

US State Department human rights reports

Gulf allies: A record of repression and torture**Part 3: Bahrain**

Ed Hightower
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The US State Department recently released its “2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.” This year’s annual report provides details on human rights conditions in over 190 countries. Included are reports on the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which represents the US-backed monarchies of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait.

This Saudi-dominated alliance backed the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya, and has provided key support for the attack on Libya by the United States and European powers. The GCC has also provided military and police personnel to put down insurrections against the repressive regimes in Bahrain and Yemen.



While the US seeks to cloak its imperialist assault on Libya in “humanitarian” terms, its allies in the GCC are guilty of widespread violations of human rights and practice repression and torture in their own countries. This WWS series examines these human rights abuses as documented in the State Department reports. This installment covers Bahrain. For our report on Saudi Arabia, [click here](#); for Qatar [click here](#).

The tiny island nation of Bahrain occupies a strategic location in the Persian Gulf, resting between the Qatar peninsula to the east and Saudi Arabia on the west. As home to the US Navy’s 5th Fleet, the nation plays an important role for imperialist aggression in the region.

Bahrain’s monarchical and repressive regime maintains the closest of ties to Washington and its military security apparatus, such that the head of Bahrain’s intelligence agency, Sheikh Khalifa, “unabashedly positions his relationship with the US Intelligence Community above all others, insisting that his key lieutenants communicate openly with their US liaison partners and actively seek new avenues of cooperation,” according to a 2009 diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks.

Bahrain is home to some 1,235,000 residents, only 569,000 of whom are citizens. The majority of the population are Shia Muslims, with a narrow

layer of Sunnis dominating all aspects of social, political and economic life. King Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa is the absolute head of state and all parts of the government, including the judiciary. Members of his family, the Al-Khalifas, occupy all of the most important ministerial, governmental and business posts. Citizens have no right to change the government, but may vote for representatives of the lower legislative body, which the king may dissolve by decree.

Despite tremendous oil and natural gas reserves, most of the population lives in poverty, with conditions being especially difficult for foreign workers—some 60 percent of the population—women and ethnic minorities.

The US State Department’s 2010 report summarized some of the harsh conditions the Bahraini population faced as follows:

“Citizens did not have the right to change their government. Trafficking in persons and restrictions on the rights of foreign resident workers continued to be significant problems. There were numerous reports of abuse against foreign workers, particularly female domestic workers. There were many reports of domestic violence against women and children. Discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, nationality, and sect, especially against the Shia majority population, persisted.

“There were multiple allegations of mistreatment and torture, especially of Shia activists associated with rejectionist and opposition groups. Authorities arbitrarily arrested activists, journalists, and other citizens and detained some individuals incommunicado. Some detainees did not always have adequate access to their attorneys. At least two of the detainees were dismissed from their public-sector jobs prior to the commencement of judicial proceedings.

“The government restricted civil liberties, including freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and some religious practices. There were instances of the government imposing and enforcing official and unofficial travel bans on political activists. The Shia are underrepresented in positions of leadership in the civil service, police, and security forces.”

Conditions of workers

Bahrain has no national minimum wage. Work regulations are weak and are not consistently enforced. The maximum workweek is 48 hours, though it can be increased to 60 hours with special permission. Workers are officially entitled to one day of rest per six days of work, and 21 days vacation after one year of service at a job. There is overtime pay, but violations were frequent, especially for foreign workers.

Foreign workers, who comprise over 60 percent of the workforce (75 percent in the private sector), face irregular payment of their wages, and

are routinely paid less wages than they were offered when they started. Foreign governments work through their respective embassies to enforce minimum wages for their citizens working in the country, but the agreements do not hold up in practice. The report notes that workers from the Philippines often received less than the 80 dinar (\$212) wage bargained for by their embassy.

Foreign workers are vulnerable to forced labor and some even faced withholding of passports, restrictions on movement, contract substitution, nonpayment of wages, threats, physical and sexual abuse. While the courts provide official redress, many foreign workers fear unfair treatment and deportation.

There exists a limited right to organize into unions, though foreign workers may not participate in collective bargaining. Unions must be a part of the country's only labor federation, the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions. Unions may not engage in political activity. Only 18 percent of the workforce belonged to a union, with 52 percent of those union members coming from one of the six major state-owned enterprises.

While striking is officially recognized, it too is severely limited. Workers in oil, gas, education, telecommunications, transportation, health, even in bakeries and pharmacies, are forbidden to strike. A strike must be authorized by a two-thirds vote, and follows mandatory arbitration. There were no strikes in Bahrain in 2010.

Bahraini law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children. There were, however, reports that such practices occurred in 2010, particularly among domestic workers and those working in the informal sector. Foreign domestic workers accounted for 30 to 40 percent of attempted suicide cases in the government's psychiatric hospitals. These workers enjoy few legal protections and abuses are more easily hidden. Reports of 12 to 16 hour days, no time off, having employment and identification papers held by employers, malnourishment, physical abuse and even rape were common.

There were also reports of children trafficked into the country for domestic service and sexual exploitation.

Prison, detention and torture

Indefinite and unlawful detention, being held without access to legal representation or family members, and torture are increasingly common features of life in Bahrain.

Between August and December alone, human rights organizations found that security personnel had tortured more than two dozen detainees. Detainees described being beaten, suspended in painful positions, forced to stand for long periods, deprived of sleep, and subjected to electric shocks. Lawyers for detainees were denied an independent medical examination to corroborate their clients' accounts of torture.

There were also reports of abuse by law enforcement authorities in connection with the approximately 200 men and juveniles detained between August and December. A prominent blogger and others arrested between August and September claimed they too were beaten, subjected to electric shocks, hung upside down, and beaten on their feet.

A United Nations report released in March described "sub-optimal health conditions" in Bahraini prisons, citing routine denial of medical treatment. In August approximately 70 prisoners in the country's central prison in Jaw protested their conditions, some engaging in a hunger strike. A local human rights NGO reported that the Jaw prison, designed to house 500, in fact held as many as 1,300 persons.

The government maintained appearances of openness and honesty regarding human rights, meeting with representatives of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International on several occasions. But they were not

granted access to detention facilities, and were lampooned by pro-government journalists on a regular basis.

Lack of legal rights, judicial norms

The king appoints all Bahraini judges; there are no trials by jury. Those accused under the country's broad 2006 terrorism law, typically opposition leaders and advocates for the oppressed, often find themselves slandered as murderers in government papers before their trials, prejudicing the trial process against them and bolstering the government's case.

This occurred in the trial of two men accused of assaulting an editor of the pro-government *Al Watan* newspaper on August 25. Authorities arrested the suspects less than 48 hours after the attack, shortly after which senior government officials announced that they had confessed. Newspapers carried photographs of the two men, referring to them as assassins and terrorists.

While the trial judge had the men released on December 12 after the victim of the assault testified in court that the two defendants were not the men who assaulted him, he also agreed to the prosecutor's request that the court examine other evidence in a hearing scheduled for 2011, essentially subjecting them to two trials for the same allegation.

Curtailement of civil liberties

Speech and political activity are severely limited by the requirement that they not infringe on public order or morals.

The state runs all domestic radio and television stations. In August, September and October, the government threatened to shut the websites of a number of newspaper and media outlets unless they stopped broadcasting video content, saying video content would have to be addressed by the legislature before being legally sanctioned.

In May the Ministry of Culture and Information temporarily shut down the Al Jazeera office in Manama and banned their news crew from entering the country, accusing the network of violating national media guidelines. It is expected that Al Jazeera will not be welcome back unless they sign a memorandum of understanding with the ministry about how and what they broadcast.

Journalists face steep fines of as much as 10,000 dinars (\$26,500) and prison sentences of at least six months for criticizing Islam or the king or inciting actions that undermine state security. Government shutdown of political opposition websites or popular blogs was business as usual.

Workers in Bahrain fared little better in the sphere of politics. The government must approve all public demonstrations, or organizers face a three- to six-month prison sentence. All political and social organizations must be officially sanctioned by the state. No organization's principles, goals or programs can run counter to Sharia law or the national interest, or may be based on sectarian, geographic or class identity.

The government uses extensive regulations on social organizations to curtail the activities of human rights groups in particular, preferring to harass leading members with bureaucratic red tape when prison is inexpedient.

In September the Ministry of Social Development, in charge of registered social groups, ordered the dissolution of the Bahrain Human Rights Society's board of directors, even appointing a ministry employee to be the group's interim head.

The government does not allow for the formation of political parties, although social groups engage in political activity despite the fact that this is also illegal.

The state permits Arabs to apply for citizenship after 15 years of residence. The requirement for non-Arabs is 25 years. The naturalization process tends to bend the rules for Sunnis, and supplements government efforts to gerrymander voting districts. Shia Muslims often complain that they must reside in Bahrain more than the minimum 15-year period before receiving citizenship.

Noncitizens may not receive scholarships and other social services to which full citizens are entitled. Prominent Sunnis dominate political life in the majority Shia country. Discrimination against the Shia is widespread, with Sunnis receiving preferential treatment in hiring in particular.

Foreign workers, the majority of the population, are denied the right to collective bargaining.

Women and children

While the constitution provides for equality, equal opportunity, the right to medical care, welfare, education, property, capital and work for all citizens, reality differs greatly.

The status of women in Bahrain is unenviable. While rape is illegal, the law turns a blind eye to spousal rape, making women akin to their property. It is not uncommon for a woman's own father to fight for her husband, convicted of raping her, to receive a lighter sentence. Honor killings are also treated with leniency. Domestic violence is not expressly against the law. A woman cannot transmit nationality to her spouse or children.

While women may initiate divorce proceedings, religious courts have the final say and often refuse to grant a divorce decree. Courts routinely grant mothers custody of daughters younger than age nine and sons younger than age seven, but custody usually reverts to the father once the children reached those ages. Furthermore, the father retains guardianship, or the right to make all legal decisions for the child, until age 21. A noncitizen woman automatically loses custody of her children if she divorces her citizen father without just cause under Bahraini law.

The State Department report found an increase in the number of child abuse cases in recent years may reflect higher willingness to report the crime. Religious courts address crimes involving child abuse, including violence against children, allowing for highly subjective factual findings and penalties and undermining uniformity and child welfare. The Be Free Center, affiliated with the Bahrain Women's Association that focuses on child abuse awareness and prevention, dealt with 2,371 cases of child abuse during 2010.

To be continued



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