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Bahrain: Country Briefing



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In brief

- **Population:** 1,046,814, includes 517,368 non-nationals (2007 estimate)
- **GDP (PPP) per capita:** \$31,898 (32nd; 2007 estimate)
- **HDI (2007):** 0.866 (41st)
- **Religions:** Shi'a Muslim (70%), Sunni Muslim (30%)
- **Politics:** The al-Khalifa family has ruled since 1783; Bahrain is now a constitutional monarchy with an elected legislative assembly; majority Shiites are demanding more power from Sunni-led government.
- **Economy:** Bahrain is a banking and financial services centre; its small and reasonably prosperous economy is less dependent on oil than most Gulf states.
- **Head of state:** Sheikh HAMAD bin Isa al-Khalifa (born 1949; King since 2002, previously Emir from 1999)
Heir Apparent: Crown Prince SALMAN bin Hamad (son of the monarch, born 1969)
- **Prime Minister:** KHALIFA bin Salman al-Khalifa, the King's uncle. The Prime Minister needs not be an elected member of the Council of Representatives. The incumbent PM has been in office since 1971.
- **Deputy Prime Ministers:** ALI bin Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, MUHAMMAD bin Mubarak al-Khalifa, Jawad al-ARAIDH



Political situation

Home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet operating in the Gulf, Bahrain is strategically exposed to all major security developments in the region. Late April 2007 it announced preparations for a possible US military strike on Iran. Bahrainis are keen to remind that Iran attempted annexing the country in 1971, and only refrained because of US presence. Since then, the Government is very weary of Iran and of what is perceived as Iranian influence over Bahraini Shiites (70% of the citizens) - a highly contentious issue as many of the Shi'a majority perceive themselves to be marginalised by the

Sunni-dominated political elite. At the identity level, there is also a growing polarisation between Arabs and non-Arabs, locals and non-native people. The issue, remains, however, extremely delicate and difficult to rise openly in Bahrain.

The al-Khalifa family has ruled Bahrain since 1783. Under Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa Bahrain has been transformed into a constitutional monarchy since 1999 and political liberalisation is underway. Sheikh Hamad pardoned political prisoners and detainees in 2001, including those previously exiled from Bahrain. He also abolished the State Security Law and State Security Court, which were much criticised by opposition groups for suppressing freedom.

Political parties are not permitted, but political societies have been legal since late 2001. The Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, is appointed by the King.

In practice, liberalisation has opened up new political space for Shi'a and Sunni Islamists. This has meant that they are now in a much stronger position to directly confront this pluralism, yet at the same time political reforms have encouraged an opposite trend for society to become more self critical. It is now common to find public seminars on once unheard of subjects such as marital problems and sex and child abuse.

Unlike other countries in the region Bahrain's prosperity is not solely a reflection of the size of its oil wealth, but also related to the creation of an indigenous middle class. This unique socioeconomic development in the Gulf has meant that Bahrain is generally more liberal than its neighbours. While Islam is the main religion, Bahrainis have been known for their tolerance, and alongside mosques, churches, a Hindu and a Sikh temple, and a synagogue can be found. The country is home to several communities that have faced persecution elsewhere.

Another facet of the openness is Bahrain's status as the most prolific book publisher in the Arab world, with 132 books published in 2005 for a population of 700,000. In comparison, the average for the entire Arab world is 7 books published per one million people in 2005 (UNDP Arab Human Development Report).

2006 legislative elections

Parliament comprises the **Shura** and the **Nuwab**. Both Houses consist of 40 members, the Shura appointed by the King, and the Nuwab elected by the public. Bahrain's main opposition group, the Shi'a-based, Islamist-leaning al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, is now the biggest single bloc in the Nuwab having won 17 out of 40 seats in the 2006 election, after ending a four-year boycott of parliament. However, pro-government MPs, including 12 from Sunni Islamist parties, remain in the majority. The next elections will be in 2010.

Tensions in the run-up to the elections

The pre-electoral climate was quite lively and marked by two major events: the expulsion of the US National Democratic Institute and the "Bandargate Scandal"¹.

- The Manama NDI Office was closed in June 2006, and its staff effectively expelled from the country, following governmental accusations of violating

¹ http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2006/11/17/africa/ME_GEN_Bahrain_Elections.php

political funding restrictions; the NDI had intended monitoring the November polls. The US Government publicly denounced the move and, shortly before the elections, sent Under-secretary Karen Hughes on an (unsuccessful) mission to argue the case for the re-opening of the NDI.

- The "Bandargate scandal" took its name after a government official who launched allegations of a governmental conspiracy to rig the elections in favour of the Sunnis. Al Bandar, subsequently deported from the country on charges of sedition, argued that the ruling elite were masterminding the accelerated naturalisation of (Sunni) Saudis in order to counter-balance Shiites. Bahrain is indeed the only exception in the Gulf where dual citizenship is accepted (Bahrain + another GCC country).

State of play after the elections

In the last cabinet reshuffle following the legislative elections in 2006, no members of al-Wefaq were appointed to cabinet-level roles, prompting the group to boycott the inaugural session of parliament. The al-Wefaq MPs have now taken their seats in parliament, and the government appears to be cracking down on more hardline opposition activists, several of whom have recently been arrested.

For the first time, a Shia Deputy Prime Minister was appointed; his position, however, is counterbalanced by the two other Deputy PMs, who are Sunnis.

The new parliament is expected to be less co-operative with the government than its predecessor. However, its powers remain limited and are largely offset by those of the appointed Shura.

Nonetheless, the government may choose to make some concessions to opposition demands in order to build a consensus in support of the still relatively new parliamentary system. Official policy is likely to focus on improving economic conditions and in particular the availability of jobs and housing, rather than on the constitutional reform that the opposition seeks.

Economy and Energy

With its highly developed communication and transport facilities, Bahrain is home to numerous multinational firms with business in the Gulf. Bahrain **is not an OPEC member**, has only very limited oil reserves and concentrates on refining and processing of oil for which it depends on imports from Saudi Arabia. However, oil revenues represent still about 60% of the country's export receipts, 60% of government revenues and 30% of GDP underpinning Bahrain's strong economic growth over the past few years. It uses most of its gas domestically, but also exports some liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and gas-derived petrochemicals.

Bahrain sees itself as Beirut's successor as the **banking and finance hub** in the Middle East. This sector represents the second largest in Bahraini economy (about 23% of GDP). Bahrain is focused on Islamic banking and is competing on an international scale with Malaysia as a worldwide banking centre.

Bahrain is actively pursuing the diversification and privatisation of its economy to reduce the country's dependence on oil. As part of this effort, in August 2006 Bahrain and the US implemented a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the first FTA between the US and a Gulf state. Continued strong growth hinges on Bahrain's ability to acquire

new natural gas supplies as feedstock to support its expanding petrochemical and aluminium industries. Unemployment, especially among the young, and the depletion of oil and underground water resources are long-term economic problems.

Women

Women's political rights in Bahrain saw an important step forward when women were granted the right to vote in 1981 and to stand in national elections for the first time in 2002's election. However, none of the 23 female contestants in last November polls were directly elected to the Nuwab; one woman won by default with no other candidate in the race.

In response to the failure of women candidates, 10 were appointed to the 2006 Shura Council, which also includes representatives of the Kingdom's indigenous Jewish and Christian communities. Notably, human rights activists Huda Nonoo was appointed, making her the first Jewish woman to sit in the Shura Council in Bahrain (or, in most likelihood, any other similar body in the Gulf) ; Ms Noono has, since, been appointed Ambassador of Bahrain to the US.

The country's first female cabinet minister was appointed in 2004 when Dr. Nada Haffadh became Minister of Health.

When Bahrain was elected to head the UN General Assembly in 2006 it appointed lawyer and women's rights activist Haya bint Rashid Al Khalifa as the President of the UNGA.

Freedom of the media

Bahrain's progress towards democracy has not included decriminalising press offences and the regime continues to control the media. The current Press Law includes 17 categories of offences and leaves journalists open to a high degree of judicial harassment.

Journalists are increasingly critical of the regime, but the press laws, which allow prison sentences from between six months and five years, prevent normal working conditions, so self-censorship still prevails.

The Supreme Court banned the media on 4 October 2006 from mentioning in any way a Bandargate scandal, involving the royal family and some politicians. Hussein Mansour, of the daily paper Al Mithak, and Mohamed al-Othman, of the daily Al Wasat, received anonymous phone threats for writing about the scandal.

The government had said in April 2005 that all Internet websites dealing with Bahrain would have to register with the information ministry, but the new rule, which was criticised by Reporters Without Borders, has not been implemented. However, access to many sites and political blogs was barred in October 2006, a month before parliamentary elections. The regime also censored online publications that mentioned Bandargate.

Human rights

In recent years Bahrain has sought to underline its commitment to human rights by increasing the number of major United Nations Conventions to which it is a party, namely through its recent accession to both the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (2006) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2007). This commitment has also been developed in the domestic

arena, and on 11 November 2007, the Cabinet issued a decision on the establishment of a national human rights authority. Once the institution has been established, it will have the responsibility of setting an integral plan to promote human rights in Bahrain, forward recommendations, proposals and study complaints, as well as communicating with international organizations and NGOs. As an elected member of the Human Rights Council, Bahrain underwent a Universal Periodic Review in April 2008, where the submission by stakeholders revealed that following this Cabinet decision, no appointments to create the national human rights institution had been made.

Persecution of Human Rights Defenders:

In spite of the commitments made by the Bahrain Government, there continues to be serious human rights concerns on the ground. Among these is the plight of human rights defenders, particularly in relation to their treatment by the authorities and their right to freedom of expression. Such activists are subjected to harassment from the authorities, and are often arbitrarily arrested and detained. Front Line, the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, has expressed concern over the fact that such harassment is affecting the work of NGOs operating in the country. In October 2008, the organisation highlighted the cases of the following individuals: **Nabeel Ahmed Rajab**, the founder and acting chairperson of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR); **Abduljalil Alsingace**, the head of Human Rights Unit of the Haq Movement of Liberties and Democracy in Bahrain; and **Maryam Alkhawaja**, a youth activist and former leader of the student organisation AIESEC-Bahrain. These activists have been victims of media harassment, where they have been branded 'traitors to Bahrain and stooges of the United States' by local newspapers for their participation in a briefing on 15 October 2008 in Washington DC on "Impact of Political Reform on Religious Freedom in Bahrain".

There are also concerns that human rights defenders in Bahrain have been subjected to torture. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) expressed concern earlier this year over the plight of **Shaker Mohammed Abdul-Hussein Abdul-Al, Majid Salman Ibrahim Al-Haddad and Nader Ali Ahmad Al-Salatna**. These men, all members of the Unemployment Committee were arrested between December 21 and 28, 2007 by the Special Security Forces in the framework of a violent wave of arrests. They were released on January 10, 2008 and have since then reported that they had been subjected to acts of torture and ill-treatments (beatings, verbal abuse, threats sleep and food deprivation as well as solitary confinement and prolonged use of handcuffs and eye blindfolds). No investigation was made into the allegations of abuse, in order to identify those who were responsible and to bring them to justice.

Freedom of Expression

Reporters Sans Frontières has reported that although journalists in Bahrain have more freedom than their colleagues in many other Gulf countries, this ability to speak out is still restricted in some ways. In October 2002, the Press and Publications Act Law No. 47 was adopted which was aimed at addressing the particular needs of the profession. The law, which did not include any of the journalists' recommendations given during the consulting period, instead lays down restrictions upon journalists prohibiting them from questioning Islam, the Head of State or the Monarchy. The penalty for a violation of this rule is the possibility of a prison sentence ranging from a six month to five years. The restrictions also extend to criticism of foreign Heads of

States and Parliaments in an attempt to prevent the risk of upsetting key economic partners in the region. Journalists in Bahrain, like their regional counterparts, censor themselves heavily, and often show restraint when reporting upon sensitive issues. In light of this practice, they have been particularly aggrieved by the restrictions placed upon them.

Much of the enforcement of the 2002 Act has been against websites, and in July 2008 at least 24 websites were being blocked following decisions by officials. Officials have censored human rights websites, something which is seen as an attempt to curb online reporting of sensitive issues which run counter to the government's position. Among the websites which have, at one time or another, been blocked in Bahrain under the 2002 Act are the websites of the HAQ Movement of Liberties and Democratic Bahrain (www.haaq.org), and the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (www.bahrainrights.org).

Three journalists from the weekly al-Wefaq, press organ of the main opposition group of the same name, were summoned by state security services on 28 June and were not released until the following day. The three men, the editor **Sayyed Taher** and journalists **Adel al-Ali** and **Mohammed Naaman** were charged with inciting hatred of the government, “insulting the regime” and “publication of news fostering confessionnalism”. The paper's representative said that the prosecutor's office had not produced any evidence before charging the men, although their questioning was apparently linked to their association with the website Awaal.net (<http://awaal.net/>) that was closed on the order of the information ministry on 24 June 2008.

In the years following the adoption of the Act, there were suggestions that the decriminalisation of press offences would be looked into by the authorities. Indeed King Hamad bin Issa Al-Khalifa had on several occasions expressed a desire to decriminalise press offences. This culminated in the decision of the Government in May 2008 to propose amendments to decree law No. 47 to parliament, which was due to study them in its October session. These proposals have been welcomed particularly as they remove almost all prison sentences, along with some offences. However, concern remains over the fact that the amendments would still allow for the prosecution of journalists under criminal law, which could still lead to imprisonment, if they are judged to have criticised the Head of State, harmed the foundations of Bahrain's official religion, published news detrimental to national unity, private life and dignity of individuals or insulted the head of an Arab state which has good relations with the kingdom.

Further the proposals exclude electronic publications from the press law, something which would leave the websites of human rights groups in a vulnerable position.

Rights of Migrant Workers:

The situation for migrant workers, particularly female migrant workers remains grave in Bahrain. In a report compiled by the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, Caram Asia and the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR) submitted to the 42nd Session of the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Committee in October 2008 the extent of the violations against female domestic workers was exposed. The report highlighted that female domestic workers are often excluded from discussions on women's rights within the kingdom. They lack legal protection, and are left open to exploitation as a result of the Kafala sponsorship system, used in Bahrain and other Gulf states.

The Kafala system dictates that migrant workers can only leave and enter the country with the assistance or specific permission of their employer, usually a local in the country. The system was drawn from a concept of 'guardianship' and workers are legally required to reside with their employers. This is often the basis upon which visas are issued to the workers. This creates a dependency situation whereby workers are afraid to leave their employers even in the face of serious abuse, as their legal status in Bahrain depends upon the ongoing sponsorship of their employer. In addition to this, domestic workers are not afforded protection under national labour laws as they are not legally classified as workers.

Consequently female domestic workers are often subject to serious violations, such as physical and sexual abuse. The report states that in 2008, there were numerous credible reports that domestic workers in Bahrain, especially female, were subjected to beatings, rapes and sexual molestation by employers and recruiting agents. Between 30% and 40% of attempted suicide cases handled by the government's psychiatric hospitals were foreign domestic workers.

It remains that few women, even after experiencing such traumas, are unwilling to report their sponsors to the authorities as they are either unaware of their rights, or they fear that they will be arrested themselves. Although the government publishes pamphlets on migrant workers' rights in different languages together with telephone hotline for victims, it does not provide direct assistance. The Migrant Worker Protection Society (MWPS) supports victims who take cases to court, however the compensation to victims has been low and in 2008 the Society was forced to withdraw several cases, including three rape cases, citing a total lack of success in the courts.

Migrant workers outside of the domestic environment are also at risk, and are often exposed to poor living and working conditions. In November 2008, MWPS reported that a Bahraini landlord was due to face court for renting out a four-bedroom house, which was in a dilapidated state, to 22 Bangladeshi workers. Three of the workers died, and seven were injured when the house eventually caught fire. The organisation stated that employer, sponsors and the building's owners should be held responsible for allowing the men to workers to live in such conditions, particularly as thousands of workers in the country live in similarly unsafe conditions.

Freedom of Religion

Although the Sunni government in Bahrain allows some religious freedom, it discriminates against Shiites, banning them from the armed forces, the police, the Ministry of the Interior, and other positions. Foreign Christians and the Jewish community are allowed to practice their religious rituals and both Christian Churches as well as synagogues are operating legally.