

The 16th Annual Report of
the Bahrain Press Association

Bahrain 2025

GOVERNING SOCIETY THROUGH FEAR



رابطة الصحافة البحرينية
Bahrain press Association

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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Introduction

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2026, the Bahrain Press Association (BPA) is issuing its annual report on the state of press freedom and freedom of opinion and expression in Bahrain during 2025, titled “Bahrain 2025: Governing Society through Fear”. This was a year that can be described as a transitional phase from sporadic repression to comprehensive and systematic legal, security, and moral control.

This title encapsulates the core conclusion of a year-long course characterized by expanded tools for controlling and regulating the public sphere, through the establishment of an integrated system based on preventive deterrence, pre-emptive criminalisation, and the legal subjugation of freedom of opinion and expression.

Fear is no longer a by-product of security crackdowns or court rulings. It has become an instrument of governance — a mechanism deployed to regulate political, media, religious, and even social life. The state has not only punished dissenting voices but has also signaled that straying from the official narrative—or expressing independent views on domestic or regional matters—may lead to summons, prosecution, or exclusion. This is evident in the clear interplay between legislation and practice. The enactment of the new press law, which expanded the powers of government institutions, coupled with the growing dominance of the cybercrime unit, the continued targeting of religious rituals, and the criminalization of political solidarity, have collectively fostered a climate defined less by constitutional protections and more by institutionalized fear.

In 2025, violations against journalists, writers, activists, and ordinary citizens accelerated significantly, with the Association documenting around 74 cases of violations ranging from arrests, interrogations, and court verdicts to bans on media coverage. This was accompanied by widespread religious restrictions during the Ashura season and a systematic targeting of all forms of expression critical of government performance or supportive of the Palestinian cause. Cases of opinion and expression that ended in arrest or interrogation exceeded 60, while judicial rulings were issued in 10 cases, indicating an expansion of the scope of punishment and its shift from being a deterrent tool to a daily policy for managing the public sphere.

Thus, the total number of violations documented by the Bahraini Press Association (BPA) since the outbreak of the protests in February 2011 until the end of 2025 rises to more than two thousand violations, in a cumulative trajectory that underscores the deepening crisis in the relationship between the authorities and freedom of expression in Bahrain.

These violations were not isolated or casual incidents, but rather occurred within a comprehensive context that combines legislation and practice. In May 2025, authorities enacted a long-awaited Press Law after more than 13 years, not as a legislative breakthrough but as a legal framework that legitimizes the targeting of journalistic work and digital media. The law thus leaves journalists and media outlets under the persistent threat of prosecution and closure through broadly worded provisions that effectively defer to the Penal Code, while placing the digital sphere under direct administrative oversight. This law represented a pivotal turning point in the structure of control and the suppression of freedom of opinion and

expression, as the state shifted from managing violations to legalizing them.

At the procedural level, the year 2025 reflected an excessive sensitivity of the legal system toward any criticism directed at the three authorities. The judiciary was increasingly deployed to pursue lawyers, journalists, religious figures, and private citizens on recurring charges such as “misuse of social media,” “spreading false news,” “undermining the social fabric,” and “violating public morals.” These accusations, the Association notes, have become routine entries in the country’s criminal lexicon—ready-made formulations used to prosecute expressions of opinion in Bahrain.

The year also witnessed a direct targeting of international journalism, exemplified by the cancellation of the visa of a prominent correspondent of an international news agency after publishing a human rights report, sending a clear message that censorship is no longer confined to domestic media, but extend to foreign coverage as well.

The report noted a striking escalation in the politicization of regional issues within the Bahraini public sphere. While limited and carefully managed expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian cause were permitted, authorities reportedly moved against individuals whose statements extended beyond symbolic gestures into overt political criticism, whether through poetry, religious sermons, or media statements. Any expression that contradicted the official state stance on certain regional issues was also suppressed through summonses, forced undertakings, and trials, underscoring that foreign policy has effectively

become a prohibited area of expression.

The year 2025 marked a new peak in the targeting of the Shiite community on religious grounds, as the Ashura season turned into an open security confrontation, involving the removal of religious symbols, the imposition of blockades on certain areas, and the arrest of chanters, clerics, and citizens, in addition to trials on charges of “inciting terrorism” over attire or the display of religious symbols. This crackdown has become an annual occurrence, expanding year after year.

The report further highlights the expanding role of the Cybercrime Directorate in 2025, portraying it as operating both as a morality watchdog and a gatekeeper of public opinion, where “public morals” laws were used to prosecute social content that carried no political message, leading up to the imposition of harsh penalties including imprisonment and permanent deportation. This reflects the state’s shift from regulating political discourse to shaping the social sphere itself according to vague and non-transparent moral standards. The Directorate is also accused of continuing to summon activists, compel them to sign pledges, and pressure them to delete posts critical of the government and its policies.

This report comes as an analytical reading of a path that is steadily heading towards a comprehensive narrowing of the public sphere in Bahrain. It raises fundamental questions about the future of journalism, the limits of expression, and the possibility of any real reform under legislation that criminalizes criticism, and practices that reward silence and punish opinion.



B. Milestones from the year 2025

Legalizing Repression: Passing a press law that legitimizes targeting the media

The process of amending the legal framework regulating journalism, printing, and publishing in 2025 marked a turning point, as the restrictions shifted from the level of security and judicial practice to a legislative structure applicable to both traditional journalism and the digital space.

The Bahrain Press Association condemned the issuance of the Press and Electronic Media Law No. (41) of 2025, which was ratified and issued by the King on October 30, 2025, after being approved by the Shura Council and the Council of Representatives.

The law represents a dramatic regression from constitutional and international commitments to freedom of opinion, expression, and press freedoms in Bahrain. The Law broadens prior censorship and administrative penalties to encompass digital media, while still leaving room for criminal prosecution under other statutes, principally the Penal Code and the Anti-Terrorism Law.

The law constitutes a setback due to its blatant conflict with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19), which stipulates that restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of the press be precise, necessary, and proportionate to a legitimate objective. Additionally, the Law employs ambiguous terms such as “national interest” and “exposure” instead of “incitement to violence,” thus broadening criminal interpretation. Moreover, it includes

provisions that constitute economic and procedural deterrents through hefty fines, powers of content blocking/removal, and license revocations that could cripple small platforms, while keeping avenues for criminal prosecution under parallel laws open.

A close reading of the articles reveals no substantive expansion of press freedoms. On the contrary, the provisions of the new law consolidate the state's tools to tighten control over the media and cyber spaces, keeping journalists and media institutions under constant threat of trials and administrative closure. While the new press law removes explicit references to imprisonment, it includes a general clause allowing for the application of “any more severe penalty under other laws,” allowing for journalists and Internet activists to be prosecuted under the Penal Code or other laws. This opens the door to severe prison sentences. As a result, the removal of direct imprisonment provisions is characterized in the report as largely symbolic, aimed at improving Bahrain's human rights image internationally, while leaving journalists effectively subject to incarceration through parallel legal mechanisms.

The law allows for the expansion of censorship to the digital sphere,

subjecting it to licensing as well as the possibility of suspension and blockage. This effectively turns the last relative avenue for civil society in Bahrain into a monitored space governed by broad executive decisions. Articles (16) and (22) reinstate prior licensing as a prerequisite for engaging in any journalistic or media activity, or even printing and publishing, which contradicts the principle that prior authorization constitutes a form of preventive censorship. Furthermore, the addition of a financial penalty of up to 5.000 dinars opens the door to political and administrative discrimination in granting or denying licenses.

The law expands the powers of temporary suspension, blocking, and administrative confiscation of content, which practically means imposing a "pre-emptive penalty" before final judgments are issued. Such provisions run counter to the presumption of innocence and fall short of international standards requiring legality, necessity, and proportionality in restricting freedom of expression.

Article (69) criminalizes "attacking" the religion or the king of the country instead of "insulting" or "inciting," which gives the Public Prosecution absolute discretionary power to criminalize any opinion.

The law grants all government institutions, such as ministries and government bodies, legal immunity equivalent to the constitutional immunity of the king, which makes substantive criticism of government policies or performance permanently prohibited.

Furthermore, Articles 75, 74, and 78 authorize the courts and the Ministry of Information to suspend newspapers or block websites for a period of no less than three months, or even up to a full year, or to revoke their licenses, even before a final judgment (Article 78). These are pre-emptive penalties imposed before a judicial conviction, clearly contradicting the principle of the presumption of innocence. Article 75 also allows for the confiscation and deletion of content, effectively turning the law into a tool for the digital erasure of journalistic material.

The report also draws attention to Articles 84 and 85, which grant the Ministry of Information the power to issue formal warnings to newspapers and websites and to require them to publish the text of those warnings. This amounts to direct executive interference in editorial content. The articles also permit the suspension or revocation of a license if "the editorial policy tackles the national interest," a vague formulation that allows the authorities to consider any opposing opinion a threat to national security.

The new law represents a harsher tool in the hands of authorities to disrupt independent journalism and strangle freedom of opinion and expression. It formalizes censorship mechanisms and prevents the formation of alternative spaces for opinion and public discussion in the country.

The judiciary as a tool of deterrence:

prosecuting opinion on charges of "honor and reputation"

The year 2025 revealed an increasing use of the judiciary as a tool of soft political deterrence by reframing public criticism as criminal disputes related to "honor and reputation." Lawyer Rashid Al-Binali was sent to the court in February 2025 following a complaint lodged by a member of parliament over a critical online post. The proceedings ended with his conviction and fine, along with a prison sentence, which was later replaced with an alternative penalty.

This issue reflects a recurring pattern aimed at silencing critical voices by imposing sustained psychological and legal burdens, even when imprisonment is not actually enforced.

The risk here lies in turning the judiciary from a resort for resolving disputes into a tool for controlling public discourse. In this dynamic, the mere act of initiating legal proceedings can serve as a deterrent signal to others operating within the public sphere.



■ Lawyer Rashid Al-Binali

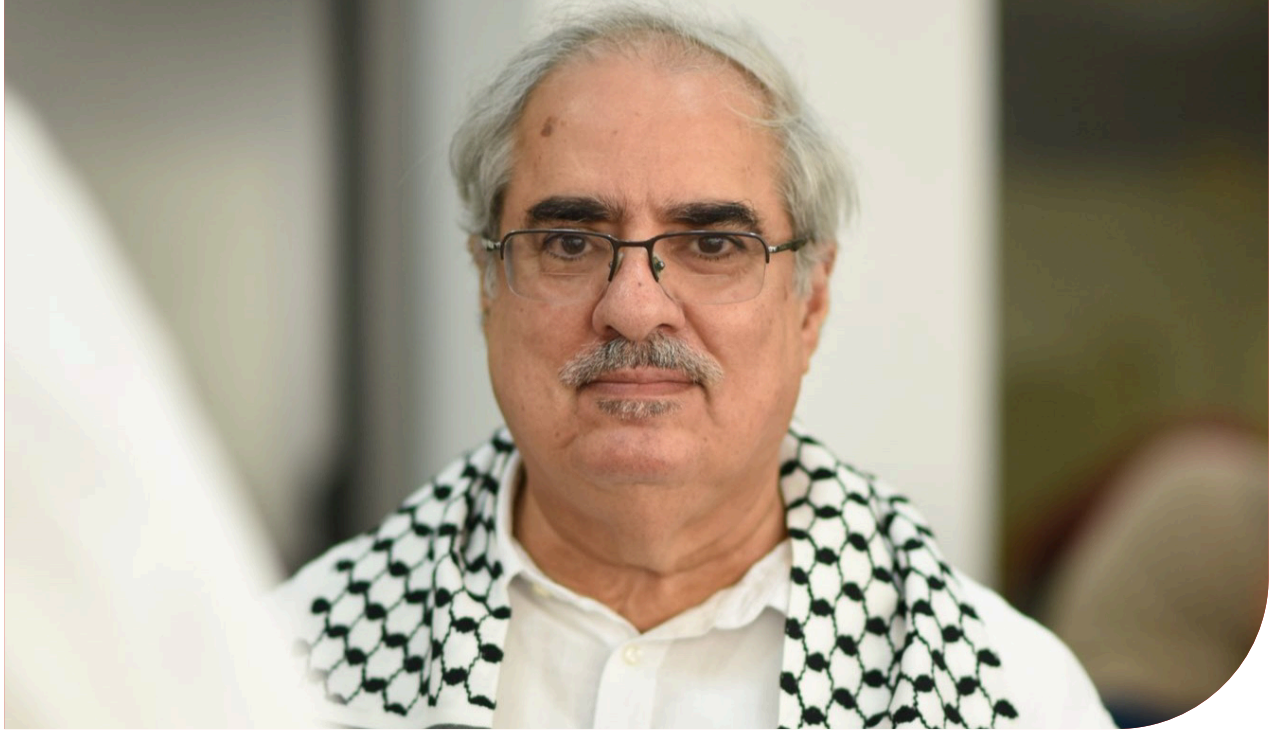
Targeting International Media:

Revocation of a foreign journalist's visa following a human rights report

In October 2025, Bahraini authorities revoked the visa of journalist Jon Gambrell, the Gulf and Iran bureau chief at the Associated Press, just one day after he published a report on the hunger strike of detained activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja.

The decision came without a clear official explanation, and the concerned authorities merely





■ Ibrahim Sharif

Solidarity with Palestine is punishable

Despite allowing limited gatherings in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, the year 2025 witnessed direct targeting of any expression of solidarity that went beyond the permitted symbolic framework. For instance, in March, chanter Mahdi Sihwan was arrested after reciting a poem in solidarity with Gaza during a religious event.

Later in November, political dissident Ibrahim Sharif was arrested immediately upon his return from Beirut over media statements about Palestine and the boycott, and was referred to a trial that ended with a sentence of six months in prison and a fine.

The arrest and trial of Ibrahim Sharif is a telling example of the expansion of the scope of punishment to include opinions expressed outside the country's geographical borders. His media statements in Beirut were sufficient grounds for his immediate arrest upon arrival and a lengthy trial. This case sends a clear message: freedom of expression is conditional, and punishment extends beyond national borders, pursuing opinions wherever they are expressed.

Banning Peaceful Protests: Managing Demonstrations through Permits and Selective Prohibition

Throughout 2025, the authorities continued to obstruct the right to peaceful assembly through a selective licensing mechanism, particularly concerning sit-ins organized by the Bahrain Society against Normalisation. Several permit requests were rejected, sometimes due to the "title of the event," and sometimes under the pretext of "regional circumstances," without any clear legal basis. This behavior reflects meticulous management of protest, theoretically keeping the right intact but renders it practically meaningless, by making every action subject to negotiation, warning, or prohibition, thereby reinforcing a pre-emptive deterrent atmosphere and limiting community initiative.



The Cybercrime Directorate as Opinion Police

The Cybercrime Directorate emerged during 2025 as a central tool for controlling public discourse through immediate summonses, prolonged investigations, and the imposition of non-publication pledges.

This mechanism has been deployed widely in cases of criticism of government policies, solidarity with Palestine, and stances on certain regional issues, with some summoned individuals being released in exchange for deleting the content and pledging silence. This pattern represents a shift from subsequent punishment to preventative deterrence, where a mere summons becomes sufficient to recalibrate public behavior.

Muzzling the Digital Space: Pursuing Mass Accounts without Transparency

In December 2025, authorities announced legal action against nine social media accounts for allegedly inciting sedition and hatred. Officials also warned the public against republishing or endorsing the accounts' content through comments or interactions. Names were not disclosed nor were the criteria for classifying them so. This policy creates an ambiguous digital landscape in which the user is threatened with punishment even without knowing the red lines, thus promoting self-censorship and restricting public engagement.



The Absent Local Press: Media Silence on Repression and Solidarity

The year 2025 witnessed the continued absence of licensed local press coverage of national political issues, as well as regional issues, either through neglect or simply relaying official narratives.

This absence takes on a particular significance in light of the supposed role of the media in oversight and accountability. This silence not only reflects professional weakness but also points to a governed media environment where the parameters of coverage are predetermined.





Fear as a Public Policy: From Punishment to Preemptive Deterrence

The outcome of 2025 shows that fear is no longer a coincidental result of violations, but rather an integrated tool for managing society. Through legislation, summons, defamation, prohibition, and penalties, the public sphere is reshaped based on what is allowed and what is costly. In this sense, all the year's events intersect at a single idea: managing society through fear, not through violent repression, through a subtle system that produces silence and rewards compliance.



C. How does maintaining security turn from a noble goal into a pretext for stripping away freedoms?

Bahrain pursues an oppressive policy when it comes to dissenting opinions or freedom of expression. The state controls every aspect of the media and press, and promotes a single perspective within a uniform narrative of events, plans, and projects, in a manner that aligns with its policies, strategies, and method of governance. This is the case in many countries whose democratic experience has not yet fully matured.

In his meeting with the residents of the village of Diraz in the northern governorate in October 2024, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa affirmed that "Bahrain has neither a stake nor involvement in the global and regional events occurring in the region, apart from our sympathy with the victims." This statement which was at the time considered a subtle call to abandon the protests that the village had witnessed in solidarity with Palestine and Lebanon. The minister gave a directive to focus sermons in Al-Sadiq Mosque (the main mosque in Diraz) on "religious matters and not political ones" to avoid unrest that could lead to resorting to security solutions, as he put it.

While the minister has permitted a weekly gathering in Adliya—and at times in Muharraq—opposing the Israeli war on Gaza since October 2023, he has taken a different stance toward expressions emerging from Diraz. Given that Al-Sadiq Mosque has long

been associated with Shiite opposition voices since 2011, the minister has reportedly maintained that individuals linked to the opposition cannot freely express solidarity with Palestine and Lebanon if such expressions are deemed to risk "destabilizing security."

Earlier, the Bahrain Press Association condemned summoning dozens of social media activists and forcing them to delete posts under the threat of being accused of glorifying terrorism. The Association pointed out that the Cybercrime Directorate of the Ministry of Interior is acting in violation of the constitution and the law by intimidating and threatening activists, politicians, and civil society actors, and controlling what they publish on these platforms.

As a result, a persistent imbalance remains between the duty to maintain security on the one hand and the protection of the right to freedom of expression on the other, as in other countries whose people are still seeking a real window into democracy, and even in those that have democratic systems. Meanwhile, in light of the current global climate and the rise of right-wing and populist forces in several Western countries, undermining security is used as a scare tactic to infringe upon and curtail freedoms, as security affairs

journalist Muhannad Sabri says. He adds: "It is also a common and ongoing feature in all dictatorships in the Middle East, despite the existence of highly detailed laws for all forms of freedoms and what falls under freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of publication and writing, etc., and what is considered harming and undermining security."

Sabri also draws parallels with measures taken in countries widely regarded as democratic, in terms of pursuing critics of Israel and its war on Gaza: "Security is used as an excuse to curtail and violate freedoms. Anyone speaks about the war on Gaza is labelled as a supporter of terrorism or anti-Semitic, to the point that the terms 'supporting terrorism' and 'anti-Semitism' have lost their meaning as they are entirely misused and manipulated to serve the purpose of curbing freedoms, striking at political enemies, and defaming people."

The global context, as explained by Sabry, is moving towards a violent assault on freedoms, including freedom of expression and opinion, not only at the journalistic level but also at the public level, where individuals are arrested and deported legally or illegally because of their opinions on social media. He said: "Unfortunately, even the advanced democratic world is on the verge of adopting this complete dictatorial approach, heralding our entry into a dark tunnel with regard to

governments stripping away freedoms."

Sabri notes that in several countries across West and South Asia, authorities frequently rely on slander and defamation charges to pursue political opponents and journalists—citing examples such as Egypt and Bahrain. As for the case of civil society organizations in Egypt, which began in 2011 and ended last year, the regime used fabricated charges of receiving foreign funding illegally and targeted a group of civil society organizations and a number of activists. The case spanned more than a decade, during which those accused faced sustained legal pressure and restrictions. He argues that despite the protracted proceedings, no conclusive evidence was ultimately presented to substantiate the charges against the defendants.

Security is an important and fundamental factor for the stability of states and societies, for building prosperous political, economic, and social systems, and for attracting investments and other plans that benefit the country. Therefore, maintaining security is a priority for many countries, and Bahrain is no different. However, this 'noble goal' has become a tool for suppressing freedom of opinion and expression.

Jonathan Dagher, head of the Middle East desk at Reporters Without Borders, says: "In most countries in the Middle East,

journalists are subjected to arrest, interrogation, or even murder under the pretext of defending the national security. This is completely unacceptable. Journalists are doing their duty in informing the public with important information to ensure the creation of a well-informed public opinion based on facts. Therefore, defaming them, assaulting them, and arresting them under the claim of disrupting state security is a false allegation that cannot be accepted under any circumstances.”

Dagher pointed out that Bahrain is no different from the surrounding countries such as Iran and Egypt, which accuse journalists, activists, and dissidents of joining a terrorist organization or promoting propaganda against the state to justify arresting and prosecuting them since their opinions do not align with the state’s narrative. “The charge of undermining security is the same accusation used to arrest journalists and bloggers in these countries,” Dagher adds.

“We see this recurring in a number of countries, where security is used as an excuse by repressive regimes to control information and public opinion, which is fed through the press and news. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are not enemies of security; on the contrary, they are essential to security and can help uncover security breaches and strengthen state institutions. “Such flimsy arguments are unacceptable,” Dagher said, noting that authoritarian leaders often confuse securing

their positions of power with national security. He emphasized that journalists have a duty to the state, but they have absolutely no duty to cover up corrupt practices or acts of repression, or to remain silent about them. On the contrary, this is precisely why the press exists.”

In fact, opinions contrary to those of state officials, as well as journalistic work seeking to uncover facts and advance democratic experiences, do not contribute to destabilizing security. Rather, it is the arrest of journalists and individuals for expressing views that diverge from official positions that risks undermining social cohesion and security. Moreover, linking the reassurance of the regime and its men remaining in power with the country’s security and civil peace is an authoritarian practice followed by totalitarian, undemocratic regimes to remain in power, not by regimes committed developing their political and social experiences and addressing their shortcomings.



D. How did the press in Bahrain lose its role as a mediator between the state and society?

At pivotal moments in Bahrain's history (2011-2001), Bahraini journalism served as a window for expressing intellectual and political pluralism and as an intermediary between society and the state. At the time, daily newspapers extended beyond the role of relaying official statements. They operated as arenas for public debate and contributed to shaping national opinion on matters ranging from political reform and education to economic policy and broader social issues affecting Bahraini life.

The political and security events in Bahrain in 2011 represented a negative turning point, imposing adverse changes on the political and legal structure and causing a setback in political freedoms, including press freedoms in the country. Gradually, this role shifted from monitoring the scene and holding authorities accountable to merely serving as channels for transmitting government data, with their core existence centered on a propaganda function rather than functioning as independent media outlets.

In a critical analysis of the content of some of Bahrain's most prominent newspapers during a survey of their local news on 24 September 2025, including an analysis of their content in light of press freedom and freedom of opinion and expression standards. The newspapers exhibit a similar pattern in the structure of local news, which can be summarized into four main categories:

Official government and parliamentary news: The overwhelming majority of headlines were

devoted to official activities—including ministerial meetings, parliamentary statements, visiting delegations, and project inaugurations. For instance, Al-Ayyam featured stories on initiatives such as “providing the flu vaccine” and “launching training programs in cooperation with official institutions.” Al-Watan largely highlighted statements from the House of Representatives and the Shura Council, along with official messages of congratulations and condolences. Meanwhile, Akhbar Al-Khaleej focused on coverage of Bahrain's pavilion at Expo 2025 and other government-related events and meetings.

Economy and Business: The economic content published in newspapers lack the analytical or critical nature, as it is often written as if they are corporate announcements: banking partnerships, government projects, investment fairs. There are no articles that raise questions about unemployment, public debt, or the dilemmas of the local economy.

Security and Judiciary:

News related to security and the judiciary appears frequently, usually in the form of brief statements: arrests in cybercrime cases, referral of individuals to courts, or statements from the public prosecution. Such coverage largely echoes the official narrative of security authorities, offering little in the way of independent analysis,

investigative scrutiny, or alternative perspectives. Follow-up reporting on these cases is described as minimal, with limited contextual depth.

Public services, health, and education:

There is room for service-related news such as vaccination campaigns and the opening of new facilities, but this coverage tends to take the form of 'government success announcements' rather than field reports that reflect citizens' experiences or critique the quality of services.

Absence of critical voices:

Reviewing today's selections, not a single news item or article in the local pages directly questioned state policies or pose explicit questions about the effectiveness of government decisions. There were no field reports exploring citizens' concerns or conveying dissenting voices. Even opinion articles, which could provide a broader space for expression, failed to create a genuine space for debate and pluralism.

This absence is not coincidental; rather, it reflects a political, legal, and organizational structure that has turned Bahraini journalism into a hostage of the interests of state-linked capital, its institutions, officials, media laws, and cybercrime regulations, which criminalize criticism of the authorities and tighten the noose around any dissenting discourse. Consequently, journalism's core role as a forum for public debate has been

steadily eroded, giving way to a model that largely serves to promote and reinforce government decisions rather than scrutinize them.

This prevailing pattern makes the three newspapers more of a "government propaganda machine" than an independent media outlet. Three indicators of this can be observed:

Selective coverage: All newspapers focus on what they consider official achievements or positive events, while controversial issues such as labor protests, human rights files, or corruption cases remain absent.

Language used: Headlines such as 'Attracting Attention,' 'Another Success,' 'Fruitful Cooperation' reproduce the discourse of official achievement and lack any questioning or critical phrasing.

Uniform editorial line: There are no fundamental differences among the three newspapers. All of them reflect a unified approach: promoting the official narrative and the state's account in interpreting daily events in Bahrain, while marginalizing independent voices or those that adopt a different narrative.

Opinion Journalism:

A Unilateral Voice

Bahraini journalism was known for its opinion spaces and daily debates on government policies, political developments, and the country's economy, with contributions from writers of diverse

backgrounds and specialties. Today, the pages appear to be strictly regulated, with most published commentary aligns closely with the prevailing official narrative, while critical voices have largely faded from view. Articles addressing political or social issues are described as frequently echoing and defending state positions rather than interrogating or challenging them. Thus, 'opinion journalism' has transformed from a forum for free discussion into an additional mirror of the official narrative, exacerbating the crisis of pluralism in Bahrain.

What becomes clear from the previous presentation is that Bahraini journalism is undergoing a profound transformation: from a tool of oversight and accountability to state-controlled institutions.


This transformation did not happen suddenly; rather, it is the gradual result of policies accumulated since the beginning of the millennium. From restrictive laws such as the Press and Publication Law to the Cybercrime Law, these regulations created a rigid censorship environment. This was followed by the influence of newspaper ownership, which is directly or indirectly linked to state interests or individuals close to the executive authority, and culminating in self-censorship, where journalists engage in pre-emptive restraint for fear of angering state officials, legal repercussions, or losing their jobs. Consequently, official language has come to permeate even routine news coverage, which in many cases has shifted toward amplifying and embellishing government statements rather than

scrutinizing them.

Transforming the press into mere government-run publishing houses has serious repercussions for society. Foremost among these is a loss of trust, as local readers quickly realize that newspapers do not reflect their voices or represent their interests, leading them to turn to foreign media or social media platforms. Another consequence is the absence of public debate, since the scarcity or complete lack of independent voices weakens the potential for domestic dialogue and allows government decisions to be passed without societal accountability. Furthermore, it narrows the horizons for reform, as without a critical press, it is impossible to identify gaps or advance any genuine reforms in education, the economy, or social justice.

Conclusion

An examination of a single day's coverage in three of Bahrain's leading newspapers illustrates a broader transformation in the media landscape. Rather than serving as a conduit between society and the state, the press is portrayed as functioning largely as a promotional extension of official institutions. The newspapers reflect a uniform discourse that glorifies official achievements while marginalizing criticism, accountability, and the realities and concerns of ordinary citizens. Consequently, journalism shifts from



being a tool of accountability to a tool of embellishment, and from a mirror of society to a mouthpiece for the government.

Freedom of the press is not a luxury; it is an essential condition for any society that aspires to development and stability. The absence of independent press not only harms journalists but also weakens society as a whole and undermines its ability to confront both internal and external challenges.

The transformation of Bahraini journalism into an official propaganda platform is the result of political and legal choices that are subject to review and correction. It calls on the government to consider reopening the public sphere to an independent press not only as a response to human rights concerns, but as a strategic imperative — one that would help restore balance between the state and society and rebuild public trust in national institutions. If the press remains in its current state—merely echoing the official narrative—society will continue to lose one of its most important tools for expression and accountability, and citizens will become increasingly reliant on external platforms and exiled media outlets that cannot replace the role of free national press.

Restoring the Bahraini press to its rightful place as the fourth estate requires a high-level political will that recognizes the current trajectory as a threat to the country's stability and development. Therefore,

the Bahraini government should:

- **Review of the legal framework:** Amending the press, publications, and cybercrime laws in accordance with Bahrain's national and international obligations in the field of freedom of expression.
- **Ensuring the independence of media institutions:** Ending the dependence of newspapers on political and economic spheres of influence and allowing the establishment of new independent platforms and newspapers.
- **Access to information:** Enacting clear legislation that guarantees the right to obtain public information, enabling the press to perform its oversight role freely and independently.



E: Recommendations

E: Recommendations

In light of the systematic escalation of violations and the transformation of fear into a tool for managing the political, media, religious, and social spheres, as documented by the Bahrain Press Association during 2025, the Association affirms that addressing the crisis requires a fundamental shift in the state's perception of freedom of expression and the press. Against this backdrop, the Bahrain Press Association puts forward the following recommendations:

1. The immediate and unconditional release of all civil society activists who have been detained or sentenced because of their opinions or peaceful activities, and ending all forms of arbitrary summons and coercive pledges imposed outside the framework of the law.
2. Repeal or suspend the application of vague legal provisions used to criminalize opinion, foremost among them the articles on “false news,” “misuse of social media,” and “undermining the social fabric,” until they are brought into line with international standards.
3. Restoring Bahraini citizenship to all journalists, writers, and political activists whose citizenship was revoked for political reasons, as a fundamental step towards any serious national reconciliation and a true test of the credibility of reform.
4. Freezing the current form of the Press Law, halting the application of its restrictive articles, and opening a transparent dialogue with journalists, independent institutions, and civil society organizations to draft a modern media law that protects press freedom.
5. Ending the state and influential figures' monopoly on the media and allowing the establishment of editorially independent media outlets, and guaranteeing their right to coverage without security or administrative interference.
6. Protecting digital media as the last remaining space for public expression and halting the policy of compulsory licensing and administrative closure of websites and online platforms.
7. Redefining the powers of the Cybercrime Directorate and limiting them to actual technical crimes, preventing their use as a tool for monitoring opinions and political, religious, and social content, while subjecting its work to independent judicial oversight.

8. Stop using the judiciary as a tool for political deterrence, and ensuring its independence and preventing its use as a means to silence criticism related to public affairs.

9. A call for a comprehensive review of the philosophy of "security" in state governance by transitioning from a logic of deterrence and fear to a logic of trust and rights, considering freedom of expression as a component of stability rather than a threat to it.

10. Guaranteeing the freedom to practice religious rituals and ending security measures during religious occasions, especially Ashura, in a manner that preserves citizens' right to peaceful religious expression.

11. Guaranteeing the right to demonstrate and assemble peacefully without selective restrictions or interference, and ending the policy of controlling protests through prohibition and conditional permits.

12. Inviting 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 and to present a public report on the state of media and digital freedoms.

13. Urging Bahrain's friendly countries to raise the issue of freedom of expression and the importance of expanding press freedoms in the country.

14. Urging international organizations concerned with press freedom to enhance long-term monitoring and encourage exile journalism and digital alternatives to counter the internally imposed silence, ensuring that independent voices reach the outside world.

Summary of Recommendations:

The continued governance of society through fear only exacerbates the deadlock and deepens the gap between the state and the society. Only by respecting freedom of expression, opening the public sphere, and protecting independent journalism can Bahrain be placed on a more balanced and sustainable political and media path.

Bahrain 2025: Governing Society through Fear



Special thanks to
National Endowment for Democracy
United States of America



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Website: www.bahrainpa.org

referred to a "post-approval review".

This incident represents a turning point because it replicates the policy of managing through fear from the domestic level to the outside world, sending a direct message to the international press that human rights coverage could prompt immediate exclusion. It also reflects official discomfort with any narrative that does not pass through the approved channels.

There have also been reports of the removal of

Ashura Under Siege: Targeting Religious Rituals by Force and Prohibition

During the 2025 Ashura season, restrictions on the religious practices of the Shia community intensified markedly. The events began with the removal of mourning symbols displayed in the village of Diraz before the start of the month of Muharram. This led to clashes and the injury of citizen Hassan Al-Anfouz in the head, followed by the imposition of a siege on the area and banning clerics from entry.

There have also been reports of the removal of



■ **Jon Gambrel**

Ashura banners in other areas, as well as the arrest and summons of dozens of clerics, religious chanters known as "rawadeed," and heads of mourning gatherings. These measures were reportedly accompanied by warnings and threats concerning the display of religious symbols and slogans. Such practices reveal the transformation of religious rituals into a security issue managed by the logic of prohibition rather than organization and regulation.

In July, security authorities continued targeting a number of individuals in connection with religious posts related to Ashura. Since 1st of July, at least 30 summonses have been issued for clerics, religious chanters, and mourning ceremony leaders for interrogation, alongside the arrest of three clerics: Sheikh Isa Al-Mu'min, Sheikh Kazem Darwish, and Sheikh Hussein Abdul Karim Mulla Atiyah, as well as two chanters: Mujtaba Al-Abid and Sayyid Mahmoud Al-Mousawi.

The summonses included Sheikh Maitham Al-Salman, Sayyid Muhyi Al-Din Al-Mashaal, and others, in addition to the chanters Mahdi Suhwan, Ali Hammad, Abdul Ameer Al-Biladi. In addition, the heads of several Husayniyas, including the head of the Karzkan Husayniya and former municipal council member Jassim Al-Mahdi were also summoned.