

BAHRAIN 2021

**You only see
what we see!**





BAHRAIN 2021:

You only see what we see!

**12th Annual Report
on Freedoms Journalism
and media in Bahrain 2021**

Bahrain Press Association
An association that defends
the freedom of the press
and the media in Bahrain,
founded on July 9, 2011.

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I: Introduction

The Bahrain Press Association (BPA) has documented 49 acts of infringement on Media and freedom of expression in Bahrain during 2021. Thus, the number of documented acts of infringement since the February 2011 uprisings until December 2021 rose to about 1755 violations.

The title of this annual report, "Bahrain 2021: You only see what we see" is an expression of the state's policy that citizens are obliged to perceive and interact with the various realities through the state's lens and in compliance with its vision. Any deviation

or opposition to the state's vision, policies, or decisions is therefore deemed as a punishable crime.


Half of the rights violations that occurred during 2021 (26 cases) were the state's responses to Bahrainis who did not clearly endorse its policies. In addition, a report by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Canada, confirmed the Bahraini government's spying on phones of Bahraini journalists and photographers abroad. The government uses an iPhone spyware developed by the Israeli NSO Group.

According to the annual monitoring carried out by the Association for the eleventh year in a row, violations this year were mostly about summoning citizens for interrogation by the police and the public prosecution. 31 Bahrainis were summoned for expressing their opinions using various means, especially social media. In addition, the Association has documented 6 arrests, 7 judicial proceedings, as well as 4 other incidents of various freedom infringements.

The most prominent charges brought against those interrogated, arrested, or convicted in courts or through administrative procedures were criticizing the normalization of relations

between Bahrain and Israel; questioning the efforts of the national team for the Coronavirus control and prevention; insulting the judiciary; criticizing the Ministry of Interior; and violating the public morals.

Figures mentioned in this report indicate about %50 decrease compared to the figures documented in the 2020 report, which reached 111 infringements. The BPA believes that this significant drop is due to a kind of citizen's self-censorship—a sense that has been developed in Bahrainis over the past years due to the harsh repression measures and the tailored laws through which journalists, human rights advocates, and cyber-activists are being persecuted.



The Bahraini government's arbitrary measures have placed thick walls around free speech and drawn bold red lines for what should not be talked about. Consequently, and in order to avoid arbitrary charges, those with independent or dissenting opinions have resorted to choosing cautious and carefully chosen words that keep them away from algorithms used by the Cybercrime Directorate to identify its targets.

The decrease in infringements is essentially a result of decreased critical voices and limited willingness to involve in public issues. The leaders of the Islamic Nationalist Association, Wifaq, are just an example. Since the Association's dissolution in 2016, they have been refraining from expressing their opinions about public affairs on the Internet. They used to lead the country's most prominent political association but now have no option but to succumb to the new reality created by the crackdown.

This year, it was remarkable that the Parliament passed a decree prohibiting members of the Parliament (MPs) themselves from "criticizing, blaming or accusing" the government.

The decree is one further step toward criticising the government and its associated agencies and individuals a costly venture.

The Bahrain Press Association regrets the severe decline the country has reached in terms of media freedoms and freedom of expression. Meanwhile, it continues its appeal to the authorities to reconsider its stand and adopt a new reconciling approach that brings the country out of the tensions created by the 2011 crisis. Unfortunately, despite the positive image the Bahraini government was able to project through the Alternative Penal Code those convicted in cases related to freedom of expression—especially opposition political leaders, journalists and civil society activists—are still excluded from this conditional release. In addition, the state still refuses to do justice to journalists whose citizenships were revoked in 2011, violating the provisions of the constitution and the law.

Resolving these issues ensures putting the country on the right track. Therefore, the Bahrain Press Association urges the Government of Crown Prince and Prime Minister Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa to take a bold decision to stop the deterioration in media freedoms that has continued since 2011.

II: Milestones in 2021

1. Summonses

The Cybercrime Directorate (4 January 2021) summoned journalist Jaafar Al-Jamri for interrogation about a Tweet he retweeted criticizing Bahrain's normalization of relations with Israel. The Directorate summoned Al-Jamri for the second time (11 February 2021) to interrogate him about a lawsuit the Ministry of Education filed against him after he had tweeted about "Future Schools." In addition, the Public Prosecution summoned (27 January 2021) nutritional therapist Dr. Alia Almoayed and accused her of "working against the efforts of the national team for the Coronavirus control and prevention" after she had tweeted ques-

tioning the vaccines.

The Cybercrime Directorate summoned (24 March 2021) lawyer Abdullah Hashem for interrogation over a lawsuit filed by Al-Arabiya News reporter claiming that Hashem criticized him in a Tweet. The Public Prosecution summoned (11 May 2021) former MP—and member of Al-Minbar Al-Islami Society—Muhammad Khaled for interrogation about retweeting the Kuwaiti writer Dr. Jassim Al-Jezza who criticized Gulf states for normalization with Israel.

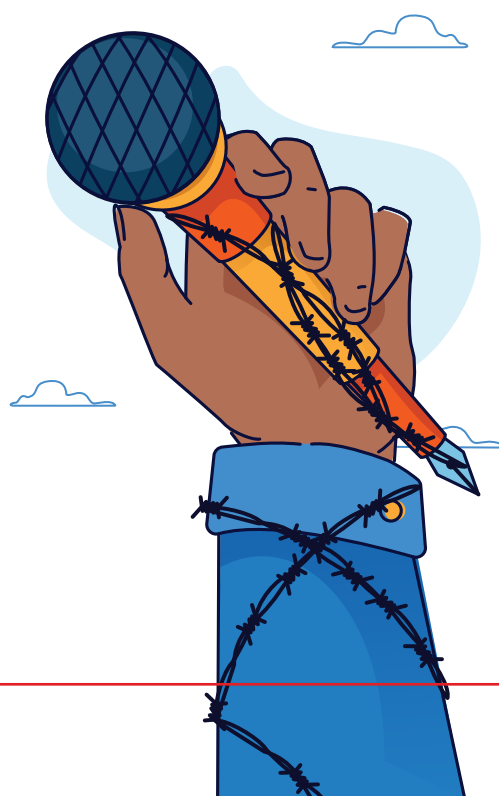
The Cybercrime Directorate summoned (24 May 2021) a 52-year-old lady for a Tweet that directorate deemed "an insult to one of the religions in the country and incitement to hatred of a religious sect."

In the period between 10 and 20 August 2021, security authorities summoned 15 Shiite chanters and clerics to interrogate them about charges related to commemorating Ashura rituals. They were especially interrogated about the purport of some sermons and chants. The following names were identified among those who were summoned: Sheikh Muhammad Riyash, Sheikh Abdel-Muhsen Mulla Attia Jamry, chanters Muhammad Al-Qallaf, Salih Sahwan, Hassan Nowruz, Sayed Ahmad Al-Alawy.

Security authorities summoned (4 October 2021) journalist Saad Rashid upon a lawsuit filed against him by a member of the civil society.

They also summoned (29 October 2021) employees and members of the Bahrain Anti-Normalization Society. Ghassan Sarhan, Ibrahim Kamal al-Din, and Ammar Siyady were interrogated about their invitation to hold an event in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons.

The Public Prosecution summoned (14 December 2021) the manager of "Disney nursery," Maryam Rady, after she had filmed a video of the nursery's children discussing domestic social and political issues.



2. Arrests

The Ministry of Interior arrested (7 January 2021) a 44-year-old woman for sharing on her Instagram account what the Ministry described as "incitement to immorality." The Ministry also arrested (23 February 2021) another 35-year-old woman over the same charges after posting on social media a video that included what the Ministry described as "anti-public moral statements."

On 13th May 2021, the Ministry of Interior arrested the Bahraini citizen Murtada Al-Laith who criticized a statement the Ministry issued in response to the Qatari Al-Jazeera news channel. The statement denied the existence of any political prisoners in Bahrain. Meanwhile, International human rights organizations, the US Con-

gress, and the European Union talked about political prisoners in Bahrain.

The Ministry of Interior arrested (23 June 2021) the retired Naval Colonel Muhammad Al-Zayani for posting on his Instagram account a video that touched indirectly on corruption in the judiciary system. The Ministry of Interior arrested (30 June 2021) former MP Usama Al-Tamimy from the hospital. He was receiving medical care one day after he published an audio clip accusing the authorities of "injecting him with a poisonous substance that caused him a stroke."

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate arrested (9 December 2021) a 21-year-old young man it claimed he "offended the Divine Self and incited engagement in acts of immoral behavior by posting immoral images on social media.



3. Judicial Proceedings

The General Administration of Investigation and Criminal Evidence obliged (22 March 2021) the secretary-general of the Unitary National Democratic Assemblage, Hassan Al-Marzouq, to pay a fine upon a judgment issued against him about which he said, "I have no idea." He was charged over his old Tweet about the siege of the village of Daraz.

A minor criminal court sentenced (6 April 2021) citizen Ahmad Saad to 3 years in prison on charges of "insulting the judiciary". Saad had published a video clip in which he complained about a member of the judiciary following his court case.

Based on a lawsuit filed by the Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs and Endowments, Sheikh Khalid bin Ali



Al Khalifa, the Lawyers Disciplinary Council decided (22 March 2021) to ban lawyer Abdullah al-Shamlawi from practicing law for one year. Shamlawi was charged for Tweeting about fasting the Day of Ashura.

The Minor Criminal Court sentenced (8 July 2021) activist Muhammad Al-Zayani to two years in prison over charges of showing contempt for a judicial body. The Supreme Court of Appeal upheld (3 August 2021) his sentence, but later on 31st October it commuted it to the half. Eventually, on 3rd November, the executive judge granted him a conditional release under the Alternative Penal Code.

4. Other Infringements

The detained academic and blogger Dr. Abdul-Jalil Al-Singace started (July 8, 2021) an open hunger strike after the officer in Jaw Central Prison, Muhammad Yousef Fakhro, confiscated research he had written in prison on popular proverbs. A report by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Canada, revealed (24 August 2021) that the Bahraini government has spied on the phone of Tweeter Yousef al-Jamri who tweets via his news account. The government uses an iPhone spyware developed by the Israeli NSO Group. On the other hand, the former columnist for "Akhbar Al Khaleej" newspaper, Ibrahim Al-Sheikh, confirmed (27



September 2021) that he is still banned from writing in the newspaper since 2019. "My ban continues to this day," he Tweeted. The Ministry of Justice ordered (10 November 2021) the cancellation of a webinar organized via Zoom titled "The Economic Recovery Plan: An Analytical Vision," in which the leader of the dissolved "WAAD" Association, Ibrahim Sharif, was going to participate.

III. The Documented infringements

January

Journalist Jaafar Al-Jamri summoned for criticizing neutralization



The Cybercrime Directorate (4 January 2021) summoned journalist Jaafar Al-Jamri. Jamri tweeted, “a summoning phone call from the Cyber-crimes to appear tomorrow (5 January 2021) at 9:00 am.” He was interrogated about his criticism of Bahrain’s neutralization with Israel, retweeting condemning neutralization and considering it “a betrayal of

the entire Arab and Muslim nation.”

Legal proceedings against a lady for “inciting immorality”

The Ministry of Interior's Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security Administration announced (6 January 2021) that it had taken “the necessary legal proceedings against a 44-year-old lady to bring her before the Public Prosecution. The lady allegedly broadcasting what the Ministry described as “incitement to immorality.” The Ministry added that the mentioned lady—along with others—had a live broadcast via her account on Instagram that “incites immorality and addresses issues that conflict with the public morals.”

Dr. Alia Almoayed summoned for tweeting about the Coronavirus vaccines.



The Public Prosecution summoned (27 January 2021) nutritional therapist Dr. Alia Almoayed and accused her of “working against the efforts of the national team for the Coronavirus control and prevention”. Almoayed had tweeted about the Coronavirus vaccines, and the authorities deemed her tweet skeptical about the efforts of the national team for the Coronavirus control and prevention.

February

Jaafar Al-Jamri summoned for tweeting about Future Schools

Jaafar Al-Jamri received a phone call (9 February 2021) from the Cybercrime Directorate informing him about an interrogation session scheduled for 11 February 2021 at the Public Prosecution Office. The summons was based on a lawsuit the Ministry of Education filed against him upon his tweet about Future Schools. Upon its start, the hearing was adjourned until 18 February 2021. His tweet stated, “They allocated millions of dinars for Future Schools. Unfortunately, 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 qualified to run a popular market dominated by used goods.”

A woman in her thirties arrested for “inciting prostitution”

The Cybercrime Directorate announced (23 February 2021) the arrest of a 35-year-old woman after posting on social media a video clip containing “anti-public moral statements.” The Public Prosecutor stated that “the Public Prosecution has finished its investigations of a video clip that has been circulated on social media for a woman inciting immorality.”

March

Lawyer Abdullah al-Shamlawi banned from practicing law for a year because of a tweet about fasting the Day of Ashura

Based on a lawsuit filed by the Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs and Endowments,



Sheikh Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa, the Lawyers Disciplinary Council decided (22 March 2021) to disbar lawyer Abdullah al-Shamlawi for one year after he had tweeted about fasting the Day of Ashura. “The Disciplinary Council decided to ban me from practicing the profession for a year, against the background of tweeting about the [Islamic] ruling on Ashura fasting,” Shamlawi said. However, he also noted that “my tweet about Ashura fasting has nothing to do with the ethics and principles of practicing law. Therefore, punishing me by disbarment has no legal base.”

The Unitary Assemblage's secretary-general fined for an old tweet about the siege of Daraz.



The General Administration of Investigation and Criminal Evidence summoned (22 March 2021) the secretary-general of the Unitary National Democratic Assemblage, Hassan Al-Marzouq, for interrogation about one of his Tweets. Al-Marzouq said that he was summoned "to pay a fine upon a judgment issued against me," but he did not mention the sum he paid. He was charged over his

old Tweet about the siege of the village of Daraz. Al-Marzouq further added, "I have no idea about this lawsuit."

Al-Arabiya's correspondent sues lawyer Abdallah Hashem



The former correspondent of the Saudi Al-Arabiya channel, the Iraqi Muhammad Al-Arab filed (24 March 2021) a lawsuit against the lawyer Abdallah Hashem concerning the latter's Tweet on 11th of March. The Tweet stated, "Relegation to the dustbin of history needs no justification. Make sure that we have known your end since 2011."

There are other three waiting for their turn, book them their holes there." The Tweet came in response to Al-Arab's announcement of his injury during his biased coverage of the war in Yemen. Hashem commented on the lawsuit saying, "We have to remind him that whoever stands against the people has no intercessor, and that whoever gets involved in public work should bear the consequences and does not recede by criticism," adding, "This is a long battle," as he put it.

April

Amendments to the Press Law to regulate electronic media

The Bahraini Cabinet approved (5 April 2021) amendments to the Press, Printing and Publishing Law

that included new definitions covering electronic media, press organizations, websites and news accounts on social media. Despite the abolition of the journalist's imprisonment penalty in the recent amendments, the government included electronic media and the regulation of websites and accounts of media agencies in the new law, which means more restrictions on electronic publishing. The Ministry of Information Affairs confirmed that the government has finished the bill of the new press law and that it will refer it to the legislative authority to review and pass.



Citizen Ahmad Saad sentenced 3 years for “insulting the judiciary”.

A minor criminal court sentenced (6 April 2021) citizen Ahmad Saad to 3 years in prison on charges of “insulting the judiciary”. Saad had published a video clip in which he complained about a member of the judiciary following a case he had in the court.

May

Former MP Mohammed Khaled summoned for retweeting about normalization

The Public Prosecution summoned (11 May 2021) former MP—and member of Al-Minbar Al-Islami Society that is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood—Muhammad Khaled for interrogation about

retweeting the Kuwaiti writer Dr. Jassim Al-Jezza who criticized Gulf states for normalization with Israel. The two intended countries are Bahrain and the Emirates, which normalized their relations with Israel in the agreement known as the “Abraham Accords”. The Public Prosecution accused Sheikh Muhammad Khaled of “contempt for the regime and incitement of hatred against it.”



Citizen Murtada Al-Laith arrested for criticizing a Ministerial statement

The Ministry of Interior arrested (13 May 2021) the Bahraini citizen Murtada Al-Laith who criticized a statement the Ministry issued in response to the Qatari Al-Jazeera news channel. In his video posted on social media, Al-Laith said, "The Ministry of Interior states that there is not a single political prisoner, is it brothers? Perhaps they went to the bathroom, or the clinic and you didn't see them!" Meanwhile, International human rights organizations, the US Congress, and the European Union talked about political prisoners in Bahrain. Similarly, official media reports deny any Cov-

id-19 infections among prisoners, while the virus check reports indicate otherwise.

A middle-aged lady summoned for insulting "Shiites" on Twitter

The Cybercrime Directorate announced (24 May 2021) summoning a 52-year-old lady for a Tweet that the Directorate deemed "an insult to one of the religious sects in the country and inciting hatred against it." The Directorate affirmed that "the necessary legal measures have been taken in preparation for referring the case to the Public Prosecution." The identity of the aforementioned lady was not disclosed, but activists spoke of a "Twitter" account under the name "Nashmiaht Al-Bahrain" that used to publish tweets offensive to the Shiites in the country.

June

Retired Colonel Muhammad Al-Zayani summoned for “insulting the judiciary”

The Cybercrime Directorate summoned (23 June 2021) the retired Naval Colonel Muhammad Al-Zayani for interrogation after posting on his Instagram account a video that touched indirectly on corruption in the judiciary system by using conditional statements indicating probability. However, his lawyer reported that he denied the charges in court. In his defense of himself, Al-Zayani said, "I did not say that the judge is corrupt, but I said if the person is corrupt and the judge helps him, then there is corruption, or the corrupt is claiming that against the judge." He also noted that repeating the word "if" three

times “means probability and not assertion. Therefore, I am innocent of what I am accused of.”

Former MP Usama Al-Tamimy arrested upon posting audio clip



Security authorities arrested (30 June 2021) former MP Usama Al-Tamimy from the hospital, where he was receiving medical care, one day after he published an audio clip accusing the authorities of “injecting him with a poisonous substance that caused him a stroke.” He further added that he has been subjected to murder twice and taking the bread out of his mouth “by burning and destroying all my property and freezing my bank accounts.”

July

Blogger Dr. Abdul-Jalil Al-Singace goes on hunger strike for confiscating his research

The detained academic and blogger Dr. Abdul-Jalil Al-Singace started (8 July 2021) an open hunger strike, stopped receiving medication, and refused to communicate due to the humiliating and degrading treatment by officer Muhammad Yousef Fakhro, the officer in charge at Jaw Central Prison. The strike came after his research on proverbs he had prepared in prison was confiscated. He was also denied access to rubber supports for his crutches, which he needed to walk, due to post-polio syndrome he had since childhood.



Blogger Muhammad Al-Zayani sentenced to two years for “insulting the judiciary”

The Minor Criminal Court sentenced (8 July 2021) activist Muhammad Al-Zayani to two years in prison over charges of showing contempt for a judicial body. The chief prosecutor of the Southern Governorate announced that “the public prosecution received a request from the Supreme Judicial Council to take criminal accountability measures against a person for posting a video clip on social media that includes insulting and alluding to the judicial authority.” Accordingly, the Public Prosecution summoned the clip’s creator and proceeded with the interrogation confronting him with the content he published and circulated.

August

The appeals court upholds Muhammad Al-Zayani's sentence

The Supreme Court of Appeal upheld (3 August 2021) upheld the sentence of retired colonel Muhammad Al-Zayani to two years in prison over charges of insulting the judicial authority. In its pleadings, the Public Prosecution stated that he had "deliberately brought charges related to the work and sovereignty of the judiciary and insulted its judges." It also demanded to levy the maximum penalty. For his part, Al-Zayani denied the charges emphasizing that he publishes videos with the aim of raising awareness.

15 Shiite chanters and clerics summoned during Ashura celebrations

In the period between 10th and 20th of August 2021, which coincided with the Ashura season that the Shiite sect celebrates each year, security authorities summoned 15 Shiite chanters and clerics. They were interrogated about charges related to commemorating Ashura rituals, particularly the purport of some sermons and chants. The following names were identified among those who were summoned: Sheikh Muhammad Riyash, Sheikh Ab-

del-Muhsen Mulla Attia Jamry, chanters Muhammad Al-Qallaf, Salih Sahwan, Hassan Nowruz, Sayed Ahmad Al-Alawy, Ali Muhammad Al Abbas, Hussein Ali Muhammad Ashur, Kadhim Ibrahim Mahdy, Muhammad Abdel-Halim Fardan, Ali Ahmad Mahdy, Youssef Ahmad Mahdy, Ahmad Khalil Zain El-Din, Sadeq Abdel-Wahed Marhoun. In addition, the committee in charge of mourning processions in the Hamad Town area and the head of the General Authority for Mourning Processions in Al-Dair area, Faisal al-Moumen, were summoned for interrogation as well.





Journalists' phones hacked by Pegasus spyware

A report by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Canada, revealed (24 August 2021) that the Bahraini government has spied on phones of activists, journalists, and Tweeters by an iPhone spyware developed by the Israeli NSO Group. Tweeter Yousef al-Jamri who tweets via his news account @YusufAlJamri and photographer Musa Abdali were among those. Both are living in exile in London. Some of those activists were targeted by unknown loopholes such as 'Zero-click' in 'iMessage' in 2020 and another one used in 2021, which NSO called FORCEDENTRY.

September

Ibrahim Al-Sheikh is still banned from writing

The former columnist for "Akhbar Al Khaleej" newspaper, Ibrahim Al-Sheikh, confirmed (27 September 2021) that he has still being banned from writing in the newspaper since 2019. On his Twitter account, he stated: "My ban continues to this day." Early in April 2019, security authorities referred Al-Sheikh to the Public Prosecution after he had written an article criticising media misinformation led by the media outlets affiliated with states leading the war in Yemen. Al-Sheikh made this reference to the former correspondent of the Saudi Al-Arabiya channel, former correspondent of the Saudi Al-Arabiya channel. It was the same article that led to banning him from writing.

Freedom House 2021: Criticism of normalization is prohibited in Bahrain

Freedom House organization said in its 2021 annual report published in September 2021, that "Internet freedom is still restricted in Bahrain, and the authorities continue to block websites and force them to remove electronic content, especially posts critical of the government on social media." The organization indicated that after Bahrain restored its relations with Qatar, "the ban on some websites has been lifted, but it is still not possible to access a number of websites and media outlets, including Al Jazeera." In addition, it mentioned that "the government bans discussions critical of normalization with Israel and targets those who criticize

its policies. On the contrary, it fails to take any action against hate speech directed against the opposition or Shiites, including leaflets that describe Shiite citizens as "garbage" and "dogs."

October

"Cybercrime" calls for not dealing with inflammatory messages transmitted from abroad

The Cybercrime Directorate of the Ministry of Interior called on (2 October 2021) not to deal with inflammatory messages published from abroad with the aim of provoking sedition, after calls to demonstrate against the opening of the Israeli embassy in Manama. "Through the observation of what is being circulated on social media, some statements published from outside the country were detected.



Those statements were allegedly attributed to some Bahraini authorities and officials with the aim of provoking sedition, spreading chaos and threatening the social fabric and civil peace," the Directorate announced. Moreover, it urged "social media users to seek information from reliable sources and avoid republishing these inflammatory messages or interacting with them."



Journalist Saad Rashid summoned for interrogation by the Public Prosecution

The Public Prosecution summoned (4 October 2021) journalist Saad Rashid of Al-Watan newspaper upon a complaint filed against him by a member of the civil society. The complaint came after Rashid published a video clip attacking verbally opponents of the normalization agreement with Israel that the government signed. On his Twitter account, Rashid said, "We were summoned by the Public Prosecution to complete the interrogation concerning the complaint filed against us by one of the members of the associations that signed a petition rejecting the peace agreement with Israel."

administratives of the 3 Bahrain Anti-Normalization Society summoned

Security authorities summoned (29 October 2021) a number of administrative members of the Bahrain Anti-Normalization Society. They were interrogated about their invitation to hold an event in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons. Lawyer and former deputy director of the Society, Ghassan Sarhan, posted about their summoning saying, "The summons ended, and my words were taken and those of the former director of the association, Ibrahim Kamal Al-Din and brother Ammar Siyadi. The reason (for summons) was the invitation of the Bahrain Anti-Normalization Society for a solidarity event with the prisoners in the occupying Israeli prisons tomorrow." The Socie-

ty had to cancel the event under the pressure of summonses and interrogations.

Muhammad Al-Zayani's sentence from two years to one



The Court of Appeal reduced (31 October 2021) the sentence issued against retired colonel and cyber activist Muhammad Al-Zayani from two years to one year on the charge of "insulting the judiciary." This decision came as a prelude to his release under the Alternative Penal Code, which requires serving half of the sentence, of which Al-Zayani spent four months only.

November

Condition release of Muhammad Al-Zayani under the Alternative Penal Code

The executive judge approved (November 3, 2021) approved the conditional release of the retired colonel and cyber activist Muhammad Al-Zayani after submitting a request to benefit from the Alternate Penal Code.

The “Justice” bans a webinar hosting Ibrahim Sharif

The Ministry of Justice ordered (10 November 2021) the cancellation of a Zoom webinar titled “The Economic Recovery Plan: An Analytical Vision.” The webinar was organized by National Democratic Assembly, a legally licensed political association, with the participation of the leader of the dis-

solved Waad Association, Ibrahim Sharif. The Assembly received a call from the Ministry of Justice to inform the cancellation.

December

4 interrogated for “incitement to commit immorality”.

The Capital Governorate’s Public Prosecution summoned (8 December 2021) 4 defendants for interrogation over charges of “incitement to commit immorality”. The Public Prosecutor of the Capital Governorate stated that “following the report received from the Anti-Human Trafficking and the Protection of Public Morals Police regarding the circulation of video clips on social media about engaging in acts contrary to public morals, the Public Prosecution proceeded with immediate investigation and



interrogation of four defendants and accused them of inciting debauchery and managing a place for such acts, which is punishable for up to five years in prison.”

A young man arrested for “insulting the Divine Self”

The Anti-Cybercrime Directorate arrested (9 December 2021) a 21-year-old young man it claimed he “offended the Divine Self and incited engagement in acts of immoral behavior by posting immoral images on social media.” It also added in its statement that “legal actions were taken, and the young man (an anonymous) was referred to the Public Prosecution.” It became later known that the intended young man used to participate in intellectual and religious discussions on the voice chat platform Clubhouse.

Disney Nursery director referred to the Prosecution for filming a clip

The Ministry of Education referred (14 December 2021) the director of Disney nursery, Maryam Rady, for filming a video of the nursery’s children discussing domestic social and political issues. The Ministry stated that it had taken measures against the director of the nursery under the pretext of violating the terms of the license. In its statement, the MoE said, “In reference to the video published via the account of one of the nurseries in the Kingdom and showed the involvement of a group of children in matters outside the nursery’s scope of work and against the terms of its licensing, as well as the content of the video regarding the unacceptable employment of children in issues not within the nature nurseries, the competent authority in the Ministry summoned the director of the nursery for interrogation about the violations attributed to her, As a result, she was referred to the prosecution.”





IV: Special Reports

**The
release
of opposition
leaders from
prison is an “awaited”
step before the 2022 elec-
tions**

While most of the leaders of the political opposition in Bahrain have completed their tenth year behind bars, there are no real indications of a political breakthrough that will lead to their release as a prelude and encouragement for the opposition and its political base in the street to participate in the parliamentary elections to be held at the end of 2022.

Although some of the arrested opposition leaders adopted a hard stance on the political process, the joining of the Secretary-General of Al-Wefaq Sheikh Ali Salman to them in December 2014 and his sentence to life imprisonment eventually led to the end of political manoeuvring between the opposition and the government, leaving



all the cards in the hands of the government as the only player who can take real steps to alleviate the political tension and overcome the repercussions of the stifling crisis in the country.

While opposition leaders suffer from persecution and medical neglect, the government, which has taken a number of positive initiatives, including the Alternative Penal Code, does not seem in the process of using the special royal pardon mechanism that would open a positive window on the political scene in the country.

The Bahrain Press Association asserts that all opposition leaders are essentially "opinion" detainees and that unfair judicial trials do not change the fact that they are "political" prisoners serving "sham" court sentences. These political leaders have been arrested and detained for expressing their political opinions and talking about the nature of the political system they aspire to, and in no case should their detention continue.

The release of one of the opposition figures, Muhammad Jawad Pervez, months ago (under the Alternative Penal Code), and before him the international human rights defender Nabil Rajab, confirms that the Bahraini government is able to release opposition leaders, and that this step will be dealt with positively at various levels, inside and outside Bahrain.

The Association believes that the time has come for the Bahraini state to turn a new page with those who represent the opposition. Additionally, guaranteeing freedom of expression in the country, within the constitutional and legal principles, does not represent any threat to the country's political and security stability.

Bahrain's allies, especially the United States, the United Kingdom and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, are called upon to pressure Bahrain to release opposition leaders and all prisoners of opinion in the country, to cool down the political arena, and to make room for more political participation in the upcoming parliamentary elections that are to be held within a year from now.

The following is a brief summary of the arrested opposition leaders:



1. Hasan Mushaima (life imprisonment)

The Secretary-General of the Haq Movement Hassan Mushaima (73 years old) has been in prison since his arrest in March 2011. Mushaima was on a treatment trip in 2010 in the United Kingdom for suffering from cancer and returned

to the country in February 2011 with the outbreak of protests in the capital, Manama.

Mushaima has been one of the most prominent opposition figures since the 1990s. The authorities accused him of attempting to overthrow the government and sentenced him to life imprisonment. In his detention, Mushaima was subjected to frequent harassment and was denied his right to treatment and medical care more than once.

The most significant developments regarding his health condition since his arrest:

October 2011	Mushaima informs his family of his fear of the doses he is being injected with, describing them as "suspicious."
January 2012	Two new glands appear in his body.
April 2012	The Public Prosecution says that Mushaima was completely cured of cancer.
April 2012	Mushaima requests his health reports from the prison administration.



June 2012	A grafting operation in Mushama's ear after infections and severe pain in it.
September 2012	Stopping Mushaima's treatment for glandular cancer.
October 2012	A military doctor informs Mushaima of the presence of a tumor in his body and the possibility of a cancer reattack.
October 2012	Mushaima has difficulty moving and has a tumour in his gland.
November 2012	Taking a sample from Mushaima in the military hospital.
June 2013	The prosecution says that Mushaima feels pain in his right ear.
March 2014	Conducting a cancer examination for Mushaima and the results confirm that it is free of the disease.
January 2016	Mushaima undergoes an operation in his eye.
October 2017	Mushaima was prevented from the regular cancer screening.
January 2018	A sharp rise in Mushaima sugar level and concerns about having a stroke.
August 2018	Mushaima was allowed to receive his medication for chronic diseases after being prevented from it for five months. He also underwent the periodic cancer examination for the first time in two years.
October 2020	Mushaima's blood pressure increased, and he was transferred to the military hospital.
May 2021	Abnormal swelling of his feet with the appearance of black spots, large swelling in the leg and severe knee pain.
August 2021	Mushaima spent about three weeks in the military hospital due to a severe rise in blood sugar and pressure.



2. Abdul-Wahab Hussain (life imprisonment)

The founder of the Al-Wafaa Movement, Abdul-Wahab Hussein (67 years old), is considered the most prominent opposition figure in Bahrain who called for the demonstrations on the 14th of February 2011. Many attribute the start of the Bahraini uprisings to him.

In March 2011, Abdul-Wahhab was arrested, accused of attempting to overthrow the government, and sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in leading the protests.

In May 2013, Abdul-Wahab Hussein was temporarily released to attend his mother's funeral, in a rare release from prison, as thousands gathered in his hometown of Nuwaidrat to receive and offer his condolences on the passing of his mother, after which he returned to prison again.

Abdul-Wahab Hussein's family was harassed, and his eldest son Hussein was later arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in a political case as well.

Abdul-Wahab Hussein's health, too, has deteriorated more than once in prison, and the following is a table of the most important developments related to his health condition.

May 2013	Abdul-Wahab Hussein was transferred to the military hospital after his health condition deteriorated.
October 2013	Doctors at the military hospital say that Abdul-Wahab Hussein may need to travel abroad for treatment.

November 2013	Abdul-Wahab Hussein suffers from complete numbness and difficulty moving his right side.
November 2013	Abdul-Wahab Hussein was transferred to the military hospital after a setback in his health and heart-related examinations.
November 2013	An urgent operation was performed on Abdul-Wahab in his right eye for the second time after the failure of the first operation.
November 2013	Abdul-Wahab Hussein is suffers from heart problems
April 2014	Abdul-Wahab Hussein was transferred to the military hospital and given a therapeutic dose, contrary to the advice of his private doctor in Britain.
April 2014	The Jaw Prison administration delayed Abdul-Wahab Hussein's treatment for peripheral neuritis, with a constant feeling of fatigue.
December 2015	Abdul-Wahab Hussein was transferred to the military hospital after feeling abdominal pain and underwent an urgent operation after discovering the presence of an ulcer and bleeding in his body.



3. Sheikh Abdul Jalil al-Miqdad (life imprisonment - 30 years)

Sheikh Abdul-Jalil al-Miqdad (61 years old) is considered one of the Shiite clerics who founded the Al-Wafa movement along with Abdul-Wahab Hussein.

In addition to his religious activity, he gave political speeches. Before the uprisings of 2011,

Miqdad was banned from public speaking because of his opposition political speeches. Al-Miqdad was arrested with his fellows in March 2011 after crushing protests at the Pearl Roundabout and is serving a life sentence over charges of taking part in an attempt to overthrow the regime.

Al-Miqdad's family was harassed by the authorities, where their identity documents (including passports) were confiscated. Later, two of his sons (Mustafa and Murtada) were arrested and sentenced to prison in political trials. The Ministry of Housing refused to hand over the family's housing unit because he was in prison.

Al-Miqdad was temporarily released from prison twice; to attend his brother's funeral ceremonies (November 2015) and his mother's funeral ceremonies (April 2021). However, the authorities did not approve his temporary release to attend his sister's funeral ceremonies in September 2018.

In June 2021, al-Miqdad spoke for the first time about deliberate medical neglect with the intent of humiliating him and said that what he is being subjected to is a "negligence that amounts to torture."



4. Sheikh Mohammed Habib Al-Miqdad (life imprisonment - 96 years)

Sheikh Mohammed Habib al-Miqdad (59 years old) is a Shiite cleric known for his critical positions on the government since his return to Bahrain in 2001.

He was arrested before 2011 on more than one occasion, the last of which was in August 2010, when he was released with the outbreak of widespread protests and popular pressure for his release.

Al-Miqdad was arrested less than a month after his release in March 2011 and is currently serving a life sentence of up to 96 years.

In court, Al-Miqdad spoke of being tortured. Over the past ten years, Miqdad has suffered more than one health problem due to medical negligence. Additionally, due to his father's imprisonment, his family has been subjected to many harassments, most notably the authorities' refusal to issue identification papers to his young son.

In addition to political activism, al-Miqdad is active in charitable work. He is the founder of the Al-Zahra Association for Orphan Care –an association that was dissolved by a decision of the Minister of Justice in July 2019.



5. Abdulhadi al-Khawaja (life imprisonment)

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja (60 years old) is the founder of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and one of the most prominent human rights defenders in the Gulf region. He has been known for his sharp

He was arrested more than once because of his human rights activism, most recently in March 2011

, when he was accused of attempting to overthrow the government and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Al-Khawaja was severely tortured in the last arrest that his jaw was broken and thus was transferred to the military hospital for an urgent operation. During his trial in the court, he told the judge about the torture and sexual harassment he was subjected to in his detention.

Al-Khawaja became famous worldwide for his prolonged hunger strike in 2012 that lasted for 110 days to demand his release.

Al-Khawaja went on hunger strike for a month in 2014, and also went on hunger strike for a week in 2015 to demand an end to the torture of minor prisoners and to enable them to contact their families.

Al-Khawaja's last hunger strike was in November 2021 and lasted for a week in protest of his prevention from making calls with his family.

Al-Khawaja's family has been subjected to a lot of harassment because of his human rights activism, most notably the arrest of his two daughters, Maryam and Zainab, who are activists in the field of human rights, more than once, and their sentencing to prison terms of varying lengths. Both Zainab and Maryam Al-Khawaja were forced to leave Bahrain, where they reside in Denmark, of which they hold citizenship in addition to Bahraini citizenship.

The Danish Foreign Ministry tried to pressure Bahrain on more than one occasion to release Al-Khawaja, who holds Danish citizenship, but these attempts were unsuccessful.

In early October 2021, Al-Khawaja submitted a request to benefit from the Alternative Penal Code, through which hundreds of political detainees were released, but the authorities did not respond to his request.



6. Abdul-Jalil Al-Singace (life imprisonment)

Abdul Jalil Al-Singace (59 years old) is a Bahraini blogger, academic and human rights activist, a founding member of the Islamic Nationalist Association, Wifaq, and later in the Haq movement with Hassan Mushaima.

Al-Singace, who worked as an associate professor at the College of Engineering at the University of Bahrain, was arrested twice in 2009 and 2010 despite being in a wheelchair. Moreover, his latest arrest in March 2011 witnessed inhumane treatment and torture, as he said in his testimony before the court.

He went on an open-ended hunger strike in 2015 and has been on another strike since July, after his diaries were confiscated and he was mistreated by the prison administration. The security authorities targeted Al-Singace's family after his arrest, as his brother Abd Ali is serving a life sentence and his eldest son Hussein was arrested and he spent 7 years in prison that ended in March 2018.



7. Sheikh Saeed Al-Noori (life imprisonment)

Sheikh Saeed Al-Noori (49 years) is a Shiite cleric who headed the Islamic Awareness Society for one term, and one of the founding members of the Islamic Scholars Council of the Shiite community in Bahrain. He is also considered one

of the founders of the Al-Wafaa movement led by Abdul-Wahab Hussein.

He was arrested in August of 2010 and released with the outbreak of protests at the Pearl Roundabout in 2011, but he was arrested again in March of the same year. The authorities accused him of attempting to overthrow the regime, along with other opposition leaders, and was sentenced to life imprisonment.





8. Sheikh Ali Salman (life imprisonment)

Sheikh Ali Salman (56 years old) is the most prominent opposition figure currently detained. The founder of the Islamic Nationalist Association, Wifaq, a former member in the Bahraini Parliament, and the leader of the opposition since 2001.

He led the opposition through many stages.

Salman was not arrested in the case known as the “Figures Case” (21 of opposition leaders were arrested in 2011) but was arrested in December of 2014 after the failure of the political settlement between the regime and the opposition. Charges of political motives were brought against him, and he was sentenced to 4 years in prison. Later when the Gulf states launched their boycott Qatar campaign, Bahraini authorities accused him of espionage with Qatar, and therefore was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Salman spent 6 months of his detention in solitary confinement, and after his sentencing, he was transferred to the opposition leadership building, where he is serving a life sentence. It is noteworthy that American pressure has not succeeded in releasing him since his arrest 7 years ago.

Salman's family has been targeted because of his political stances, and his young daughter (Sara) is deprived of citizenship and identity papers.



9. Sheikh Mirza Al-Mahroos (15 years)

Sheikh Mirza al-Mahroos is a Shiite cleric. He was arrested in 2010 and accused of forming a cell to carry out military actions in Bahrain. He was subjected to torture during detention and was released with the outbreak of protests in February 2011.

He was rearrested with others in March of the same year and said in a court statement that he had been tortured by official figures in the country.

The authorities accused him of attempting to overthrow the regime, and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Al-Mahroos suffers from colon problems and abdominal pain due to the torture he was subjected to. He was transferred several times to the hospital for treatment. He also goes on hunger strikes when the authorities refuse to provide him with the necessary medical care.

He has a son detained in the Jaw Prison, and he went on a hunger strike because the authorities prevented him from seeing his son in prison.

His wife died in January 2014, and he was temporarily released to attend her funeral. However, the authorities refused to release him temporarily to attend his aunt's funeral in November 2016.



10. Sheikh Abdul Hadi Al-Mukhaudar (15 years)

Sheikh Abdul Hadi al-Mukhaudar (53 years old), a Shiite poet and cleric and the founder of Dar al-Isma Publishing. He is known for his anti-government poetry and political opinions. He was arrested in the 1990s during

the State Security Law and was imprisoned for 5 years.

He became a prominent political activist after the year 2001, and he is one of the founders of the Islamic Wafaa Movement led by Abdul Wahab Hussein. He was arrested in 2010 for a few months and released with his fellows as the demonstrators were taking the Pearl Roundabout. Nonetheless, the authorities re-arrested him in March of the same year and charged him with attempting to overthrow the regime. During his imprisonment, he was tortured and sexually harassed. He also complained about the refusal to renew his smart card while in prison, which led to the suspension of some of the family's needs. Al-Mukhaudar was sentenced to 15 years.



11. Mohammed Ali Radhi Ismail (15 years)

Mohammed Ali Radhi Ismail is a close associate of Abdul Wahab Hussein and co-founded with him the Islamic Wafaa Movement. He was arrested in March 2011 and charged with attempting to overthrow the regime.

During his detention, he was subjected to torture and degrading treatment. The details of his case were mentioned in Case No. 23 of the report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry (the Bassiouni report), and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

His family was harassed, and his son Mustafa was arrested and sentenced to 3 months in prison for unlawful assembly in 2015. Ismail was released temporarily in March 2021 to attend his father's funer-



2. Chagrined Bahraini Press: The Unaccomplished Task

The article depends on the premise that “the subordination of the local press to the apparatus of totalitarian regimes loses its necessary balance and deprives it of its expected pluralism. In autocratic societies, it is easy to tell why the press stumbles and lacks ‘respect and reliability,’ and rather becomes a means of obtaining personal gains. Autocracy, by nature, aims at creating institutions that seem independent but, in reality, are obedient and tamable. The article seeks to examine the reality of the press in Bahrain from the starting point that press freedom in Bahrain is still an unaccomplished task. Over the past decades, the state tried fiercely to dominate the press and thwart its developmental and enlightening role by monopolizing the journalistic market and exploiting the arts of “autocracy.” Thus, the mission of the press remained in limbo while the state was able to accomplish its task of dominating and the journalistic character.

The article concludes that the Bahraini press has begun to lose the journalistic value since 2011. In fact, most newspapers, except for Al-Wasat which was shut down in 2017, have become no different from the state’s official press; they speak for the government and follow its directives. The government monopolizes the journalistic voice and dictates its political agenda. As a result of the authority’s interventions, one can say that the Bahraini press has given up its developmental role and turned into means of aggravation and confusion for the public opinion opposing the government. The Bahraini press, in its current version, presents its production as a token of friendship to the regime.



Totalitarianism and the arts of autocracy

The picture may seem harsh and painful when looking at the reality of the local press in Bahrain, although history is a witness for Bahrain's pioneering role in print press in the Gulf. Bahrain preceded other Gulf states in issuing the first paper newspaper at the hands of Abdullah Ali Al-Zayed in 1939 to become the first daily newspaper published in the Arab Gulf region

The early beginnings of the Bahraini press, specifically in the fifties (1942-1961), have witnessed the launch of a number of newspapers, magazines and various publications. Each has a story with bans, suspensions, and attempts to control the press and media discourse through the Publications Law, which was approved

in 1956 against the background of the political turmoil led by the Supreme Committee in 1954-1956. This eventually led to the arrest and exile of political leaders from Bahrain and the imposition of a severely repressive atmosphere on the press. The situation continued at such a pace until the eve of independence in 1970 when the press was able to breathe some freedoms. However, in August 1975, the state imposed a state of emergency and pursued the speech under the cloak of the State Security Law. After decades, Bahrain witnessed an improvement in press freedom when it scored 68 points in 2002



Its level remained almost constant between 2003 and 2010, as the number of points during that period ranged between 70 and 72 points. However, after the sharp decline in press freedom in Bahrain in 2011, in which it scored 84 points, Bahrain continued to deteriorate in 2012 when it dropped two additional points from the previous year to get 86 points. However, the drop in 2013 was the largest in its history. It got 87 points (Al-Wasat newspaper, issue 4987 - Monday, May 02, 2016 AD). The decline and recession continued to be the norm; if it improves one degree soon after it loses two. What remains unchanged though is its place and one the worst countries in press and .media freedoms

In 2014, Bahrain faced a torrent of human rights accusations regarding press freedom. The Freedom House classified Bahrain among the online list of the 'not free' countries, considering that press freedom has declined. These reports continued to confirm the declining freedoms and the rising hegemony of the local press. This is especially the case after the closure of Al-Wasat newspaper, which was the only voice of opposition, whereas the government controls the rest of the media, including local newspapers.



This was not the first time the government targeted Al-Wasat newspaper as the authorities have repeatedly targeted the paper and its staff. The Bahraini government has shut down the newspaper on four occasions since 2011. As the uprisings started, it suspended its activities for one day—causing the resignation of some of the newspaper’s senior staff. Similarly, in 2015, the government suspended Al-Wasat activities for two days for not describing Bahraini military casualties in Yemen as ‘martyrs’. In January 2017, Al-Wasat was banned for publishing photos of tortured victims later executed by the Bahrain government. It is worth noting that the Bahraini authorities tortured to death one of Al-Wasat founders, Karim

.Fakhrawi

Concerning the press, the government has always been willy in its limiting definition of journalistic work to only those officially registered as journalists with the Ministry of Information. This is the argument on which Bahraini officials base their responses to the statements of human rights organizations calling for the protection of journalists and practitioners of any new forms of journalism, insisting that they are criminally convicted.

In fact, the clampdown on freedom of speech that culminated in 2011 was preceded by clear-cut attempts by the government to establish its control over media and gag the press

The government had suspended the periodicals issued by opposition political societies since mid-2010, which these societies described as an “attempt to restrict their expression and silent their voice.”

Such measures have yielded disappointing journalistic norms, and thus the vision of independent newspapers expressing the public opinion and its problems and concerns disappeared. These are issues that the report of the Royal Independent Commission of Inquiry (Bassiouni’s Commission) clearly referred to. It criticized the content and discourse of the official media. The report concluded that Bahrain TV showed material that contained “derogatory language and inflammatory coverage of events, some of which may have involved defamation.”

The committee’s report proved “the bias of the Bahraini media towards the regime.” It recommended that the Bahraini government should “adopt a more flexible approach in its practice of censorship and allow the opposition more space in television, radio and print media.” This media has played, and is still playing, a major role in fueling sectarianism and transforming the conflict between the opposition and the government into a conflict between two sects. The absence of news—in its classical sense—has become noticeable as most news, even non-political news, contribute to provoking the political crisis. Thus, local newspapers—with the sole exception of Al-Wasat newspaper—turned into expanded versions of official media bulletins (The media struggle in Bahrain, Carnegie Endowment Institute Echo Bulletin, 3 May 2012).

Legalizing Repression

The local press record (1954-1980) indicates the disappearance of many newspapers and magazines due to the lack of resources and the inability to bear the financial burdens of printing and distribution. However, a careful examination of this phenomenon leads to a set of other reasons that, combined with the financial crises, led to the reformation of the press market according to the scenario set by the ruling authority. Many of these newspapers were suspended due to legal prosecutions or the tightening grip on the conditions of their publication. The regime had at its disposal an arsenal of laws, most notably the Publishing Law issued in 1956. The enactment of this confining law put more restrictions on the freedom of journalism, and the local press has turned from an independent entity to a kind of 'think tanks' nurtured by the government. As a result, they have to align with the official discourse otherwise, closure and banning will be their destiny.

This historical narrative helps us trace the two tendencies of 'besiegement and domination' as one of the arts of autocracy in dealing with the public sphere and the journalistic space in particular. The core concepts of the Publications Law 1956 and the rest of the other restricting laws continued to govern even in the independence phase where it was replaced by new legislation—a law that is not different from its predecessor. The situation remained unchanged even after Bahrain had entered the phase of political openness in 2001 when it issued a law regulating printing and publishing in 2002. This flawed law carries many human rights violations and tools of abuse, control and isolation.





In 2002, the authorities issued Decree No. (47), regulating printing and publishing. This law is still used to impose severe restrictions on journalists, reporters, bloggers, street journalists who use the Internet to publish their media content, and editors of daily newspapers. The law contains 17 different types of penalties under which journalists may be fined or imprisoned (Bahrain's new publications laws pose a threat to journalists | Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain).

Under this law, journalists may face criminal charges and imprisonment if they are accused of publishing false news, inciting hatred of the regime, insulting an official institution, insulting the king, or investigating topics and practices related to national security. To bring those charges, the government relies on the vagueness of legal articles and the cunning to broaden the criminalization of any journalistic practice. It also imposes harsh penalties based on the articles of the Anti-Terrorism Law and the alike. The government has been presenting drafts of new press laws then quickly withdrawing them.

This is not a bad thing indeed, especially if we are certain that press-related projects proposed by the government aim at besieging the press, isolating journalists, and domesticating the press to serve its agenda. The last of these attempts was two years ago when the government put forward a new bill to regulate press and publications, which press institutions perceived as a law enforcing isolation. It was another episode of restrictive laws as it, more importantly, legitimizes such violations cunningly relying on the vagueness and broadness of the law articles. In addition, the absence of any legislation regarding the right to access information that any journalist needs leads them to depend in their investigations on the information supplied by the concerned authorities. On the other hand, a court can hold any journalist accountable for publishing any information under multiple headings. Laws such as allowed by the Press and Media Law or the Anti-Terrorism Law allow such arbitrariness. The Committee for the Protection of the Journalists (CPJ) described the Bahraini situation in the harshest terms in its 2013 report. It stated that “the Bahraini government suppresses any source of information that does not agree with its official version of events, despite its verbal assurances on the importance of the press.” This confirms the miserable situation of the press in Bahrain.

Pro-capital ownership

In addition to restrictive legislation and the arsenal of arbitrary laws, it seems that the journalistic scene in Bahrain is far more complex than just dealing with intolerant laws. In addition, it is possible to emphasize the critical role played by the ownership of the capital controlling the newspapers issued in the country, consequently identifying the privileged individual ownership of the press. The Royal Commission of Inquiry's report published in late November 2011 indicated that the government completely controls and monopolizes media outlets, both the television and radio broadcasting. It also referred to the growing tendencies of hatred and incitement against political opposition groups, which are not allowed media spaces to talk about themselves and their projects. Thus, other threads and deeper roots allow the authority to directly control the journalistic field and the press by weaving economic networks of various sizes between the newspapers' boards of directors and the state.

What is surprising here is that the remaining local newspapers, despite being classified as loyalist newspapers, the conflict among them seems clear to anyone familiar with the source of funding and the government agency supporting it. For example, Al-Watan newspaper is considered the Royal Court mouthpiece. On the other hand, Al-Bilad newspaper was known for serving the former Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, whom Akhbar Al-Khaleej newspaper tended

to support and regularly published about his achievements and political positions in both regional and local affairs. Finally, the most widely circulated newspaper, Al-Ayyam, is also affiliated with the king and expresses his own position.

Newspapers that did not have a sponsor among the ruling family/officials were destined to be financial liquidation and closure. This confirms the crucial role of newspaper ownership and sponsorship. Al-Waqat and Al-Mithaq newspapers, for example, faced financial difficulties that led to the liquidation of both newspapers, despite the different reasons for the lack of support and the government's interference in restricting the resources of Al-Waqat. However,

Al-Wasat newspaper was a different case. Despite its financial independence and ability to bear the burdens of printing and running costs, it faced an arsenal of laws restricting the work of the press. Eventually, it was forcibly stopped in violation of the law and without a judicial ruling, and then its property was liquidated.

Censorship and Bounties

Many professionals in the field of journalism confirm the existence of elaborate censorship by higher authorities over their daily work. They also assert that there are indirect penalties imposed on newspapers if they publish topics or articles incompatible with the state's general domestic and foreign policies. Subsequent censorship of newspapers may sometimes lead to the dismissal of the journalist from the newspaper. In more extreme cases, the government resorts to cutting back on advertisement, which is a primary source of income for newspapers.



Given the dependence of newspapers on government advertisements, editors-in-chief tend to take into account government positions in press coverage and in setting editorial 'unwritten' rules that ensures conformity with the official discourse.

Local newspapers have become accustomed to dedicating the first three pages to cover official news from the Royal Court, the Prime Minister's Office or other political leaders. As a result, newspapers end up always and forever in a manner of obedience and compliance with the state's policies and the government's viewpoint.

Moreover, the state creates incentive plans that encourage journalism professionals to become obedient and appreciate the gifts they receive (Bahrain's Press Law is exemplary – Al-Ayyam newspaper – issue 8427 Sunday, May 6, 2012). Those whose coverage or articles support state policies are rewarded with a range of incentives or privileges. The Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman's Award for Journalism is an example of prizes given to journalists supporting the state and promoting its vision.

Through this triad and these direct and indirect tools, "autocracy" exercises its arts of domination, control, and even repression in many cases. It can be said that "the current press law has obvious flaws as it subjects journalists to criminal penalties. In addition, newspaper authorization/licensing procedures are not flexible enough, especially for an institution in charge of licensing daily papers. Furthermore, the stance towards the electronic press is still ambiguous in terms of the authority to ban and block websites. The Ministry of Information now exercises this authority." (The Bahraini Observatory, "What future for press freedom in Bahrain?"). In addition, specialized security oversight bodies have recently been added. The Cybercrime Unit, for instance, monitors and controls digital journalistic content or what is known as 'citizen journalism'.

Distrust and self-submission of the press

The description of the low ceiling of press freedoms remains incapable of describing the current reality of the journalistic field in Bahrain. The more accurate statement that touches the reality is that the journalistic field has now reached an actual blockage, and the expected trust in what local newspapers produce is absent. This also explains the government's keenness to make an extra effort in two main areas to accomplish the task of controlling and dominating the public space through:

- 01** Resorting to new tools of coercion: Increasing the legal arsenal that monitors the entire media movement and establishing laws that criminalize media activity that the government does not endorse. Numerous laws in this regard that have no limits in the pursuit of journalists and cyber activists.

In its 2021 annual report, Reporters without Borders referred to several grave violations against journalists, emphasizing that the press in Bahrain is experiencing "continuous and uninterrupted repression." On charges of participating in demonstrations; sabotage; or supporting terrorism, journalists usually face prison and life sentences in some cases. While many are mistreated, others get their citizenship revoked. In addition, local journalists working for international media organizations have been finding it difficult to renew their licenses since 2016.

Likewise, as most of the media actors are living in exile face prosecutions on charges of committing 'cybercrimes' for criticizing Manama's policies on social media platforms, obtaining a visa for a foreign journalist has become very complicated.

Recently, the scandal of the Bahraini regime's spying on a group of activists was disclosed. In addition, an official report revealed the existence of several programs used by state agencies in Bahrain to monitor the Internet and communications. The report concluded that Bahrain "employs many means to block or suppress content on the Internet." It also resorts to systematic jamming on the Internet to thwart demonstrations. The report emphasized that Bahrainis who publish content on the Internet critical of the government are prosecuted and arrested by the cybercrime unit at the Ministry of Interior. The report also assured that Bahrain monitors human rights activists, dissidents and members of the political opposition. The government is increasingly using spyware and Internet controls such as FinFisher, Hacking Team and NSO Group that Bahrain had purchased since 2010.

02

Distorting the truth: demonizing the opposition media and waging electronic wars in the same arena. With the absence of independent space for journalistic writing, thoughtful opinion articles were absent from the local press. Instead, they were replaced by dull writings brightly polishing state policies

An analysis of a random sample of opinion articles in several newspapers reveals the orientation of the writers and basing their arguments on hatred and incitement. Some human rights reports indicate an increase in hate speech in the content of most local newspapers. This raises questions about the intent of such discourses deeply involved in undermining the social fabric and their flagrant advocacy of government policies. It may be said that behind this hate-filled scene is a profound societal and political division that is reflected in these writings. In fact, this assertion is not plausible given the fact that these writings have become fragile and lost any popular trust as they portray fake realities.

The press allowed to circulate has given up its role as a watchdog. On the contrary, it went ahead in eliminating institutions and individuals that do not conform to the official viewpoint. Newspapers have become an expanded version of the official news and thus gained distrust and lost any social influence. Additionally, newspapers have turned into one of the new tools of coercion that constantly produce incitement and hate speech, often without justification.

There appears to be an urgent need to

01 Bahrain's need for a new press law that abolishes the grim legal legacy that has been in place for more than half a century.

02 The abolition of legislation and laws restricting press and media freedoms, especially those targeting new media platforms, and the recognition of citizen journalism alongside traditional journalism.

03 Allowing the community of journalists to be re-represented structurally (in a syndicate) and professionally by slackening the grip over press institutions.

04 Revoking the harsh sentences against some journalists, media professionals and intellectuals, and restoring revoked citizenships.

V: Recommendations

The Bahrain Press Association condemns the targeting of journalists, bloggers, photographers, and people of opinion which it believes has become a systematic and commonly practiced behavior. It is also one of the main reasons that led to the decline of Bahrain's reputation at the international level in terms of freedom of the press. 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 freedom to exert urgent pressure on the Bahraini government to:

01 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.

02 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.

03 Secure freedoms of media and the press and reconsidering the work priorities of the Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security Administration, especially with regard to monitoring cyber activists.

04 Put an end to the authority’s monopoly of the television, radio and print media, and enable the voice of opposition in the media—including reauthorizing the publication of Al-Wasat.

05 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.

BAHRAIN 2021:

You only see what we see!
Bahrain Press Association



**An association concerned with
defending freedom of the press
and media in Bahrain, established
on July 2011 ,9.**

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