

2020

Bahrain

Freedom

in Quarantine





Bahrain 2020: Freedom in Quarantine

Bahrain press association
Organization concerned with defending
freedom of expression in Bahrain
Founded in London
9th July 2011

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Introduction

During the year 2020, the Bahrain Press Association documented 111 infringements of media freedoms and freedom of expression in public and virtual spheres in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Thus, the number of documented acts of infringement since the February 2011 uprisings until December 2020 rose to about 1,706 violations.

Entitling the eleventh annual report of the Bahrain Press Association, "Bahrain 2020: Freedom in Quarantine" comes as an indication to the silencing imposed on Bahraini voices by the state through its security and judicial apparatus.

According to the annual monitoring carried out by the Association for the tenth year in a row, violations this year included 51 judicial procedures or referrals to the Public Prosecution, 25 arrests and 12 cases of summoning for interrogation, in addition to 23 cases of various forms of violation, including threats, blocking websites, layoffs, as well as introducing legislation restricting freedom of speech.

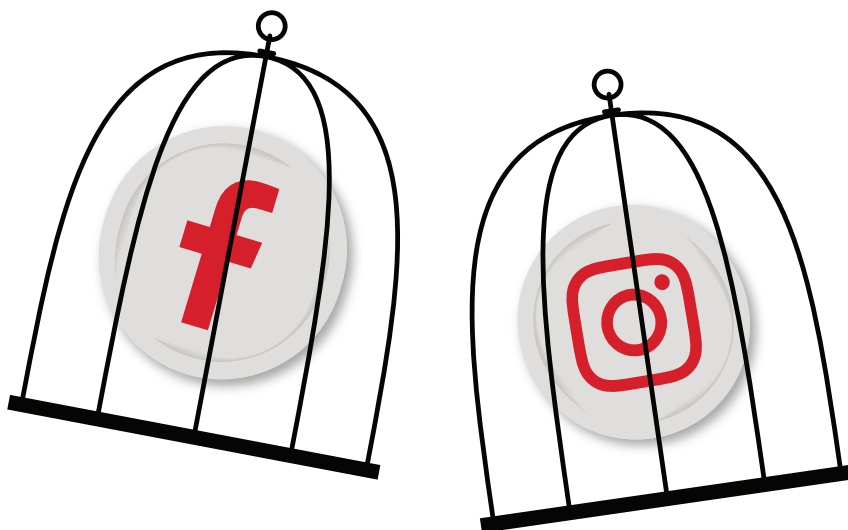
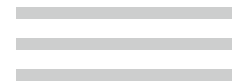
The majority of these infringements came in response to opinions Bahraini nationals and residents expressed on social media, whether about domestic or regional issues. On top of pretexts the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate of the Ministry of Interior used to summon cyber activists for interrogation was "misusing social media." This repeated, loose accusation may include criticizing the state officials' performance or the work of ministries or even commenting on regional events. It also includes playing with national currency notes, criticizing social phenomena or publishing historical information contrary to the official narrative.



- **This happens** while the government shows indifference to the local criticism and
- the regional and international periodic reports that place the country in late ranks
- in media and Internet freedoms indexes.

The Anti-Cybercrime Law 60 of 2014, which regulates the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate's work, does not stipulate any authority to monitor cyber activity pertaining to expression or other political content. Only trading, transmitting, disseminating, or publishing pornographic content—especially that is directed at children—is the area of the Directorate's operation, and are listed under Article 10 on "content-related crimes." Otherwise, the law does not refer to any authority given to the Directorate to monitor cyber activity. Even with regard to the six types of crimes that fall within its scope of work, none of them pertain to speech and expression. Nevertheless, the Cybercrime Directorate seems to have been obsessed with people expressing their opinions on social media.

The Bahraini Press Association regrets the deterioration of press freedom and freedom of expression in general in Bahrain. Indeed, such conditions have led Bahrain to fall behind in all international indicators concerned with freedom of the press. The Association calls on the Bahraini government to take a bold decision to harness the Cybercrime Directorate and reduce its penetration into the public space. It is crucially important to put the Directorate back on its original track as its current practices are defaming the Bahraini state.



Highlights of 2020

Investigation and Interrogation

The Ministry of Interior summoned (3 January 2020) journalist Aqil Swar; Youssef Al-Khagah, a leader in the dissolved WAAD association; and cyber activist Nader Abdel-Imam for tweeting about the American military operation that targeted the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani. Tweeter Khalil Idrabouh was also summoned by the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate (6 January 2020) at 1:00 am over the same issue.

The Public Prosecution summoned (24 March 2020) activist Reda Ali for interrogation about a social media campaign that he launched to demand the return of Bahrainis stranded in the Iranian city of Mashhad after the closure of airports due to the spread of the Coronavirus. The Ministry of Interior summoned (7 April 2020) the well-known Bahraini singer Hind, accusing her of “publishing false information about home delivery workers’ conditions.” Security authorities summoned (27 April 2020) photojournalist Mazen Mahdi for interrogation about his tweets regarding the Saudi position on the Palestinian cause.

The Public Prosecution summoned (1 June 2020) the renowned lawyer Fatima Al-Hawaj for interrogation about a social media post. In addition, the Cybercrime Directorate summoned (5 July 2020) psychologist Dr. Sharifa Swar after she had published a video clip in which she talked about possessing evidence confirming that the “Lyrica” drug pills distributed in Bahrain come from the .Ministry of Health’s storehouses

The Public Prosecution summoned (15 October 2020) nutritional therapist Dr. Alia Almoayed for publishing information and advice on alternative medicine. The National Health Regulatory Authority (NHRA) filed a complaint against her. The Cybercrime Directorate summoned (4 November 2020) journalist Jaafar Al-Jamri over a tweet criticizing the Ministry of Education’s “Future Schools” project. It also summoned (14 December 2020) the former President of the Muharraq Club Fans Association Saad Mahboub without



Prosecution and Courts

A primary court sentenced (9 January 2020) the blogger and former parliament candidate, Abdullah Al-Sahli, to one-month imprisonment for a social media broadcast criticizing the head of the Civil Service Bureau. Likewise, a Bahraini court sentenced (16 January 2020) two foreign girls to 6 months in prison and deportation from Bahrain after being convicted of “practicing prostitution and encouraging its practice and publishing pornographic content” on social media. The appeals court replaced (30 January 2020) the one-year sentence and fine against the psychiatrist Dr. Sharifa Swar (in the lawsuit of Hamad Girls Preparatory School) with an alternative sentence for the same period.

The Ministry of Interior referred (16 March 2020) 41 lawsuits against citizens (whose identities were not disclosed) to the public prosecution for allegedly disseminating rumors about the Coronavirus. The Cybercrime Directorate (11 April 2020) announced that legal (unknown) measures were taken against a Bahraini citizen aged 39. He reposted an old video clip on his social media account about a vandalism incident against mosques few months earlier. The First Minor Criminal Court (27 April 2020) sentenced an Asian resident to 6 months in prison and deportation from the country on charges of publicly offending a religious sect. The Court of Cassation upheld (24 August 2020) the one-year imprisonment of the Shiite Cleric Sheikh Abd al-Mohsen Mulla Atiyah al-Jamri for “insulting the Umayyad caliph Muawiya bin Abi Sufyan”.

The Court of Cassation revoked (21 September 2020) the sentence against a Bahraini politician who wrote a comment deemed “an offense to the Divine Self,” and returned the lawsuit to the court that issued the ruling for reconsideration. A local court sentenced (15 October 2020) a citizen in his fifties to one year in prison and fined him 1000 dinars for “refusing to wear a face mask and filming a video clip while refusing to do so and challenging the police officer.” A local court acquitted (29 September 2020) lawyer Abdullah Hashem of the charge of “intentional spreading of false news.” The Lower Criminal Court sentenced the psychiatrist Dr. Sharifa Swar to seven months for posting a video clip on social media in which “she tried to appeal to followers and claimed her innocence by accusing employees of false testimony against her.”



Arrests

The Ministry of Interior arrested (15 March 2020) an anonymous person on charges of “propagating the rumor of imposing national safety procedures, and urging people to quickly purchase their food needs due to the development of the Coronavirus crisis.” Security authorities arrested (30 January 2020) the historian Jassim Al Abbas, author of the “Years of al-Jareesh” blog, on charges of posting false information on social media.

They also arrested (5 May 2020) a foreign woman for what the authorities described as “incitement to engage in acts of immoral behavior by posting immoral images on social media.” The Cybercrime Directorate announced (6 May 2020) the arrest of an Asian man who “misused social media by posting a video containing money manipulation in his car.” The Criminal Investigation Police arrested (25 May 2020) two persons (both 33 years old and of Asian nationality) after they had published a video clip that included what the police considered “a violation of public morals.” Security authorities arrested (28 May 2020) lawyer Rashed Al Binali and accused him of “spreading false news through his social media account about the Corona pandemic.” The Ministry of Interior arrested (19 June 2020) two Asians on charges of posting a video clip that contained what the Ministry called “money manipulation.”

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate announced (18 July 2020) the arrest of a person (Ahmed Al-Bankhalil, 35 years old) on charges of “publishing a tweet insulting a religious sect and inciting hatred against it.” Security authorities arrested (28 August 2020) Dr. Wissam Al-Areed, on charges of “publicly insulting a companion [of the Prophet] in his recitation of the ceremony of Imam Hussein’s visit—a ritual Shiites usually do in the month of Muharram. The Public Prosecution ordered (17 September 2020) a Bahraini woman to be held in pretrial detention on charges of “publishing tweets that infringe on the Islamic religion and promote atheism.” Security authorities arrested (25 September 2020) a person (50 years old) whom it considered “misusing social media,” after he posted a video showing his refusal to wear a face mask.

The Ministry of Interior arrested (11 November 2020) ten people among whom was director Yasser Nasser. The Ministry said that they “published offensive and illegal phrases after the death of the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa.” Security authorities arrested (24 November 2020) two people on charges of “misusing social media by publishing images that violate public morals.”



Threats and Other Violations

The Ministry of Interior vowed (3 January 2020) to take “legal measures against everyone who uses social media accounts to violate public order, stir up discord, threaten civil peace and social fabric, and undermine security and stability in Bahrain.” Al-Watan newspaper, speaking for the Royal Court, dismissed (26 January 2020) 12 of its staff, claiming that its operational conditions necessitated its restructuring.

Journalist Nasser Zein lost his job (13 February 2020) in ‘Layalina’ magazine after its closure. In addition, he lost all financial dues (8 years) after the administrative staff (all of Arab nationalities) had left the country. Journalist Mahmoud Al-Jaziri who is spending one year in the central ‘Jaw Prison’ was subjected to additional punishment (9 April 2020) and thus transferred to a solitary confinement following the spread of a leaked audio clip in which he refuted the allegations of the National Institution for Human Rights about the prison's readiness to prevent COVID-19.

The Ministry of the Interior warned (24 April 2020) against the publication and circulation of a leaked audio message by prisoner Issa al-Jasim, demanding the prisoners’ release to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the prison. The Ministry of Labour and Social Development banned (9 May 2020) a webinar on anti-normalization with Israel that was scheduled for online streaming. Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince of Bahrain and Deputy Prime Minister (currently the Prime Minister) amended (17 July 2020) the executive regulations of the Civil Service Law to prevent civil servants from expressing any criticism of government policies.

The General Administration for Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security vowed (2 October 2020) to pursue what it described as “suspicious accounts” on social media that “aim at stirring up discord, threatening civil peace and the social fabric, and destabilizing security in the Kingdom of Bahrain,” as well as pursuing those who follow these accounts. In coordination with the relevant authorities, the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate of the Ministry of Interior shut down (11 November 2020) a website that allegedly published false information about the Coronavirus. The authorities also blocked (22 November 2020) the alternative website of the opposition online newspaper ‘Bahrain Mirror’, which visitors used to use to access the content of the newspaper, which has been blocked since 2011.



The Documented Violations

January 2020

The Interior vows to pursue tweeters



The Bahraini Ministry of Interior warned (3 January 2020) against interacting with “social media accounts that aim to stir discord, threaten civil peace and the social fabric, and undermine security and stability in Bahrain, which are administered from outside” after the US military operation during which the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, was killed. The Ministry pledged via its Twitter account “to take legal measures against anyone who uses social media accounts in violation of public order and interacts with these accounts.”

Tweeters summoned for posting about Soleimani

The Ministry of Interior summoned (3 January 2020) a number of social media users, including journalist Aqil Swar, the leader of the dissolved WAAD Association Youssef Al-Khaja, and the cyber activist Nader Abdul-Imam. The summons reported that Interior officers asked them to avoid involvement in the regional conflict. The interrogated commented on the US military operation that led to killing the Iranian military general Qassem Soleimani on their Twitter accounts. The officers also asked them to delete all the tweets they published in this regard, and they complied. In a phone call with journalist Aqeel Swar, the director of the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate, Basem Al-Ma’raj, justified his request to delete all his related tweets that “the region is undergoing a critical moment because of what is happening in Iraq, and that we are trying to distance Bahrain from any forces that may get us involved.”

Khalil Idrabouh summoned for publishing a Quranic verse

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate of the Ministry of Interior summoned (6 January 2020) tweeter Khalil Idrabouh at 1:00 AM. Officers interrogated him about a Quranic verse he published on his Instagram account commenting on the US operation that targeted the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force. Idrabouh was also obliged to sign a pledge.

Two foreign women imprisoned and deported for publishing inappropriate photos

A local court sentenced (16 January 2020) two foreign girls to 6 months in prison and deportation from Bahrain after being convicted of “practicing prostitution and encouraging its practice and publishing pornographic content” on social media.

Al-Watan Newspaper fired 12 journalists

Al-Watan newspaper informed (26 January 2020) 12 of its staff members of their “dismissal” due to the operating conditions that required its restructuring. The dismissed are both Bahrainis and Arabs of other nationalities. Regarding the case’s developments, the Minister of Labor Jamil Humaidan held a meeting (27 January 2020) with the newspaper’s management, leading to an agreement to allow the concerned employees to stay for a period of six months until June/July of 2020, and then the dismissal decision takes effect.

Abdullah Al-Sahli convicted for criticising state officials

A primary court sentenced (9 January 2020) the blogger and former parliament candidate, Abdullah Al-Sahli, to one-month imprisonment. Al-Sahli said that he was convicted for criticizing the head of the Civil Service Bureau for not implementing the Bahrainization plan, describing him as “Rambo” in a recording posted on social media. He said that he was fined 500 dinars and that his criticism was for MP Ali Zayed. The appeals court (12 January 2020) substituted his punishment.

In November 2019, the Ministry of Interior announced through its social media that “in response to photos violating public morals that were circulated on social media, the Protection of Public Morals Directorate managed to arrest two foreign girls who committed acts against public morals, and another Bahraini citizen (28 years old) involved in the incident using his car, and, accordingly, necessary legal measures were taken.”

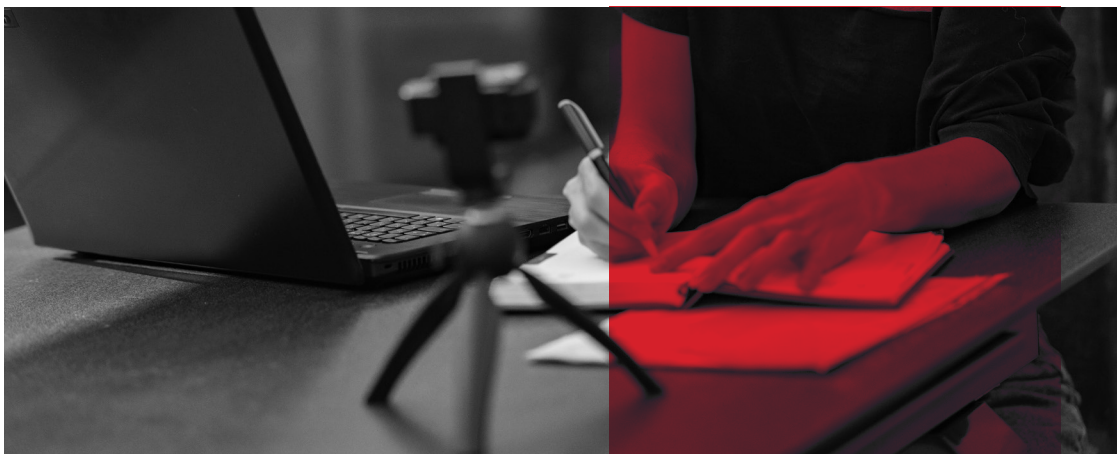
Sharifa Swar’s sentence is substituted

The appeals court replaced (30 January 2020) the one-year sentence and fine against the psychiatrist Dr. Sharifa Swar (in the lawsuit of Hamad Girls Preparatory School) with an alternative sentence for the same period. The minor criminal court sentenced (14 November 2019) Sharifa Swar to one year in prison and fined her 200 dinars and a bail of 500 dinars to suspend the execution until the appeal. The lawsuit was concerning a video clip that was circulated on social media in which few individuals talked about the dismissal of a student from her school for drug dealing. Swar had talked via her Instagram account about drug dealing in schools and the involvement of influential figures in the matter.



A “bail” to release the “Years of al-Jareesh” blogger

Security authorities released (4 February 2020) the historian Jassim Al Abbas, author of the “Years of al-Jareesh” blog, after detaining him for five days on charges of posting false information on social media. Al Abbas was summoned (30 January 2020) to the Criminal Investigation Directorate after he had published a photo of a historical mosque on his Instagram blog “Years of al-Jareesh”, but was released on bail.



The closure of ‘Layalina’ leaves journalist Nasser Zein jobless

Financial conditions forced ‘Layalina’ magazine to a complete shut down and lay off its employees after a career that lasted 17 years.

Nasser Zain was the only press editor working for the magazine alongside a group of photographers and designers. Zain said, “I received with great regret the news of terminating my service after working for the magazine for 8 years. I am now unemployed.” He stated that he did not receive any financial dues for his work in the magazine throughout this period. All Arab magazine managers left Bahrain before paying any financial obligations related to the closure process.



March 2020

A person arrested for spreading rumors in an audio recording

The Ministry of Interior announced (15 March 2020) the arrest of a person who allegedly “disseminated the rumor of imposing national safety procedures and urged people to quickly purchase their food needs due to the development of the Coronavirus crisis.” The Ministry did not disclose his identity. The chief prosecutor of Al-Muharraq governorate Abdullah Al-Thawadi announced (16 March 2020) that the public prosecution “received a notification from the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate that it observed an audio recording circulating on social media containing false news and promoting rumors about the Kingdom’s measures to limit the spread of the Corona pandemic (such as imposing a state of emergency). Such rumors would compromise civil peace and undermine public security.” It added that investigations led to identifying the accused. The prosecution assumed investigations as soon as it received the report and interrogated the accused, who had confessed what was attributed to him. The prosecution ordered his pretrial imprisonment until submitting him to an urgent trial.

Referral of 41 lawsuits to the public prosecution for spreading rumors

The Bahraini Ministry of Interior vowed (16 March 2020) to pursue rumor-mongers on social media regarding Bahrain’s measures to limit the spread of the Corona pandemic. The Director-General of the Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security Administration stated that they “recently investigated 35 reports pertaining to offense and disseminating false news, 23 of which were referred to the Public Prosecution Office.

Besides, 30 reports about social media accounts promoting sectarian incitement through its publications, of which 18 reports were referred to the Public Prosecution for investigation.” He added that “the process of monitoring and tracking violating accounts will continue in preparation for taking the necessary legal measures, as 16 employees work on this task around the clock.” He also noted that “it has been observed that several social media users misuse modern technologies in circulating lies and malicious rumors and spreading fabricated news in a way that could cause concern and disturb public security.”

Activist Rida Ali summoned for launching a social media campaign

The Public Prosecution summoned (24 March 2020) activist Reda Ali for interrogation about a social media campaign that he launched to demand the return of Bahrainis stranded in the Iranian city of Mashhad after suspending flights and closing airports due to the spread of the Coronavirus. He was later released on the same day.



Journalist Mahmoud Al-Jaziri transferred to solitary confinement after a leaked audio clip

Information from the central 'Jaw Prison' confirmed (9 April 2020) that detained journalist Mahmoud Al-Jaziri was subjected to punishment by transferring him to a solitary confinement following the spread of a leaked audio clip in which he refuted the allegations of the National Institution for Human Rights

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April 2020

Singer Hind summoned for posting about delivery workers

The Ministry of Interior announced on its Twitter account (7 April 2020) that the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate took "the necessary legal measures against a citizen who had published false information about the conditions of home delivery workers." It also called for "getting information from its official sources and ignoring rumors." Although the public prosecution did not disclose the identity of that person, it was later known that she was the singer known as the "Bahraini Hind".

about the prison's readiness to prevent COVID-19 and launching the video call service for inmates with their families and other information that came in previous statements by the Institution's president, Maria Khoury, broadcast by Bahrain's official TV. The prison director Hisham Al-Zayani also deprived him and a number of other political detainees of weekly scheduled contact with their relatives.

Legal measures taken against a person for reposting an old video

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate announced (11 April 2020) that legal measures were taken against a Bahraini citizen aged 39 who reposted an old video clip on his social media account. The video was about an incident of vandalism and an assault on a mosque few months earlier. The Directorate did not disclose the person's identity or the measures taken. Additionally, the social media account was completely deleted at a later time.

Photojournalist Mazen Mahdi summoned

Security authorities summoned (27 April 2020) photojournalist Mazen Mahdi for interrogation about his tweets concerning the Saudi position on the Palestinian cause. The interrogating officer requested the immediate deletion of the tweets, and the case was transferred to the court. He was later released on the same day.

The Ministry of Interior calls for non-circulating an audio recording of a criminal prisoner

The Ministry of Interior urged (24 April 2020) not to publish or circulate a leaked audio message by prisoner Issa Al-Jassem demanding an amnesty for prisoners to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus in the prison, promising the prisoners' participation in the campaign launched by the King's son, Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, to donate to the state's efforts in combating the virus. The Ministry tweeted: "The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate: An audio recording has been observed on social media of a person sentenced to death in drug trafficking lawsuits, including smuggling and selling of narcotic substances, amounting to about 86 kilograms of hashish ... Please do not circulate these messages."

6 months and deportation for an Asian for offending a religion

The First Minor Criminal Court (27 April 2020) sentenced an Asian resident to 6-months imprisonment and deportation from the country on charges of publicly offending a religious sect. In the course of the verdict, the court stated that the aforementioned (whose identity has not been revealed) "has publicly offended a religious sect on social media by describing its affiliates as terrorists, and that they are spreading the Coronavirus and killing people."

May 2020

An Asian referred to the Prosecution for misusing social media



The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate announced (6 May 2020) the arrest of an Asian man who “misused social media.” The Directorate tweeted: “Commenting on a circulated video, an Asian (aged 33) was arrested for misusing social media by publishing a video that included manipulating money in his car. Legal measures are being taken in preparation for referring him to the Public Prosecution.”



Ministry of Labour bans a webinar on normalization with Israel

The Ministry of Labour and Social Development banned (9 May 2020) a live webinar on anti-normalization with Israel. The Bahraini Democratic Youth Society said that it had received directives from official authorities and “based on supreme orders” it had to stop a webinar on resisting normalization in the Gulf region the Society was broadcasting. The Society explained that it was “surprised by a call from the official authorities in the Ministry of Labour and Social Development after the normalization webinar began broadcasting, as those authorities informed the Society’s administration to stop the broadcast immediately upon supreme orders.” In a statement, the Society apologised to its audience who were watching the webinar when it was cut off.



Lawyer Rashed Al Binali arrested for posting false news about Coronavirus

Security authorities arrested (28 May 2020) lawyer Rashed Al Binali and accused him of “spreading false news via his social media account about the Corona pandemic.” The Ministry of Interior said that the aforementioned “stated that the virus does not exist in reality and that it is just a lie that aims to obtain people's money, devaluing the measures taken by the government of the Kingdom of Bahrain in this regard, which may result in the non-compliance of citizens and residents with these measures and their abstention from taking preventive measures, and thus undermine the national efforts in facing the pandemic.” The Public Prosecution assumed its investigations, where it interrogated the accused in the presence of his lawyer, and ordered him to be held in pre-trial detention. He was released on 8th of June 2020.

June 2020



Lawyer Fatima Al-Hawaj interrogated about a tweet about Soleimani

The Public Prosecution summoned (1 June 2020) the renowned lawyer Fatima Al-Hawaj for interrogation about a social media post deemed “glorifying Qasim Soleimani,” the Iranian general who was killed in a US air strike by a drone near Baghdad airport. The Prosecution ordered the lawyer's release and the continuation of her interrogation about the incident.



Two Asians arrested for posting a video showing money manipulation

The Ministry of Interior arrested (19 June 2020) two Asians on charges of posting a video clip that contained what the Ministry called “money manipulation.” The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate commented, “In response to video clips circulated on social media, two Asians (aged 26 & 39) were arrested on charges of misusing social media by posting video clips showing manipulation and playing with money. Legal measures are being taken in preparation for their referral to the public prosecution.”

Sharifa Swar summoned for interrogation

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate summoned (5 July 2020) psychologist Dr. Sharifa Swar after she had published a video clip in which she talked about possessing evidence confirming that the "Lyrica" drug pills distributed in Bahrain come directly from the Ministry of Health's storehouses. She was interrogated the following day about the information she gave in the aforementioned video. "My testimony has been taken, and I presented them with evidence, and we are waiting for the gang to be arrested," said Swar, after leaving the Criminal Investigation Department building in the Adliya area.



The 'Cybercrime' warns against Facebook pages

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate announced (16 July 2020) that it had identified fake pages on the social network 'Facebook' carrying the names of local newspapers and that they spread false news, indicating that these pages contain unsafe links that hack computers and mobile phones. The directorate urged social media users to report those fake pages that "intentionally spread false news and baseless claims that aim at causing confusion and destabilization and threaten the social fabric."

A law banning employers from criticising government policies

Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister (currently the Prime Minister) Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, amended (17 July 2020) the executive regulations of the Civil Service Law to prevent civil servants from directing any criticism to government policies. Paragraph (10) of Article (34) of the amended law stated: "The employee may, throughout the occupation of his job, express his opinions by all means, provided that he does not address anything that stirs up disputes in society, or affects national unity, or criticizes government policies and decisions by any means."

Ahmed Al-Bankhalil arrested on charges of "offending a religious sect"

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate announced (18 May 2020) the arrest of a person (35 years old) who "misused social media." It made no reference to his identity, but information indicated that he was the Bahraini citizen, Ahmed Al-Bankhalil. The Directorate said that the accused had "published a tweet insulting and inciting against a religious sect." It also added that "legal measures are being taken in preparation for referring him to the Public Prosecution." The Public Prosecution stated that it "started the investigation as soon as it received a report from the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate, where it interrogated the accused, who admitted that he had published the concerned tweet, and the prosecution ordered him to be held in custody and brought to court."



August 2020

Lawyer Abdullah Hashem on trial on charges of "disseminating false news"

The Public Prosecution (5 August 2020) referred lawyer Abdullah Hashem to the Fifth Minor Court on charges of "intentionally broadcasting false news with the knowledge that it may cause harm to national security and public order." Hashem stated that the accusation was based on eight tweets posted on his Twitter account about community affairs. That was in reference to a media campaign that he led in 2019 to demand a halt to building a complex on a piece of land in the Arad area. The land ownership was transferred to two of the ruling family, one of whom is the son of the Minister of the Royal Court, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa. In May 2019, the Public Prosecution decided to detain lawyer Hashem for a week pending investigation after he was charged with disseminating false news and misusing social media.

Sheikh Abdul Mohsen Al-Jamri's imprisonment for a year on charges of insulting the Umayyad Caliph Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan was upheld

The Court of Cassation upheld (24 August 2020) the one-year imprisonment of the Shiite Cleric Sheikh Abd al-Mohsen Mulla Atiyah al-Jamri for "insulting the Umayyad caliph Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan" in early 2010. The authorities accused Al-Jamri of insulting Muawiyah when he said, "history books are full of figures who have no value in terms of humanity and morals, such as Muawiyah and the Umayyads."



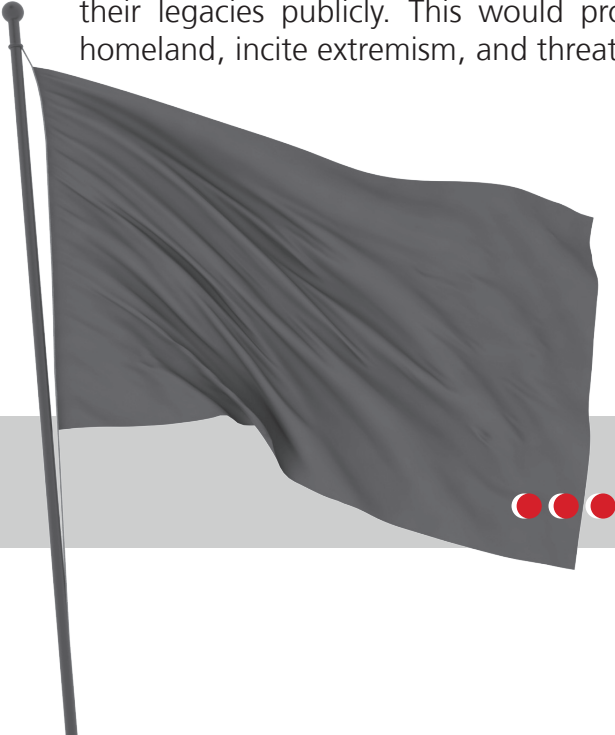
Writer Abdel-Moneim Ibrahim describes Shi'is as "animals" for practicing the rituals of Ashura

Abdul Moneim Ibrahim, the writer in 'Akhbar Al-Khaleej' newspaper, described Shiites (24 August 2020) as "animals" and even considered that animals are better than the Shiites who insist on practicing Ashura rituals during the pandemic. He said in an article published on the date mentioned above, "animals, insects and marine creatures instinctively realize the importance of applying social distancing in cases of disease in order not to transmit the infection to the rest of its healthy group members. So why does a person who is supposed to be more aware and intelligent than animals continue to ignore this innate scientific fact? ... Video clips shared on social media have shown a number of citizens ignoring safety and health precautions, especially distancing during the commemoration of Ashura in Manama ... We wish citizens to be more intelligent and conscious as human beings in facing the virus by maintaining social distancing in this critical moment the world is going through." Lawyer Hoda Al-Shaer filed a case (26 August 2020) against the aforementioned journalist for what was stated in his article as "insulting and contempt for a Muslim sect."



Dr. Wissam Al-Areedh arrested for reading "The Ashura Visit"

Security authorities arrested (28 August 2020) Dr. Wissam Al-Areedh on charges of "publicly insulting a [Prophet's] companion." On its official Twitter account, the Ministry of Interior announced "summoning and arresting a person who delivered a sermon that included legal violations, as he attacked the honorable Companions and publicly insulted a glorified figure of religious sect, which is a subject of glorification or reverence for the people of the community," in reference to Muawiya bin Abi Sufyan. Al-Arrayed read the visit of Imam Hussain (peace be upon him), which the Shiites usually read in the month of Muharram. The Public Prosecution stated that it "received a report from the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate about a video clip circulating on social media showing a person delivering a sermon at a religious event. The sermon included explicit and hidden expressions intended to insult the honorable companions and question their legacies publicly. This would provoke discord among the people of the homeland, incite extremism, and threaten civil peace and the social fabric."



September 2020

A Bahraini woman referred to the Prosecution for propagating “atheistic ideas”



The Public Prosecution ordered (17 September 2020) a Bahraini woman to be held in pretrial detention on charges of “publishing tweets that infringe on the Islamic religion.” The prosecution indicated, through its head, Nasir al-Shaib, that it had received a report from the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate that observed a Twitter account whose holder tweeted in a way deemed “offending the Islamic religion and a contempt for its rituals.” The prosecution added that it “has seen the tweets published on the account and found out that they offend the Divine Self, the Islamic religion and the Holy Qur’an, and insult religious symbols.” The prosecution interrogated the account holder, who confessed—as stated in her statement—the offense attributed to her of the religions and the Islamic religion, offending its rituals and Holy Book, and insulting its symbols, and that she used to publish her atheist ideas in this way in order to share those ideas with others.”

Court of Cassation overturns a one-year sentence for a citizen “insulted the Divine Self”

The Court of Cassation revoked (21 September 2020) the sentence against a Bahraini politician who wrote a comment deemed “an offense to the Divine Self,” and returned the lawsuit to the court for reconsideration. In the reasons for the verdict, it indicated that “the appellant’s attorney submitted a request to hear the victim’s statements, so the court decided to seize the case for judgment, and then issued its judgment without considering his request, and that the appealed judgment had been upheld without responding to the request to hear the victim’s testimony.” The accused did not deny writing the comment, but said that he, “was under the influence of alcohol during that and entered into a heated argument with someone.” The court of first instance sentenced the accused to one year in prison with effect.





A one-year sentence for a fifty-year-old man for “misusing social media”

Security authorities arrested (25 September 2020) a 50-year-old man who posted a video they classified as social media misuse. In its statement on the incident, the Muharraq governorate’s police department said, “In response to a video clip circulating on social media, legal measures have been taken against a person after his refusal to comply with anti-infection procedures, and for insulting a public employee while performing his job, and misusing social media.” On 15 October 2020, a local court sentenced him to one year in prison and a fine of 1000 dinars for “publishing a video clip challenging a policeman and violating his orders to we

Lawyer Abdullah Hashem acquitted of “disseminating false news”

A local court acquitted (29 September 2020) lawyer Abdullah Hashem of the charge of “intentionally spreading false news with the knowledge in advance that it might undermine national security and public order.” The Public Prosecutor sent lawyer Abdullah Hashim (15 May 2019) to the court on charges of “exploiting his personal account in publishing false and unfounded news that would harm the public order.” It also added that it “had seen the news published on the defendant’s personal account, which showed that he had published it over a long period of time and included incorrect information and comments attributed to the accused that could cause confusion and instability in the community, as well as questioning the performance of the authorities and their ability to maintain security and protect society.”



October 2020

Ministry of Interior vows to pursue opponents of the Bahrain-Israeli peace agreement

The Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security Administration announced (2 October 2020) monitoring and observing what it described as “suspicious accounts” on social media that “aims at stirring up discord, threatening civil peace and the social fabric, and destabilizing security and stability in the Kingdom of Bahrain.” It pointed out that “these accounts are managed from outside the country by fugitives who were convicted in terrorist lawsuits.” It added that “the aforementioned accounts deliberately spread sedition and discord among the components of society and distort the image of the Kingdom of Bahrain and offend it for signing a declaration supporting peace between the Kingdom of Bahrain and the State of Israel.” It also vowed to take legal actions against those accounts.

Dr. Alia Almoayed summoned for publishing advice on alternative medicine

The Public Prosecution summoned (15 October 2020) nutritional therapist Dr. Alia Almoayed who runs a nutritional counseling office for interrogation after publishing information and advice on alternative medicine. The Prosecution reported that the National Health Regulatory Authority (NHRA) filed a complaint against her in the Anti-Cybercrime Directorate based on claims of publishing unfounded allegations.



November 2020

Journalist Jaafar Al-Jamri summoned for criticising the Ministry of Education

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate summoned and interrogated (4 November 2020) journalist Jaafar Al-Jamri over a Tweet criticizing the Ministry of Education’s project of “Future Schools”. Jamri mentioned that he was summoned based on a complaint filed by the Ministry of Education against him. “They allocated millions of dinars for Future Schools. The millions evaporated, and we are back in the schools of the 1980s after a ‘future’ we hadn’t seen. Those who oversee this comedy are not even qualified to run a popular market for used goods,” Jamri tweeted.





The Interior shuts down a website for publishing false information about Coronavirus

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate of the Ministry of Interior shut down (11 November 2020) a website that allegedly published false information about the Coronavirus. In its statement, the Directorate said that it “had taken legal measures, with concerned authorities, to ban a website after publishing fraudulent messages on social gatherings and efforts to combat Coronavirus,” calling for “caution and avoiding circulating these messages.” It did not, however, identify that website.

10 people arrested for “insulting former Prime Ministers”

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate announced (11 November 2020) the arrest of ten people who allegedly “published insulting and illegal phrases after the death of the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa.” Although it did not reveal the identities of the defendants, theater director Yasser Nasser, known as “Gilgamesh” was among them. He was detained (with the rest of the accused) for a week pending investigation, following a post he had published on social media in which he said, “The lives of martyrs are more important and more valuable than the lives of others,” which was considered by the Directorate as an insult to the late Prime Minister. He was released on the 19th of the month on a bail of 500 dinars.



Dr. Sharifa Swar sentenced to 7 months for pleading to public opinion

The Third Lower Criminal Court sentenced (18 November 2020) the psychiatrist Dr. Sharifa Swar to 7 months in prison for publishing a video on social media “through which she tried to influence those charged with the decision to appeal a case in which she was previously convicted of practicing human medicine and pharmacology without a license, as she tried to plead with the followers and restating that the charges were fabricated through employees who testified falsely against her.

“ **The court** stated that “the aforementioned published a live broadcast publicly via the social media platform ‘Instagram’ and listed false and incorrect matters about her appeal to a prison sentence issued against her, after she was convicted of practicing the profession of human medicine without a license. The accused deliberately published the broadcast before the appeal was decided and throughout her video, she claimed that her case was due to a common medical drug, and she was convicted of her attempt to appeal to the public opinion only.”

The alternative URL to “Bahrain Mirror” is blocked

The competent security authorities blocked (22 November 2020) the alternative website of the opposition electronic newspaper ‘Bahrain Mirror’. The website’s visitors noticed that the alternative link they used to use to access the original website, which has been blocked since 2011, was blocked too. 🇧🇦

Two persons arrested for misusing social media

The security authorities arrested (24 November 2020) two people on charges of “misusing social media.” The Director General of the Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security Administration stated that “two people were arrested for misusing social media by posting images that violate public morals.” He clarified that the administration monitored the publications and immediately intensified search and investigation operations, which resulted in the identification and arrest of the two accused.”

December 2020



Former President of the Muharraq Club Fans Association summoned

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate summoned (14 December 2020) the former President of the Muharraq Club Fans Association Saad Mahboub without giving a reason. Mahboub is subjected to frequent summons to interrogate him about videos he publishes on social media, which often contain comments on sports events.

Recommendations

The Bahrain Press Association condemns the systematic and widespread behavior of the government by targeting journalists, bloggers, and people of opinion as it badly affects Bahrain's reputation at the international level with regard to media freedoms. The Association calls on the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Nations and all international organizations and bodies concerned with defending the freedom of opinion and expression, press and media freedoms to exert urgent pressure on the Bahraini government to:

- _ Immediately and unconditionally release all photographers, media professionals, and activists detained for practicing their work in covering protests or exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression;
- _ Stop arbitrary prosecutions and arrests and judicial trials on charges of “inciting hatred of the regime,” “misusing social media,” “insulting a figure or foreign/sister country,” “insulting the Bahraini army,” “offending the Divine Self,” and all what restricts freedom of expression in the country.
- _ Secure freedoms of media and the press, and reconsidering the priorities of the Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security Administration, especially with regard to monitoring cyber activists.
- _ Put an end to the authority’s monopoly of the television, radio and print media, and enabling the voice of opposition in the media—including reauthorizing the publication of Al-Wasat newspaper.
- _ Call on the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression to schedule an urgent visit to Bahrain.

