enabled them to build stronger links with their fellow citizens—a percentage only second behind Egypt's 85%.

Current trends as of November 2018 show that Bahrain is regarded as an extremely active social media country that continues to see new Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn users.

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In 2018, 72.47% of the Bahrain population used Facebook; 15.78% used YouTube; 5.62% used Twitter; 4.01% used Pinterest; 1.21% used Instagram, and 0.1% used LinkedIn. As these figures demonstrate, Facebook is the most important social media tool for Bahrainis and there is a Bahraini presence on other social media platforms, despite ongoing government repression of social media.

The Relationship Between the Media and Law

Behind state control of media in Bahrain and the opposition to this control through social media is the legal system. Bahrain is a signatory of six international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR). Despite Bahrain's commitment to international human rights norms, organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry have criticized Bahrain for ignoring fundamental civil rights of its citizens. For example, the ongoing mass arrests of protestors and denial of political freedoms since the Bahraini uprising in 2011 is an infringement of the following articles of the ICCPR:

Article 9(1): "Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention";

Article 19(1): "Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference";
and

Article 21: "The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized."

Ahlulbayt TV, a [Shi'a](#) television channel based in the United Kingdom, issued a special broadcast on March 30, 2011, along with an email outlining the acts of violence by the government of Bahrain with links to various YouTube clips demonstrating the aforementioned infringements. It appeared that Bahraini state media were not showing what

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national and international social media were showing—namely, that ambulances were not allowed to pick up injured people from the massacre location, doctors were beaten up by Bahrain Police, and the army sprayed peaceful demonstrators with live bullets.

Restriction of Freedom of Expression

The conflict between state and social media is evidenced by the Bahrain’s overall suppression of freedom of expression. In its 2017-2018 report, Amnesty International commented that Bahraini authorities arrested, detained, interrogated, and prosecuted human rights defenders, political activists, and Shi’i clerics who expressed criticism of government policies, or criticism toward other Persian Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar. Specifically with regards to social media, Freedom House reported that during the period 2017-2018 at least 27 Bahraini people were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their online activities, seven of whom received prison sentences totaling 207 months. 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, which at the time was the harshest sentence ever for that particular crime. The government of Bahrain has also expanded its suppression of freedom of expression to international media, as journalists from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Agence France-Presse* and the UK’s Channel 4 have all been denied visas to enter Bahrain.

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Human Rights Violations

According to international human rights organizations, there are several reasons Bahrain is able to infringe human rights articles. These reasons include the following: the declaration in Bahrain’s constitution that hereditary constitutional monarchy is the sole type

of governance within the country (Article 1(b)) and that the religion of the state is Islam (Article 2); *shari'ah* being a principal source for legislation, and the official language of Arabic. Together, these factors enable the government of Bahrain to unilaterally create government policies in the interests of the ruling al-Khalifa family while at the same time using *shari'ah* to justify these policies, even if they infringe fundamental civil liberties of Bahraini citizens. Therefore, state control of media and more generally freedom of expression in Bahrain is achieved through the internal legal system that allows the government to block opposing political thought inside and outside of Bahrain.

Imranali Panjwani

See also Censorship; Social Media

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FURTHER READINGS

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