

Bahrain 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

The government released more than 3,400 prisoners, a significant portion of Bahrain's prisoner population, through royal pardons, and more releases took place through the open prison and alternative sentencing programs. Nongovernmental organizations and activists assessed that the releases included a significant number of political prisoners.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; and serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship.

The government took credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution provided for freedom of speech, including for members of the press and other media, but only if “the fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine are not infringed, the unity of the people is not prejudiced, and discord and sectarianism are not aroused.” The government limited freedom of expression and press freedom through prosecutions of individuals under libel, slander, and national security laws that targeted both professional and citizen journalists.

The law prohibited any speech authorities considered a challenge to public order or accepted morals. While individuals openly expressed critical opinions regarding domestic political and social matters in private settings, those who shared such opinions publicly, including in traditional or social media, could face questioning. The Ministry of Interior acted on complaints from individuals or groups about certain posts and brought “offenders” in for questioning. Depending on the complaint, investigation, and assessed violation of the law, individuals were released without charge or charged

and tried. The penal code allowed penalties of no less than one year and no more than seven years of imprisonment, plus a fine, for anyone who “offends the monarch of the Kingdom of Bahrain, the flag, or the national emblem.”

On May 8, a criminal court sentenced Mohammed al-Zayani, a retired Bahrain Defense Force officer and social media figure, to three months’ imprisonment and a fine of 1,000 dinars (\$2,650) for sharing a video on social media that “publicly incites hatred against the Shia community.”

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

According to opposition social media accounts, authorities sometimes summoned citizen journalists active on social media to account for their reporting. International media representatives also reported difficulty obtaining visas to work as journalists. On May 8, five UN experts and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention sent a letter to the government expressing concern regarding the arrest, mistreatment, and detention of Hashem al-Wadaei, the brother-in-law of human rights defender Sayed Ahmed al-Wadaei. The experts stated the government’s actions aimed to intimidate and impair Sayed Ahmed al-Wadaei’s human rights activities and might be in reprisal for his cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms, in particular his attendance at the 34th session of the Human Rights Council in 2017. According to the letter, Hashem was arrested on February 22 without official charges following a house raid, subjected to physical and

verbal abuse by police, and subsequently released on April 8.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Government censorship regularly occurred. Ministry of Information Affairs personnel monitored media reports on matters deemed sensitive, especially those related to religious sects, national security, criticism of the country's ruling family or the judiciary, and the Saudi royal family. Media often self-censored and did not report on certain subjects.

The government did not own any print media, but the ministry and other government entities exercised considerable control over privately owned domestic print media. The private owners of the country's main newspapers had close ties to or held positions in the government.

The government owned and operated all domestic radio and television stations. Audiences could access some radio and television broadcasts in Arabic and English from stations based outside the country, including by satellite. The government blocked foreign television stations it considered critical of the country.

The Ministry of Information Affairs reviewed all books and publications prior to issuing printing licenses. The Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments also reviewed books that discussed religion.

The law prohibited “anti-Islamic” content in media and mandated imprisonment for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.” The law stated, “Any publication that prejudices the ruling system of the country and its official religion may be banned from publication by a ministerial order.”

On September 7, opposition social media accounts reported the Ministry of Interior summoned pardoned prisoner Fawaz Abdulnabi al-Shuwaikh for thanking Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and praising the resistance in a video taken as he departed prison under a royal pardon. The public prosecution ordered al-Shuwaikh’s detention for three months pending investigation. On September 8, opposition groups also noted the Ministry of Interior had summoned Hussain al-Gafood for “declaring support to Bahraini martyrs.” Al-Gafood and al-Shuwaikh were released in late December.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The constitution and labor code recognized the right to form and join independent trade unions, as well as the right to strike, but with significant restrictions. The law did not provide for the right to collective bargaining. The government did not effectively enforce all applicable laws, including prohibitions on antiunion discrimination. Penalties for violations of laws protecting freedom of association and the right to strike were less than

those for analogous violations such as civil rights violations and were sometimes applied against violators.

The law prohibited trade unions in the public sector. The law also prohibited members of the military from joining unions. Public-sector workers could join private-sector trade unions and professional associations, although these entities could not bargain on their behalf. There were two licensed, multisectoral trade union federations, the General Federation for Bahrain Trade Unions and the Bahrain Free Labor Unions Federations.

By law, only trade union organizations could organize and announce strikes. According to the law, strikes were prohibited in vital facilities such as hospitals, airports, and commercial outlets, and in front of locations with a security nature.

The law prohibited strikes in 12 “vital” sectors, the scope of which exceeded International Labor Organization standards, including the oil, gas, education, telecommunications, transportation, and health sectors, as well as pharmacies and bakeries. The law made no distinction between “vital” and “nonvital” employees within these sectors. Workers were required to approve a strike with a simple majority and provide 15 days’ notification to the employer before conducting a strike.

The law allowed trade unions and federations of unions from “similar” sectors. In practice the existing union federations represented unions from

different sectors, including one for domestic workers. An individual convicted of criminal acts that led to the dissolution of a trade union was prohibited from holding any union leadership position. The law gave the labor minister, rather than the unions, the right to select the federation to represent workers in national-level bargaining and international forums. The law did not require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. The law prohibited unions from engaging in political activities.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

Although there was no national private-sector minimum wage law, the semi-autonomous government institution Tamkeen provided financial support to companies to ensure employees received a set minimum compensation based on educational level. Citizen public sector workers received a minimum wage that was generally considered a living wage, but there was no minimum wage for foreign public sector workers. There was no official poverty level.

Subject to the provisions of the private-sector law, employers could not

employ a worker for more than 48 hours per week without including contract provisions for overtime pay. Employers could not employ Muslim workers during the month of Ramadan for more than six hours per day or 36 hours per week. Wage, hour, or overtime law violations – especially overtime law violations – were common in private-sector companies, particularly construction and security companies.

Occupational Safety and Health

The Ministry of Labor set occupational safety and health (OSH) standards that were appropriate for the main industries in the country. The law outlined protections that applied to citizens and noncitizens alike, except for domestic workers. The law stipulated companies in violation of occupational safety standards could be subject to fines. The Ministry of Labor employed general inspectors and occupational safety inspectors. The ministry used engineers from multiple specialties to investigate risks and inspect standards at construction and outdoor sites, where most violations of OSH standards took place.

The government did not regularly or proactively identify unsafe conditions but responded to workers' OSH complaints. Workers reported fear of retaliation and risked jeopardizing their employment for reporting situations that endangered their health or safety, refusing to work in hazardous conditions, or taking legal action against employers who retaliated against them for exercising their right to remove themselves from such conditions.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Ministry of Labor did not effectively enforce OSH or overtime laws. Penalties for wage, hour, and OHS violations were less than those for similar crimes, such as fraud or negligence, and were regularly applied against OSH violators. The Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) received 88 complaints related to health and safety by August 31. Labor inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and could initiate sanctions. The law granted LMRA inspectors the status of judicial police officers during labor inspections, with enhanced authority to inspect workplaces and implement labor law. As of August 31, the LMRA referred 1,121 labor violations for public prosecution.

On August 6, the LMRA announced it had begun issuing international bank account numbers to all migrant workers entering the country to help reduce wage theft.

The LMRA informed employers who confiscated passports that they were subject to administrative penalties and implemented such measures when employers either failed to return passports to employees or were repeat offenders. The LMRA prohibited at-fault employers from hiring new workers. Recruitment agencies complicit in illegal practices could be subject to license revocation, legal action, shutdown of business operations, or a forfeit of license deposits. During the year the government shut down recruitment agencies and revoked licenses of others for infringing on

workers' rights.

LMRA inspections could result in fines, court cases, loss of work permits, and termination of businesses. Inspectors had the authority to levy fines and close worksites if employers did not improve conditions by specified deadlines. A judge determined fines per violation, per worker affected, or both. A judge could also sentence violators to prison. For repeat violators, the court could double the penalties. The number of labor inspectors was not sufficient to enforce compliance. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concern that resources for enforcement of the laws were inadequate for the number of worksites and workers, that worksites would not be inspected, and that violations would continue.

On July 7, the Labor Ministry launched a hotline to receive complaints against employers who violated the summer outdoor work ban, designed to limit workers' exposure to excessive heat. On July 24, the labor minister stated his ministry's inspection team had carried out 6,252 unannounced visits to labor sites since July 1 and found five companies in violation of the summer heat ban. On September 2, the cabinet extended the summer outdoor work ban from its previous two-month time frame to three months (June through September). Authorities enforced the ban with regard to large firms, but according to local observers, violations by smaller businesses were common and without consequences. Employers who violated the ban were subject to up to three months' imprisonment, fines, or both, but

enforcement was inconsistent.

On September 1, the king amended the law prohibiting foreign employees from working in the country without a valid permit and requiring employers to obtain such permits for their foreign workers. The royal edict reduced employer fines for first-time violators if the employer paid the fine within 14 days. Repeat offenders were required to pay double. The decree-law also reduced the fine for workers with expired work permits if the permit was renewed within 10 days of expiry.

The government published pamphlets on foreign workers' rights in several languages and provided manuals on these rights to local diplomatic missions. Workers could file complaints with the government via email, in person, or through government hotlines. Most cases involving abused domestic workers, however, did not reach the ministry or the public prosecutor.

Violations of overtime and OSH standards were common in sectors employing informal foreign workers, such as construction, automotive repair, and domestic service.

According to NGOs, workplace safety inspection and compliance were substandard. Because the law did not fully protect domestic workers, this group was particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to the difficulties of oversight and access to private residences.

The informal sector was estimated to make up approximately one-third of the labor force. The Ministries of Labor and Interior acknowledged severe underreporting of abuse and labor exploitation in the informal sector. The government had separate laws governing general labor and domestic labor. While the government made significant efforts to provide protections to domestic workers, many of the government's legal protections for workers did not extend to employees in the informal sector, including entitlements to paid annual leave or overtime pay. An amendment to the labor law to expand the protection of domestic workers was under review by the parliament as of year's end.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The constitution prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention, and the law provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these requirements.

Suspects could be held in pretrial detention for up to three months, after

which the case was referred to the attorney general. Pretrial detention should not exceed six months, according to the law. The High Criminal Court had to authorize any extensions beyond that period and any renewals at 30-day intervals.

On August 20, the UN secretary-general issued a report on reprisals for cooperation with the United Nations, citing the cases of Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, Abduljalil al-Singace, Sayed Ahmed al-Wadaei, and Hassan Mushaima as human rights activists subjected to arbitrary arrest, lengthy sentences, mistreatment, torture, and removal of citizenship, among other forms of reprisals.

Human rights groups reported the Ministry of Interior summoned and questioned individuals for attending protests and demonstrations, expressing their opinion in public or on social media, and calling for an end to the monarchy (which authorities considered a terrorist act). In publicly reported cases, individuals detained for questioning were released after a few days without charges.

According to a May 22 report from Front Line Defenders, authorities subjected human rights activists to judicial harassment, intimidation, and threats to their livelihoods, and in many cases charged them under “terrorist” or “national security”-related laws with lengthy prison sentences “to silence criticism of human rights violations in the country.”

On March 25, the Ministry of Interior Criminal Investigation Directorate reportedly summoned opposition figure Ebrahim Sharif for questioning after he criticized local housing conditions and the country's sovereign wealth fund Mumtalakat on social media and alleged the government misused public money. His wife, political activist Farida Ghulam, said on X (formerly Twitter) he was detained and referred to the public prosecution for investigation due to describing Mumtalakat's acquisition of the British McLaren Group as a waste of public funds when pressing social needs needed to be addressed. On March 28, local media sources reported Sharif was released without charges.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or

Punishment

The constitution prohibited such practices, but domestic and international human rights organizations, as well as detainees and former detainees, maintained that abuse and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government security officials continued during the year.

Prominent prisoners, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Abduljalil al-Singace, alleged prison authorities refused to refer them to medical specialists and denied them access to necessary medicines. Prisoner advocates likewise maintained the Ministry of Health provided prisoners inadequate access to certain medical care and specialist physicians.

On July 11, five UN experts sent a letter to the government expressing concern regarding the impact of the “continued arbitrary detention of human rights defenders” Abduljalil al-Singace, Hassan Mushaima, Abdulla Isa Abdullah Mahroos, and Abdulhadi al-Khawaja on their health. According to the letter, al-Khawaja’s health significantly deteriorated “as a result of severe physical, sexual, and psychological torture” and inadequate medical care during his imprisonment. The letter also stated Mushaima’s health deteriorated and authorities denied him access to adequate medical care. The experts reported al-Singace and Mushaima were held in prolonged solitary confinement and denied access to sunlight since their transfer to Kanoo Medical Center in 2021.

On March 25, the Ministry of Interior announced the death of Jaw Prison inmate Hussain Khalil al-Ramram, who was serving a 15-year sentence on terrorism charges. The government released closed-circuit television footage of his collapse in the prison yard while playing soccer. The Ministry of Health stated al-Ramram's death was due to cardiorespiratory arrest following chronic health problems, and stated he received 201 medical checkups between 2018 and his last appointment nine days prior to his death. Activists, however, claimed medical negligence caused his demise. On March 3, al-Ramram released a voice message from his prison cell accusing prison authorities of not providing proper medication and delaying his medical checkups. Several opposition social media accounts also reported al-Ramram never received hernia surgery initially scheduled for 2022.

On March 26, following al-Ramram's death, several prisoners in Jaw Prison banged on their cell doors and defied guards' orders to remain in their cells. Prisoners demanded unconditional release and demonstrated by destroying equipment and refusing to return to their cells in several buildings. Guards were instructed not to use force to move inmates back into their cells to avoid conflict and physical confrontation, and allowed the protests to continue, during which inmates took over five buildings at Jaw for more than four months. In August, NGOs, activists, and opposition social media accounts reported prison authorities restricted water and food portions starting in May in response to the protests and turned off air conditioning

and electricity intermittently in July and August.

On August 12, three UN experts sent a letter to the government asserting that conditions at Jaw Prison “do not appear to comply with the requirements of humane and dignified treatment.” The experts also expressed concerns regarding “restrictions on prisoners’ movements to court, clinic, or hospital appointments.” According to a December 15 report from the opposition-affiliated human rights organization Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), approximately 1,000 political prisoners were protesting in March, but more than 800 political prisoners were pardoned collectively in the April 8, June 15, and September 4 pardons. By late August to early September, negotiations between prisoners and authorities led to decreased tensions, many prisoners ended their strikes, and fewer than 100 prisoners remained on strike.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

The law prohibited the worst forms of child labor. There were no confirmed reports during the year of the worst forms of child labor. The 2012 labor law set the minimum age of employment at 15 years. The minimum age applied to children working in all sectors except domestic workers, who were governed by separate laws. LMRA regulations required foreign domestic workers to be at least 18 years old to obtain a work permit. Most

domestic workers in the country were foreign workers. The law specified that children under 18 could not be employed in hazardous conditions and could not work overtime or night-time hours. They also could not work more than four consecutive hours or six hours per day, and they were granted annual leave which could not be waived. Children also had to undergo a medical exam prior to employment. Those who employed underage children could be imprisoned for three months or fined, which was commensurate with analogous crimes. The government effectively enforced child labor laws and regularly conducted monitoring and inspections. The government offered children who were victims of forced labor the option to receive services at the Expat Protection Center, the Child Protection Center, or foster care.

Child Marriage

According to the law, the minimum age of marriage was 16 for girls and 18 for boys, but special circumstances allowed marriages at younger ages with approval from a family court. The government enforced the law effectively.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government generally cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law did not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government did not have a system for providing protection to refugees. The government at times provided protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Such protection was mostly limited to those who were able to obtain and maintain employment. Such individuals generally had access to health care and education services while employed but were at risk of deportation if they became unemployed or their country of origin revoked their passports.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

The Jewish community was estimated at approximately three dozen persons. Antisemitic media statements and protests by local citizens occurred regularly. No incidents of antisemitic violence were reported.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

There were new developments related to prior instances of the government engaging in acts of transnational repression.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion

On October 4, Reuters reported London's Court of Appeal ruled Bahrain could not claim state immunity to block a lawsuit brought in the United Kingdom by two dissidents, Saeed Shehabi and Moosa Mohammed, alleging the Bahraini government infected their computers with surveillance software called FinSpy around 2011 and had agents monitor their work with political prisoners in Bahrain. The matter remained before British courts without a final determination as of year's end.