

BAHRAIN

	2009	2011
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	n/a	Not Free
Obstacles to Access	n/a	11
Limits on Content	n/a	22
Violations of User Rights	n/a	29
Total	n/a	62

POPULATION: 1.3 million
INTERNET PENETRATION: 54 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: Yes
SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: Yes
BLOGGERS/ONLINE USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

INTRODUCTION

Bahrain has one of the highest internet penetration rates in the Middle East, but as more people have gained access to new technologies, the government has increasingly attempted to curtail their use for disseminating and obtaining politically sensitive information. Bahrain has been connected to the internet since 1995. In 1997, an internet user was arrested for the first time, for sending information to an opposition group outside the country.¹ In 2002, the Ministry of Information (MOI) made its first official attempt to block websites containing content that was critical of the government. Today, over 1,000 websites are blocked in Bahrain.²

Censorship of online media is implemented under the 2002 press law. The restrictions have been extended to mobile telephones, and the use of Blackberry services to disseminate news is banned. The government intensified its crackdown on internet activists and online publications in the period leading to the October 2010 elections by arresting two bloggers and shutting down several websites and online forums critical of the state authorities.³

¹ Initiative For an Open Arab Internet, "Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet: Bahrain," December 2006, <http://old.openarab.net/en/node/350>.

² Reporters Without Borders, "Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain," http://en.rsf.org/surveillance-bahrein_36665.html, accessed August 17, 2010.

³ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "New Web Crackdown Blocks Dozens of Websites and Electronic Forums in Bahrain," September 4, 2010, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3287>.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

According to some measures, Bahrain is the second most connected country in the Arab world,⁴ and the number of internet users has risen rapidly, from 40,000 in 2000 to 649,300 in 2009.⁵ In mid-2009, there were approximately 139,000 internet subscriptions, of which 53.9 percent were ADSL, 30.7 percent were wireless, 12.6 percent were mobile broadband, and 2.8 percent were dial-up.⁶ Internet access is widely available at schools, universities, and coffee shops, where Bahrainis often gather for work and study. However, when it comes to the quality of services, a report issued in 2009 suggests that Bahrain's broadband connections cannot adequately support modern internet applications, such as video and file sharing.⁷

While price competitiveness is increasing, subscription prices are still relatively high considering the restricted speeds and download limits. This is due to the fact that most internet-service providers (ISPs) are dependent on leased access to the network of Batelco, the dominant, partly state-owned telecommunications firm.⁸

Bahrain has one of the highest mobile-phone penetration rates in the region, with 118 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.⁹ Some of the latest generations of mobile phones, such as Apple's iPhone, are available in the country, but they are still very expensive. Although the use of Blackberry phones is on the rise, particularly among the business community, the authorities in April 2010 banned Blackberry users from sending news bulletins through text messages and threatened the individuals and newspapers responsible for the messages with legal action.¹⁰

The government routinely prohibits the publication of advanced Web 2.0 content and blocks interactive exchange, particularly when they do not support its political agenda. Access to the video-sharing site YouTube, social-networking site Facebook, and the

⁴ This ranking includes internet access as well as fixed and mobile telephone lines. Mohamed Marwen Meddah, "Total Country Connectivity Measure for the Arab World," Startup Arabia, August 20, 2009, <http://www.startuparabia.com/2009/08/total-country-connectivity-measure-for-the-arab-world>.

⁵ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "ICT Statistics 2009—Internet," <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx>, accessed February 16, 2011.

⁶ Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), *Telecommunications Market Indicators in the Kingdom of Bahrain* (Manama: TRA, March 2010), slides 20 and 23, <http://www.tra.org.bh/en/pdf/TelecommunicationsmarketsindicatorstheKingdomofBahrain.pdf>.

⁷ Said Business School (University of Oxford) and Universidad de Oviedo, *Broadband Quality Score: A Global Study of Broadband Quality* (Oxford: Said Business School; Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, September 2009), [http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/newsandevents/Documents/Broadband%20Quality%20Study%202009%20Press%20Presentation%20\(final\).pdf](http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/newsandevents/Documents/Broadband%20Quality%20Study%202009%20Press%20Presentation%20(final).pdf).

⁸ Daniel Munden, "Gateway to Success," *Gulf Daily News*, August 26, 2009, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=258311>.

⁹ TRA, *Telecommunications Market Indicators in the Kingdom of Bahrain*, slide 10.

¹⁰ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "Authorities Ban Blackberry Users from Sending News Bulletins," IFEX, April 15, 2010, http://ifex.org/bahrain/2010/04/15/blackberry_ban/.

microblogging site Twitter is available, although individual pages on each of those platforms are often blocked (see “Limits on Content”). The Arabic regional portal and blog-hosting service Al-Bawaba has been blocked since 2006, and the Bahraini blog aggregator Bahrainblogs.org, which served as a means for Bahraini bloggers to interconnect, was blocked in 2009. In 2010, the Information Affairs Authority (IAA), a new government agency that replaced the MOI earlier in the year, banned the use of video and audio reports on the website of the *Al-Wasat* newspaper, seemingly after the outlet webcast several audio programs critical of the authorities. Moreover, the IAA blocked the website of the largest political society Al-Wefaq reportedly after the group announced plans to start an audio and video service through the site.¹¹

There are 12 ISPs serving Bahraini users, but the major providers are Batelco, MENA Telecom, Zain, and the recently launched VIVA. Most ISPs lease network access from Batelco, although the firm was fined in late 2009 for refusing to grant MENA Telecom direct access to an international cable.¹² According to Bahrain’s Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), some 31 ISP licenses have been granted, but only 12 providers are in business.¹³ There have been no reported instances of ISPs being denied registration permits. Three of the major ISPs are also the only mobile operators in Bahrain: Batelco, Zain, and VIVA.

Mobile-phone services and ISPs are regulated by the TRA under the 2002 Telecommunications Law. Although the TRA is an independent organization on paper, its members are appointed by the government, and its chairman reports to the minister of state for cabinet affairs with responsibility for telecommunications, Sheikh Ahmed bin Attiyatallah al-Khalifa (a member of the ruling family). The TRA has issued several regulations that were not welcomed by consumers, including measures that could potentially violate individual privacy rights.¹⁴

LIMITS ON CONTENT

Online media in Bahrain are governed by the Press and Publications Law of 2002, which stipulates prison sentences of up to five years for publishing material that is offensive to

¹¹ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Crackdown Against Civil Rights and Free Expression Results in the Blockage of the Website of the Largest Political Society,” September 18, 2010, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3366>.

¹² “TRA Fines Batelco \$13m on Access Curbs,” Trade Arabia News Service, November 25, 2009, http://www.tradearabia.com/news/it_170919.html.

¹³ TRA, “Market Information: Number of Licenses Issued,” <http://www.tra.org.bh/en/marketstatistics.asp>, accessed August 17, 2010.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Bew, “‘Big Brother’ Move Rapped,” *Gulf Daily News*, March 25, 2009, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/ArchiveNewsDetails.aspx?date=03/25/2009&storyid=246587>.

Islam or the king, or that is perceived as undermining state security or the monarchy.¹⁵ According to some estimates, the IAA (formerly the MOI) has blocked and shut down more than 1,000 websites, with a focus on sites that are critical of the Bahraini government, parliament, and ruling family, and including human rights websites, blogs, and online forums.¹⁶ The IAA can order the blocking of a website without referring the case to a court. It has instructed all ISPs to “prohibit any means that allow access to sites blocked by the ministry.”¹⁷

On January 14, 2009, the MOI issued a ministerial order requiring all ISPs to block websites containing pornography or material that may provoke violence or religious hatred.¹⁸ It also threatened to revoke the license of any operator violating the decree. The ISPs have consequently begun using a commercial filtering system and posting an explicit block page with a reference to the ministerial order.¹⁹ The filtering is based on keyword density, the manual entry of URLs, and certain website categories, including potential circumvention tools like Google page translate and Google cached pages.

Website administrators face the same libel laws that apply to print journalists, and they are held jointly responsible for all content posted on their sites or chat rooms. In 2009 the website of the Democratic National Work Society was blocked for the second time after it published an article about the so-called Al-Bandar report, which described an alleged anti-Shiite conspiracy within the Sunni-led government. The authorities required the removal of the article as a condition for lifting the block, but the society rejected the demand and the case went to court.²⁰ In February 2009, the MOI said it had lifted blocks on multiple websites after they removed the banned content.²¹ Many webmasters have added rules to their online forums that prohibit posts criticizing the ruling family, and they have begun banning users who attempt to post such comments to avoid having their sites blocked.

In practice, many websites run by national or international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are inaccessible. For example, the websites of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) have been blocked. The MOI has also issued orders to ban material about certain cases that could implicate members of the royal family, such as the alleged anti-Shiite conspiracy and a

¹⁵ Press and Publications Law of 2002 of the Kingdom of Bahrain (No.47 of 2002). A copy can be found at: <http://mahmood.tv/bahrain/bahrain-politics-2/bahrain-politics/press-law-472002-arabic/>.

¹⁶ Reporters Without Borders, “Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain.”

¹⁷ Reporters Without Borders, “Authorities Step Up Offensive Against Journalists and Websites,” news release, May 14, 2009, http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=33042.

¹⁸ Frederik Richter, “Bahrain Web Crackdown Triggers Calls for Reform,” Reuters, February 9, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5183Y320090209>.

¹⁹ OpenNet Initiative, “Country Profile: Bahrain,” August 06, 2009, http://opennet.net/research/profiles/bahrain#footnote34_6d3d5g9.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Information Ministry Reopens Blocked Websites,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, February 13, 2009, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/2352/news/read/37295/1.html>.

case involving alleged corruption by a government minister.²² Even Google Earth was briefly rendered inaccessible so that Bahraini citizens could not examine the estates of the royal family;²³ it was unblocked after concerted public and media pressure. Blocking decisions and policies are not transparent, and users do not always get a block message, especially when they try to access banned political websites. For some blocked sites, DNS tampering is used, and users simply receive error messages such as “The page cannot be displayed.”²⁴ Webmasters do not receive notifications that their sites have been banned.

Apart from websites, the government routinely blocks blogs and individual pages on social-networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. For example, several Bahraini blogs were blocked in 2009, including those maintained by human rights activists Abduljalil Alsingace (Alsingace.katib.org) and women’s rights activist Ghada Jamsheer (Bahrain-eve.blogspot.com). In January 2010, authorities blocked access to a Twitter page called “Free Bahrain.” It was operated by a Bahrain resident who posted links and news on the human rights situation in the country.²⁵ The same woman’s personal channel on the YouTube video-sharing site, which mostly contained critical footage, was also blocked.²⁶ Moreover, in June 2010, the authorities blocked a popular blog called Sanawat al-Jareesh, which provided an unofficial account of Bahrain’s history.²⁷ And most recently, amidst the crackdown in advance of the November election, the personal website and the Facebook page of an opposition activist Abdul Wahb Hussain were also blocked.

Although technically the law does allow affected individuals to appeal a block within 15 days, no such case has yet been adjudicated even several years after the blocking action in question. For example, a legal challenge mounted by the Waad political group has languished in the courts, and the blocking order against its website remains in place. The website is now accessible due to pressure exerted on the authorities, but the block could be reinstated arbitrarily.²⁸

Since the enactment of the 2002 Telecommunications Law, which assigns penalties for illicit use of the internet, users have adopted a culture of self-censorship. Bahraini bloggers, numbering close to 200, usually prefer to remain anonymous, and security personnel do not hesitate to pursue or harass “irritating” journalists and bloggers.²⁹ Users

²² Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Authorities Reinforce Sweeping Media Ban, Internet Censorship on Controversial Report,” news release, November 28, 2007, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/1635>;

Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Dealing in Double Standards Whilst Fighting Corruption, and Violating Freedom of Opinion and Expression,” news release, April 18, 2010, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3075>.

²³ Reporters Without Borders, “Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain.”

²⁴ OpenNet Initiative, “Country Profile: Bahrain.”

²⁵ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Authorities Block Human Rights Page on Twitter Website,” news release, January 20, 2010, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3023>.

²⁶ “Minister Blocks YouTube Channel,” IFEX, January 22, 2010, http://www.ifex.org/bahrain/2010/01/22/youtube_channel_blocked/.

²⁷ “Information Ministry blocks Sanawat Al-Jareesh,” [In Arabic] *Al-Bilad*, June 11 2010, http://www.albiladpress.com/news_inner.php?nid=79281&cat=1.

²⁸ More information can be found on the *Alwasat*, website, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/2609/news/read/326019/1.html>.

²⁹ Reporters Without Borders, “Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain.”

tend to avoid certain subjects, including criticism of the ruling family and government practices; the Al-Bandar report, which is referred to as the “xx-report,” and human rights issues.

Bahrain’s online community is small but dynamic. As of January 2008, there were over 535 websites based in Bahrain. In addition to the 200 blogs, they included 111 public forums and several dozen governmental sites.³⁰ The use of proxy services, dynamic internet protocol (IP) addresses, and virtual private network (VPN) applications allow the majority of users in Bahrain to access blocked websites, although many less savvy users are not as successful. In fact, the government regularly blocks access to proxy sites and tools that enable circumvention of online filters and censors, including applications that allow browsing of other websites, such as Google page translation, Google cached pages, and online mobile emulators, requiring users to be consistently creative and adapt.

Bahrainis use the internet to debate sensitive issues and to exchange content that is not available in the traditional media. The most popular platform is the banned Bahrainonline.org—the largest independent news forum with over 50,000 members—where coverage of regular street protests is posted along with oppositionist articles. Multiple independent online news sites have emerged in the last few years, but many have had to close due to constant harassment by the authorities. For example, the sites Alsaheefa.net and Awaal.net were closed after three journalists were charged with inciting hatred of the government, insulting the regime, and fostering sectarianism in 2008.³¹ Tools like Twitter, the social-networking site Facebook, YouTube, and mobile-phone text messages have been well utilized by Bahraini individuals and human rights organizations such as the Bahrain Center for Human Rights to organize protests and promote civil rights.³² These tools have started to play even more significant role following the pre-election crackdown in 2010; after many forums and critical websites were blocked, many Bahrainis turned to Twitter and Facebook to voice their opinions and campaign against the government actions.³³

³⁰ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Internet Censorship Denies Citizens Access to Popular Public Forums, News, Alternative Information,” IFEX, January 3, 2008, http://www.ifex.org/bahrain/2008/01/03/internet_censorship_denies_citizens/.

³¹ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Three Writers for Banned Internet Site Convicted of Criminal Defamation, Fined,” news release, October 23, 2007, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/1500>; Reporters Without Borders, “Press Law Amendments Hailed, but Journalists Still Face Jail and Websites Risk Closure,” news release, July 03, 2008, <http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-press-law-amendments-hailed-but-03-07-2008,27741.html>.

³² IFEX, “Case Study: BCHR combats censorship with creativity, using film, photography and e-advocacy,” <http://www.ifex.org/campaigns/e-advocacy/index7.php>, accessed February 15, 2011.

³³ Frederik Richter, “Lively Bahrain social media face government pressure,” Reuters, October 21, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE69K2OG20101021>.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

Although freedom of expression is enshrined in the constitution, the guarantees are qualified by the phrase “under the rules and conditions laid down by law,” which essentially negates them.³⁴ Similarly, the 2002 press law promises free access to information, but “without prejudice to the requirements of national security and defending the homeland.” Bahraini journalists have argued that these loosely worded clauses allow for arbitrary interpretation.³⁵ There is no law that guarantees users’ privacy. A proposed cybercrimes law has been under consideration since 2005.³⁶

Online journalists and others face prison terms of up to five years for violations of the 2002 Press and Publications Law (see “Limits on Content”).³⁷ In addition, the 2002 Telecommunications Law contains penalties for illicit practices including the transmission of messages that are offensive to public policy or morals.³⁸ This vague phrase has been used by the government to question and prosecute several bloggers and journalists, including moderators of Bahrainonline.org who were arrested after a UN report on human rights in Bahrain was published on their forums; they were released due to public pressure, but their case has remained open since 2005 and they can be taken back to court at any time.³⁹

Users can be prosecuted for libeling officials, as in the case of Mahmood al-Yousif, who was accused of libeling Bahrain’s agriculture minister after he found fault with a statement made by the minister.⁴⁰ In May 2009, Hasan Salman was arrested and accused of publishing what authorities claimed were confidential names of employees of the national security apparatus. He was tried under the penal code and sentenced to three years in jail.⁴¹ In April 2010, as previously noted, the authorities threatened to punish individuals and newspapers responsible for sending news bulletins through Blackberry text messages

³⁴ Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, available at <http://www.shura.bh/en/InformationCenter/Pages/Documents.aspx>.

³⁵ “Bahrain,” in *Media Sustainability Index 2008* (Washington, DC: IREX, 2009), http://irex.org/programs/MSI_MENA/2008/MSIMENA_bahrain.asp.

³⁶ “New law to protect from cyber crime is presented to the House of Representatives,” [in Arabic] *Alayam*, April 28, 2010, <http://www.alayam.com/Articles.aspx?aid=17707>.

³⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Bahrain,” in *Attacks on the Press 2009* (New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, February 2010), <http://www.cpj.org/2010/02/attacks-on-the-press-2009-bahrain.php>.

³⁸ Telecommunications Law of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

³⁹ Luke Schleusener, “From Blog to Street: The Bahrain Public Sphere in Transition,” *Arab Media and Society* no. 1 (Spring 2007), <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=15>.

⁴⁰ Mahmood Nasser al-Yousif, “Bahraini Blogger: Freedom of Speech Stifled,” *Mahmood’s Den* (blog), November 26, 2007, <http://mahmood.tv/about/in-the-news/bahraini-blogger-freedom-of-speech-stifled/>.

⁴¹ “Bahrain: Citizen Sentenced to Three Years in Prison,” Free Hasan Salman, September 18, 2009, <http://frechasan.no-ip.org/?p=310>.

without a government license.⁴² One member of parliament is on record as recommending that transgressors be hanged.⁴³

Two bloggers were arrested amidst security crackdown against activists and dissidents in the period leading to the 2010 elections. In August 2010, Abduljalil Alsingace—a blogger, academic, and a leading figure in the Haq opposition group—was arrested when returning from London, where he participated in a seminar on the worsening human rights situation in Bahrain. Al-Singace's website, on which he had criticized the systematic use of torture and discrimination against the Shiites, was closed down by the authorities in February 2009. In September 2010, Ali Abdulemam, an online activist and the founder of Bahrainonline.org, was also arrested,⁴⁴ this time for allegedly disseminating false information on the forum. During their court hearing in October, both Alsingace and Abdulemam said that they had experienced severe beatings on the head, long standing hours, deprivation of sleep, and threats of rape. They also complained of being denied access to their families and lawyers and being kept in solitary confinement.⁴⁵

In 2007, the MOI ordered the registration of all websites hosted in the country or abroad that featured information about the kingdom. This decision met with significant opposition from a large number of website owners, who tacitly decided not to register their sites. The regime then reversed its position, and registration became optional.⁴⁶ The TRA also requires users to obtain licenses to use wireless fidelity (WiFi) and worldwide interoperability for microwave access (WiMax) connections.⁴⁷ The government does not allow the sale and use of prepaid mobile-phone chips without registration. In March 2009, the TRA issued a new regulation that would force telecommunications companies to keep records of customers' phone calls, e-mails, and website visits in Bahrain for up to three years; the companies would also be obliged to grant the security services access to the data.⁴⁸ Media reports have quoted an official source as saying that some websites are monitored on a daily basis.⁴⁹ In the case of Hasan Salman, who was jailed for publishing names of national security employees,⁵⁰ his online activities were monitored without a

⁴² Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "Authorities Ban Blackberry Users from Sending News Bulletins."

⁴³ "MP Al-Dossari calls for hanging journalists of the associations' newsletter," [In Arabic] *Manama Voice*, February 23, 2010, http://www.manamavoice.com/index.php?plugin=news&act=news_read&id=2574.

⁴⁴ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "Prominent Bahraini Blogger and Online Activist Under Arrest," September 6, 2010 <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3300>.

⁴⁵ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "'Terrorist Network's First Hearing – Trial Testimonies,'" October 28, 2010 <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3540>.

⁴⁶ Reporters Without Borders, "Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain."

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Bew, "Technology Bill Rapped," *Gulf Daily News*, July 20, 2006, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=149891>.

⁴⁸ Bew, "'Big Brother' Move Rapped."

⁴⁹ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "Several Websites Blocked by Information Ministry on Pretext of Crisis Involving Sectarian Religious Tensions," IFEX, July 2, 2008, <http://www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/95015/>.

⁵⁰ "Arbitrary Detention of a Citizen for Disseminating Information," Free Hasan Salman, June 21, 2009, <http://freehasan.com/?p=107>.

judicial order.⁵¹ The country's cybercafes are subject to increasing surveillance. Oversight of their operations is coordinated by a commission consisting of members from four ministries, which ensures strict compliance with rules prohibiting access for minors and requiring full visibility of computer terminals.⁵²

Cyberattacks against human rights and other websites are common in Bahrain. It is believed that hackers associated with the government crash sites at sensitive times when there is a need to stop the spread of information. The website Aafaq, which covers human rights and democracy issues in the Arab world, has been hacked by technicians from the Bahrain General Intelligence Bureau, who have added offensive comments against human rights activists.⁵³ The websites of Shiite and opposition groups, and even of public entities like the University of Bahrain and the Department of Legal Affairs, have suffered from attacks.⁵⁴ Cyber attacks against independent forums, opposition websites, and online news sources reportedly intensified in advance of the most recent elections.

⁵¹ "Case Regarding Publication of Names of National Security Employees Postponed to May" [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, April 19, 2010, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/2782/news/read/404013/1.html>.

⁵² Reporters Without Borders, "Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain."

⁵³ Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, "Bahraini Authorities Block Websites that Criticize Government Policies," news release, August 08, 2007, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/1373>.

⁵⁴ "Lawsuit on Hacking of the University of Bahrain Website Rejected by Court," [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, March 18, 2010, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/2750/news/read/382665/1.html>; See also "Website of the Department of Legal Affairs is Hacked" [in Arabic] *Albilad*, November 21, 2009 http://www.albiladpress.com/news_inner.php?nid=27387&cat=1.