

Kuwait 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

On May 10, the amir suspended the National Assembly (parliament) and some articles of the constitution for up to four years. Authorities subsequently arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced several citizens, including political activists and former members of parliament, for criticizing this decision. This development represented a significant change in the human rights situation in Kuwait during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious restrictions on free expression and media freedom, including censorship; and trafficking in persons, including forced labor.

The government took credible steps in some cases to prosecute 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. In June, the Court of Appeals upheld a

death sentence for a law enforcement officer with a possible mental illness who committed an unlawful killing in April 2023.

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 expression, including for members of the press and other media, but authorities imposed serious restrictions on these rights, including censorship and criminal libel laws. The law also imposed penalties on persons who created or sent “immoral” messages or spread “false news.” The law gave the Public Prosecution Office the power to order suspension of communication services on national security grounds.

The law banned certain issues from publication and public discussion, including insulting religion, in particular Islam; criticizing the amir; endangering relations between Kuwait and friendly countries; insulting members of the judiciary or displaying disdain for the constitution; sorcery; and information that could lead to a devaluation of the currency or create

false economic worries. In general, local activists, academics, journalists, and opposition figures reported that Kuwait State Security, the Ministry of Information, or the Public Prosecution Office sometimes contacted them after they had published opinions deemed contrary to government positions. Authorities did not always take immediate action against overseas citizens' social media posts but reserved the right to do so once the author returned to the country. Officials had broad latitude to interpret what constituted a crime in criticizing the amir or the government, and activists could face up to seven years in prison for each count.

The law criminalized “defaming Islamic religion” or God in a broader sense. Muslim citizens or residents had the right to file criminal charges against individuals they believed had defamed Islam or God. The constitution stated the amir was “immune and inviolable,” and the law criminalized defamation and criticism of the amir, as well as of senior officials and rulers of neighboring countries.

The law prohibited on national security grounds the publication or transmission of any information deemed subversive to the constitutional system. The government prosecuted online bloggers, political activists, and social media outlets under the Cybercrime Law, the Printing and Publications Law, and the National Security Law. The government generally restricted freedom of speech in instances purportedly related to national security, for example glorifying Saddam Hussein or references to the Arabian

Gulf as the Persian Gulf.

In June, the Criminal Court sentenced London-based asylum seeker and activist Salman al-Khalidi to five years of hard labor in absentia for defaming the amir on social media. The charges involved broadcasting allegedly false news, including defending the rights of Bidoon (stateless persons of Arab heritage) and prisoners of conscience. In April, an amiri decree revoked the citizenship of al-Khalidi and his dependents.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

According to a June Amnesty International report, a court sentenced Abdullah Fairouz and Fuhaid al-Ajami, editor in chief of the online media venture *TfTeeeSH*, to five years in prison in a “state security case” on charges of spreading “false news” about statements Fairouz made in a 2022 interview with *TfTeeeSH* posted online. In June, an appellate court reduced Fairouz’s sentence to three years and reversed the conviction of al-Ajami, resulting in his release from prison.

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

Independent media were active and expressed a variety of views within legally permissible limits. All print media were privately owned, although self-censorship and the law limited their independence based on fear of

prosecution. The government did not permit non-Islamic religious publishing companies to distribute materials, although several churches published religious materials solely for their congregations' use. The law stipulated large fines and up to 10 years in prison for persons who used any means, including media, to subvert the state.

Media outlets expressed a range of opinions on topics relating to social problems, but all appeared to self-censor, avoiding critical discussion of topics such as the amir and religion or any discussion of sensitive topics such as sex. Authorities censored most English-language educational materials that mentioned the Holocaust and required educational material either to refer to Israel as "Occupied Palestine" or to remove such references entirely, although they did not censor these topics in the news media.

In March, the Ministry of Information announced it would take action against artistic works that insulted the country or harmed societal morals, specifically targeting "offensive" Ramadan television shows. Although not naming it directly, the statement followed the airing of episodes of the controversial television series *One Wife is Not Enough*. In April, the ministry stopped the series for its allegedly offensive content, presumably due to references to customary marriages, incest, infidelity, harassment, and what it deemed the inappropriate portrayal of polygamy. It referred its creators to the Public Prosecution Office for "violating Kuwaiti values" and banned the actors from future projects in Kuwait.

According to a June Amnesty International statement, authorities “continue to treat nationality as a privilege that they arbitrarily dispense or deny to Kuwaitis based on their political opinions”. Amnesty stated the government issued three decrees during the year denaturalizing at least nine Kuwaiti men, and some of their wives and children. The orders did not state the reason behind their denaturalization, but they were part of a larger citizenship revocation campaign. At least one of the men criticized Kuwait and other Arab Gulf governments online.

In October, former member of parliament Shuaib al-Muwaizri alleged on X (formerly Twitter) that authorities detained him at Kuwait International Airport for more than 80 hours before denying him entry into the country. Subsequently, the Public Prosecution Office summoned approximately 25 bloggers, including former members of parliaments, to investigate allegations they had spread false news, particularly concerning claims the government had denied al-Muwaizri entry to the country. The case had not yet been decided as of year’s end.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of citizen workers to form and join trade unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes, but there were significant restrictions. Unions were independent of the government but

were required to register with the Public Authority of Manpower. The government did not generally interfere with or discriminate against trade unions; however, the law prohibited trade unions from conducting political activities.

The law stipulated any new union had to include a minimum of 100 workers and that at least 15 had to be citizens. Union rights were limited for foreign workers, who constituted more than 80 percent of the workforce. They could only join unions as nonvoting members after completing five years of work in the sector the union represented and obtaining a certificate of good conduct and moral standing from the government. They could not run for seats or vote in board elections. Foreign workers had the right to bargain collectively at their workplace and could participate in unions but were not permitted to form trade unions. The International Labor Organization and the International Trade Union Confederation criticized the citizenship requirement as discouraging unions in sectors that employed few citizens, such as construction and most other private-sector employment.

The labor law did not apply to domestic workers or maritime employees. Separate labor laws set work conditions in the public, private, domestic worker, and oil sectors. The law permitted multiple unions within enterprises. Public-sector employees could unionize, but the government authorized only one public-sector labor federation, the Kuwait Trade Union Federation.

The law provided for collective bargaining with no minimum number of workers required to form a bargaining unit. There were limits on the right to strike. Citizens in the private sector had the right to strike but cumbersome provisions calling for compulsory negotiation and arbitration in the case of disputes limited that right in practice. The law did not prohibit retaliation against striking workers or prevent the government from interfering in union activities, including the right to strike.

The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and employer interference with union functions. The law provided for reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. The law empowered the courts to dissolve a union for violating labor laws or for threatening “public order and morals,” although a union could appeal those rulings. Government agencies and citizens could petition the Court of First Instance to dissolve a union. Additionally, the amir could dissolve a union by decree. The government treated union worker actions by citizens and foreign workers differently. Citizens generally faced no government-imposed penalties for their role in union or strike activities; but companies threatened foreign workers calling for strikes with termination and deportation.

In August, several trade unions, including the Kuwait Trade Unions Federation and the Federation of Public Sector Workers’ Unions, expressed full support for the KUNA Workers’ Union Board after its members were investigated for defending a woman employee who faced harassment. The

unions condemned the investigation as a violation of constitutional and labor rights and called on the prime minister and the minister of information and culture to halt what they described as intimidation and illegal actions against the union members. The government generally enforced freedom of association provisions but placed restrictions on the right to strike.

Penalties were commensurate with those for other laws involving denial of civil rights, such as discrimination. Complaint proceedings for citizens did not involve lengthy delays or appeals. Complaint proceedings for foreign workers generally took longer than for citizens, although the duration also depended on the nature of the complaint.

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

The law set a national monthly minimum wage in the oil and private sectors and a minimum monthly wage for domestic workers. The minimum wage for expatriate workers in the domestic and private labor sectors was 75 dinars (\$246). The minimum wage for expatriate workers in the government sector was 320 dinars (\$1,050). The minimum wage was above the World Bank poverty income level. Most low-wage employees lived and worked in

the country without their families, and employers generally provided at least some form of housing.

The law limited the standard workweek to 48 hours (40 hours for the petroleum industry) and gave private-sector workers 30 days of annual leave. The law forbade requiring employees to work more than 60 hours per week or 10 hours per day. Workers were entitled to 125 percent of base pay for working overtime and 150 percent of base pay for working on their designated weekly day off. Wage and hour law violations were common in the construction, delivery, security services, and domestic labor sectors.

Occupational Safety and Health

The government issued occupational safety and health (OSH) standards that were appropriate for the main industries. The government periodically inspected enterprises to raise awareness among workers and employers and to ensure that they abided by safety rules, controlled pollution in certain industries, trained workers to use machines safely, and reported violations. Workers were responsible for identifying and reporting unsafe situations to relevant agencies. They could file a complaint against an employer if they believed their safety or health were at risk. Workers could also report violations to their embassies, the Kuwait Trade Union Federation, or the Kuwait Society for Human Rights. Noncompliant employers faced warnings, fines, or forced suspension of company operations.

OSH inspectors were required to monitor conditions and take appropriate actions when violations occurred. The Public Authority of Manpower confirmed that it sanctioned companies for violating the noon work ban. It also stated repeat offenders would face legal action and could face fines. In several cases, workers could not remove themselves from unsafe situations without jeopardizing their jobs.

The law provided that all outdoor work cease between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. during June, July, and August, or when the temperature rose to more than 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade.

In August, the Public Authority released labor inspection statistics for the previous month. Inspectors reviewed 94 sites, citing 53 companies for initial violations, though the agency did not find repeated violations during follow-up inspections. The report noted 94 workers were present at these sites, and 41 companies complied with requirements after corrective actions. The agency also received seven labor-related reports and established a hotline for reporting violations, especially those in open areas, available from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. until August 31. OSH violations were common in the construction, security and delivery services sectors.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Public Authority and the Domestic Workers Employment Department were responsible for enforcement of minimum wage, overtime, and OSH

regulations of workers. The government generally enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for crimes such as fraud or negligence. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and labor associations assessed there were insufficient inspectors to enforce compliance due to the large number of workers. Domestic workers and other low-skilled foreign workers in the private sector frequently worked more than 48 hours a week, with no day of rest. The law required workers to earn an established monthly wage to sponsor their family to live in the country, although certain professions were exempted, including teachers and imams.

Although the law prohibited the withholding of workers' passports, the practice remained common among sponsors and employers of foreign workers, particularly domestic workers. The government did not consistently enforce this prohibition. Domestic workers had little recourse when employers violated their rights, except to seek admittance to the migrant workers' shelter, where the government mediated between sponsors and workers. The government then either assisted the worker in finding an alternate sponsor or in obtaining voluntary repatriation.

At times, the Public Authority intervened to resolve labor disputes between foreign workers and their employers. The authority's labor arbitration panel sometimes ruled in favor of foreign laborers who claimed employer violations of work contracts. The government was more effective in resolving unpaid salary disputes involving private-sector laborers than those involving domestic workers.

The government made inconsistent efforts to implement and enforce labor reforms, such as educating households and foreign workers regarding the legal prohibition on passport confiscation and nonpayment of wages. Some employers denied workers their right to a weekly day of rest or to leave their work location. Workers who fled abusive employers faced legal charges for "absconding," had difficulty retrieving their passports, and were deported in most cases.

There were numerous media reports throughout the year of sponsors abusing domestic workers or injuring them when they tried to escape, including some incidents that allegedly resulted in workers' deaths. Women domestic workers were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse. Police and courts were reluctant to prosecute citizens for abuse in private residences but prosecuted some serious cases of abuse, particularly when raised by embassies. The Public Authority operated a shelter for women domestic workers, abuse survivors, or persons who were otherwise unwilling to continue to work for their employers and preferred to leave the country.

The shelter had a 500-bed capacity.

Al-Durra, a government-owned recruiting company, provided services including worker insurance, a 24/7 abuse hotline, and follow-up on allegations of labor rights violations. The government regularly conducted information awareness campaigns in Arabic, English, and three other languages via media outlets and public events and encouraged public and private recruiting companies to comply with labor laws.

In August, the Ministry of Interior reported that the Electronic and Cybercrime Combatting Department, in collaboration with other relevant authorities, had successfully blocked approximately 392 scam websites, including 52 that impersonated the al-Durra domestic workers recruitment company. Media reported on fraudulent residency permits or “visa trading,” in which companies and recruitment agencies colluded to sell visas to prospective workers. Often the jobs and companies mentioned in these visas did not exist and workers were vulnerable to exploitation on the black market or in the informal sector, where some recruitment agencies and employers forced them to repay the cost of their fake visa. Some noncitizen workers reportedly told the Public Prosecution Office they had paid approximately 1,500 dinars (\$4,920) each to travel to the country for work. In April, al-Seyassah interviewed a lawyer and labor activist, Mohamed al-Ajmi, who claimed that the resumption of Kuwaiti residency visa issuance had revived pay-to-play visa schemes, especially for Egyptian workers, who

pay \$11,500 for work visas with fictitious companies. Since workers could not freely or easily change jobs under the employer-based visa sponsorship system, many were unwilling to leave their initial job, even if visa middlemen had misled them regarding their position or employment conditions. Workers who left their employers due to abusive treatment, nonpayment, late payment of wages, or unacceptable working conditions risked charges of absconding, illegal residency, and deportation.

Authorities attempted to crack down on visa middlemen who recruited foreign workers and failed to provide them with jobs. Reports indicated employers forced domestic workers to work overtime without additional compensation. The government usually limited punishment for abusive employers to administrative actions, such as fines, shutting employment firms, issuing orders for employers to return withheld passports, or requiring employers to pay back wages.

There were reports of domestic workers dying or attempting to commit suicide due to abuse, including sexual violence or poor working conditions. Legal protections for domestic workers included a formal grievance process managed by the Domestic Workers Employment Department. Workers who were not satisfied with the department's arbitration decision had the right to file a claim in the labor court.

Several embassies whose citizens were among the large domestic worker populations experienced varying degrees of success in pressing the

government to prosecute serious cases of domestic-worker abuse, including life-threatening injuries or death.

According to the law, all foreign workers had to register in formal positions with local sponsors, but in practice foreign workers also worked in the informal sector. Some domestic workers were known to work additional hours outside of their contract, a practice that could either be voluntary or forced. Workers in the informal sector typically worked as cleaners, day laborers, food delivery workers, drivers, street vendors, shepherds, farmers, agricultural specialists, and in nail and massage parlors. Workers in the informal sector typically received very low wages and worked in unsafe conditions.

The law did not establish OSH standards for workers in the informal economy because the government denied having an informal sector. The government did not publish estimates of the number of workers in the informal sector. The informal sector was estimated to comprise tens of thousands of workers.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

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

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court, except when related to questions of citizenship or residency status. The government often did not observe these requirements.

There were numerous reports by NGOs of police arresting and detaining noncitizens without a warrant as part of a government effort to deport unlawful residents. There were also several reports of arbitrary arrest of citizens.

Authorities detained some suspects, especially in drug and state security cases, for up to two weeks without notification of the charges against them. Authorities did not allow these suspects to make telephone calls or contact lawyers and family members.

In April, *Arab Times Kuwait* reported the State Security General Department at the Interior Ministry faced criticism for arresting and interrogating parliamentary candidate Mused al-Quraifa regarding his election campaign statements. Several members of parliament condemned the arrest as unjust and a violation of the candidate's constitutional rights, calling for al-Quraifa's release. Human rights activist Mohamed al-Humaidi also criticized the ministry for denying al-Quraifa access to his lawyer, arguing that this action violated legal and international standards.

Pretrial detention was a problem. Authorities held some detainees beyond the maximum pretrial detention period of six months. Prolonged detention at the Talha Deportation Center was problematic, particularly in cases where a noncitizen detainee allegedly owed money to a citizen or lacked in-country diplomatic representation that could provide exit documents. The government stated it resolved most deportation cases within three days, but international organizations reported they could take up to a month to resolve.

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 and law prohibited torture and other cruel, inhuman, or

degrading treatment or punishment, but media and NGOs reported torture and mistreatment by police and security forces.

Several noncitizens claimed that police or Kuwait State Security force members beat them at police checkpoints or in detention. At least five foreign nationals reported credible cases of abuse or mistreatment during arrest or interrogation by law enforcement officers, including from the Ministry of Interior's Drug Enforcement General Directorate.

There were credible indications police, Kuwait State Security members, and Drug Enforcement officers abused prisoners during arrest or interrogation.

In March, the Criminal Court sentenced a brigadier general and a lieutenant colonel from the Juvenile Investigation Department to four years of hard labor for torturing and mistreating two juveniles. The Public Prosecution Office charged them with using torture and physical violence to extract confessions and information about a felony case. In May, the Court of Appeals reversed the defendants' sentence for good behavior and released them upon payment of 10,000 dinars (\$32,800).

In July, the Court of Cassation sentenced a Ministry of Interior officer to seven years in prison for assaulting a Bangladeshi national in 2023 over a car-washing dispute, which left the victim quadriplegic. The court ordered the officer to pay compensation for the damages caused.

Activists representing Bidoon reported mistreatment at the hands of

authorities while in detention. Individuals alleged security personnel subjected them to physical and verbal abuse in police centers and state security detention centers.

The government actively investigated complaints against police personnel and took appropriate disciplinary actions in certain instances.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

The law prohibited the worst forms of child labor and employment of persons below age 15, and there were no confirmed reports of the worst forms of child labor. The law also limited working hours, provided occupational safety and health restrictions for children, and set a minimum employment age for children working in all sectors. Persons ages 15 to 18 could work if they received a medical examination and were not employed in sectors considered hazardous or harmful to their health. The law permitted persons ages 15 to 18 to work for a maximum of six hours per day and for no more than four hours straight, followed by a break of at least one hour. This age group could not work overtime hours, on weekly rest days, on official holidays, or from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. Youth younger than 15 were sometimes seen selling food and small gifts at stop lights and other public places throughout the country.

The government effectively enforced the child labor law and applied penalties regularly against violators. Penalties were commensurate with or less than those for analogous serious crimes.

Child Marriage

The legal marriage age was 18, but tradition and family expectations sometimes resulted in girls marrying at a younger age within some tribal groups. Authorities generally 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 granting asylum or refugee status, and the government did not have a system for providing protections to refugees. The constitution prohibited the extradition of applicants for refugee status in third countries.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

There were no known Jewish citizens and an estimated few dozen Jewish

foreign resident workers. Antisemitic rhetoric generally originated from self-proclaimed Islamists or conservative opinion writers. There were reported cases of clerics and others making statements that perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jews. Columnists often conflated Israeli government actions or views with the Jewish religion. The government did not recognize Israel as a state, and authorities instructed teachers to expunge any references to Israel or the Holocaust from English-language textbooks.

For further information on incidents in the country of antisemitism, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, see the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.