



BAHRAIN

CAPITAL: Manama

POPULATION: 0.7 million

GNI PER CAPITA: \$12,410

SCORES	2004	2006
ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUBLIC VOICE:	3.32	2.52
CIVIL LIBERTIES:	3.59	3.73
RULE OF LAW:	3.33	3.67
ANTICORRUPTION AND TRANSPARENCY:	2.83	2.07

(scores are based on a scale of 0 to 7, with 0 representing weakest and 7 representing strongest performance)

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INTRODUCTION

Bahrain is the least wealthy of the oil-producing Arab Gulf states, and boasts an exceptionally well-educated and politically sophisticated citizenry. A brief period of constitutional and parliamentary government was brought to an abrupt end by order of the ruler (amir) in August 1975. Persistent popular agitation to reinstate the electoral order exploded into widespread violence from 1994 to 1999. During the course of the uprising, tensions heightened between the dominant Sunni population and the subordinate Shia. Long-standing agreement among liberal reformers in the two communities began to erode, opening the door to more radical movements in both camps.

After proclaiming Bahrain a monarchy in February 2002, Sheikh Hamad bin 'Isa Al Khalifah has presided over a steady contraction of the package of political reforms that was introduced during 2000–01. Liberal and radical activists who applauded the restoration of the National Assembly (al-Majlis al-Watani) were greatly disappointed by the regime's decision to accord the appointed upper house, the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura), the same legislative powers as the popularly elected

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lower house, the Chamber of Representatives (Majlis al-Nuwwab). Furthermore, the Amended Constitution of 2002 takes away the right of elected representatives to introduce bills for parliamentary debate and instead requires that all draft laws be referred to committee and introduced to the assembly by the Council of Ministers. In October 2002, King Hamad promulgated a revised Press and Publications Law, which imposes severe penalties for publishing any report that criticizes the monarchy, jeopardizes national unity, advocates changes to the country's political system, or denigrates Islam. That same month, the monarch issued Decree Number 56, which grants blanket immunity from criminal and civil prosecution to any official suspected of inflicting torture or otherwise violating human rights in the past.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUBLIC VOICE – 2.52

According to the amended constitution, the 40 members of the Chamber of Representatives are to be selected by popular vote every four years. The first parliamentary election under the terms of the revised constitution took place in October 2002, in an atmosphere that proved to be largely free of outright fraud and intimidation. Nevertheless, the Council of Ministers enacted a new citizenship law three months before the balloting that permitted citizens of the other five member-states of the Gulf Co-operation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman) to obtain concurrent Bahraini nationality, with full voting rights, thereby diluting the influence of natural-born citizens. The cabinet also issued a political rights statute that blocked popular societies and civic organizations from “participating in any electoral campaign on behalf of any candidates” and prohibited “campaigning in religious places, universities and schools, public squares, roads and government buildings.”¹ After critics of the regime won a majority of the seats contested in municipal council elections in May 2002, electoral districts were reconfigured to improve the chances of pro-regime candidates and give greater weight to the country's Sunni population. More important, thousands of Syrians, Yemenis, and Baluchis who held positions in the armed forces, police, and intelligence services were granted the right to vote. Reformers immediately condemned this administrative move, which they labeled “political natu-

ralization,” that is, citizenship conferred for largely illegitimate “political” motives.

In response to such machinations, and to protest the general terms of the amended constitution, four major popular societies boycotted the parliamentary election. These were the Islamic National Accord Society (al-Wifaq), the National Democratic Action Society (al-Amal al-Watani al-Dimuqrati or al-Wa’ad), the National Bloc (al-Tajammu’ al-Qawmi), and the Islamic Action Society (al-Amal al-Islami). Just over 53 percent of eligible voters participated in the first round of balloting for the Chamber of Representatives, while no more than 45 percent turned out for the second round. Twenty-eight Sunnis and 12 Shias ended up being elected to the Chamber of Representatives. A majority of the Sunni members belonged to the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimin), most of whom hailed from the association’s more moderate mainstream, while a small number came from the more radical (or salafi) wing.

Political parties are prohibited by law, although the Chamber of Representatives periodically raises the question of whether formal parties should be permitted to emerge. The king is on record as saying that the establishment of organized political parties is an issue for the legislature to decide. A proposal to allow the formation of political parties was rejected by the parliamentary legislative and legal affairs committee in May 2004.² Two months later, the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry took an important step toward breaking the impasse by setting up a political action committee to lobby the National Assembly on matters of concern to local businesspeople.³

Nothing of consequence was discussed in the National Assembly during the first year after the elections. But as 2003 came to a close, it became apparent that the country’s two primary social welfare and retirement agencies were rapidly approaching insolvency. A special commission selected from the Chamber of Representatives by the chamber’s speaker drew up a report charging three cabinet ministers with “mis-managing the funds” held by these agencies and engaging in “a number of failed investments” that had drained their coffers.⁴ When the government showed little interest in the report, five members of the commission called for a public “parliamentary interrogation” of the three ministers. This step was strongly resisted by the Speaker, on the grounds

minister told reporters that greater attention should be paid to economic growth and less energy devoted to political controversies. The president of the pro-regime al-Mithaq society elaborated: "It is great to have a parliament and to expand freedom of expression, but what Bahrain really needs is politicians who think of the country's national interests and look for ways to consolidate its modern trends in an increasingly globalised world."³⁵

Recommendations

- The government should encourage the National Assembly to adopt and implement measures that heighten the transparency of contracts and agreements drawn up by state agencies and public-sector enterprises.
- The offices of financial and administrative control should be established and allowed to function as envisaged in the National Action Charter.
- State officials should work with the ruling family council and transnational corporations to stop all demands for or expectations of illicit commissions as a precondition for economic projects and investments.
- State agencies and public sector companies should begin to draw up and publish detailed accounts of their annual income and expenditures.

NOTES

¹ Nadeya Sayed Ali Mohammed, "Political Reform in Bahrain: The Price of Stability," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 4 (September 2002).

² Mohammed Almezal, "Plan to Legalise Bahrain Political Parties Shot Down," *Gulf News*, 18 May 2004.

³ Tariq Khonji, "Businessmen Push for Political Role," *Gulf Daily News*, 5 July 2004.

⁴ Almezal, "Bahrain MPs to Quiz Ministers Despite Speaker's Warning," *Gulf News*, 21 January 2004.

⁵ Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Bahrain's Parliament: The Quest for a Role," *Arab Reform Bulletin* 2 (May 2004).

⁶ Almezal, "MPs Demand Resignation of Bahraini Minister," *Gulf News*, 25 August 2004.

⁷ Almezal, "Call to Change Constitution Gathers Steam in Bahrain," *Gulf News*, 20 June 2005.

⁸ Almezal, "Bahrain Allows Opposition Forum," *Gulf News*, 15 February 2004.

⁹ "King Denounces Bid to Divide Bahrainis," BBC, 27 September 2004.