

BAHRAIN 2019 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bahrain is a constitutional, hereditary monarchy. King Hamad Bin Isa al-Khalifa, the head of state, appoints the cabinet, consisting of 24 ministers; 12 of the ministers were members of the al-Khalifa ruling family. The king, who holds ultimate authority over most government decisions, also appoints the prime minister--the head of government--who does not have to be a member of parliament. Parliament consists of an appointed upper house, the Shura (Consultative) Council, and the elected Council of Representatives, each with 40 seats. The country holds parliamentary elections every four years, and according to the government, 67 percent of eligible voters participated in the most recent elections, held in November 2018. Two formerly prominent opposition political societies, al-Wifaq and Wa'ad, did not participate in the elections due to their dissolution by the courts in 2016 and 2017, respectively. The government did not permit international election monitors. Domestic monitors generally concluded authorities administered the elections without significant procedural irregularities.

The Ministry of Interior is responsible for internal security and controls the public security force and specialized security units responsible for maintaining internal order. The Coast Guard is also under its jurisdiction. The Bahrain Defense Force is primarily responsible for defending against external threats, while the Bahrain National Guard is responsible for both external and internal threats. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

Significant human rights issues included: allegations of torture; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, and the internet, including censorship, site blocking, and criminal libel; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including restrictions on independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) keeping them from freely operating in the country; restrictions on freedom of movement, including revocation of citizenship; and restrictions on political participation, including banning former members of al-Wifaq and Wa'ad from running as candidates in elections.

The government prosecuted low-level security force members accused of human rights abuses, following investigations by government or quasi-governmental

institutions. Human rights organizations claimed investigations were slow and lacked transparency.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were no reports government security forces committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

As of December authorities reported they were continuing to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of five persons during a 2017 security operation to clear protesters outside the house of Shia cleric Isa Qassim.

b. Disappearance

There were no cases of enforced disappearances reported during the year.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibits “harm[ing] an accused person physically or mentally.” Domestic and international human rights organizations, as well as detainees and former detainees, maintained that torture, abuse, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government security officials continued during the year. The Ministry of Interior police code of conduct requires officers to abide by 10 principles, including limited use of force and zero tolerance for torture and mistreatment. According to government officials, the code forbids the use of force “except when absolutely necessary.” The Royal Police Academy included the code in its curriculum and provided recruits with copies in English and Arabic. The ministry reported it took disciplinary action against officers who did not comply with the code, although it did not publish details of such steps (see section 5).

The Special Investigation Unit (SIU), part of the Public Prosecutor’s Office (PPO) in the Ministry for Justice and Islamic Affairs, reported receiving 51 complaints in the first half of the year involving alleged torture, mistreatment, and excessive force used by members of the police. Information regarding specific new cases was limited.

Human rights groups reported accounts alleging security officials beat detainees, placed detainees in stress positions, humiliated detainees in front of other prisoners, deprived detainees of sleep and prayers, and insulted detainees based on their religious beliefs. Human rights organizations also reported authorities denied medical treatment to injured or ill detainees and prisoners. The Ministry of Interior's Ombudsman's Office reported it investigated all complaints and made recommendations to the government to address concerns. Detainees reported that security forces committed abuses during searches, arrests at private residences, and during transportation. Detainees reported intimidation, such as threats of violence, took place at the Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID) headquarters facility. Some detainees at the CID reported security officials used physical and psychological mistreatment to extract confessions and statements under duress or to inflict retribution and punishment.

A number of female inmates staged hunger strikes to protest conditions in the Isa Town Prison, including what they viewed as unwarranted strip searches. Medina Ali began her strike on March 22 to protest allegedly being strip-searched by authorities after a family visit. She claimed the strip search was retaliation for her political views; she also alleged that prison officials threatened to revoke her family visitation rights and telephone calls to punish her for the strike. On September 30, the National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) visited the prison, and after a review of video and audio tapes of the alleged incidents, determined the prison guards' actions were "within the limits of reasonable force." Human rights activists alleged that the NIHR and other government-affiliated oversight bodies failed to adequately investigate and respond to credible reports of abuse at Isa Town Prison.

According to Amnesty International, Ali Mohamed Hakeem al-Arab and Ahmad al-Malali were tortured after being transferred to Jaw Prison following their January 2018 conviction for charges that included the murder of a policeman and "forming and joining a terrorist group." They were sentenced to death. On May 6, they lost their appeal to the Court of Cassation, the country's highest court, and were executed on July 27. The UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions condemned the executions, citing allegations that officials used torture to extract confessions and concerns that the trial had not guaranteed fairness and due process.

The Ministry of Interior denied torture and abuse were systemic. The government reported it had equipped all prisons, detention facilities, and interrogation rooms at

local police stations and the CID, with closed-circuit television cameras monitored at all times. In its 2018-2019 annual report, the Ombudsman's Office detailed three cases of video evidence being used in disciplinary cases against police officers.

Human rights groups reported authorities subjected children, sometimes younger than 15, to various forms of mistreatment, including beating, slapping, kicking, and verbal abuse. The law considers all persons older than 15 to be adults.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Human rights activists reported conditions in prisons and detention centers were harsh and sometimes life threatening, due to overcrowding, physical abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care. Detainees and human rights organizations also reported abuse in official pretrial detention centers, as well as in Isa Town Prison, Jaw Prison, and Dry Dock Detention Center.

Physical Conditions: Human rights organizations and prisoners reported gross overcrowding in detention facilities, which placed a strain on prison administration and led to a high prisoner-to-staff ratio. The same reports also detailed concerns regarding conditions in Jaw Prison, including overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and lack of access to basic supplies. Previous reports from the Women's Removal Center and Men's Removal Center also highlighted unsanitary conditions. The government reported overcrowding concerns had been reduced in the Dry Dock Detention Facility and Jaw Prison as the courts made greater use of a 2017 alternative sentence law that provided noncustodial sentences to convicted criminals.

According to Amnesty International, approximately 450 prisoners at Jaw Prison and Dry Docks Detention Facility staged a mass hunger strike on August 16 to protest excessive use of solitary confinement, restrictions on religious rituals, and the use of glass to separate convicts and detainees from visitors. The government acknowledged the strike but reported that only 22 persons had joined the protest. Activists reported the hunger strike also reflected concerns regarding overcrowding in the prisons, lower quality food, decreased access to health care, and a reduction in visitation time.

Although the government reported potable water was available for all detainees, there were reports of lack of access to water for washing, lack of shower facilities and soap, and unhygienic toilet facilities. Human rights organizations reported

food was adequate for most prisoners; however, prisoners needing dietary accommodations due to medical conditions had difficulty receiving special dietary provisions.

Authorities held detainees younger than 15 at the Juvenile Care Center, and criminal records are expunged after detainees younger than 15 are released.

The government housed convicted male inmates between ages 15 and 21 in separate buildings located on the grounds of the Dry Dock Facility. The Ministry of Interior separated prisoners younger than 18 from those between the ages of 18 and 21. Upon reaching 21, prisoners enter the general population at Jaw Prison.

The ministry reserved one ward in the pretrial detention center for the elderly and special needs detainees. Officials reported they offered these detainees special food, health care, and personal services to meet their needs.

The ministry operated a center for rehabilitation and vocational training, including various educational, antiaddiction, and behavioral programs. Activists said that the programs lacked trained teachers and adequate supplies and that the government did not allow some inmates to take national exams.

Although the ministry reported detention centers were staffed with experienced medical specialists and outfitted with modern equipment, prisoners needing medical attention reported difficulty in alerting guards to their needs, and medical clinics at the facilities were understaffed. Prisoners with chronic medical conditions had difficulty accessing regular medical care, including access to routine medication. Those needing transportation to outside medical facilities reported delays in scheduling offsite treatment, especially those needing follow-up care for complex or chronic conditions. In previous reports the quasi-governmental Prisoner and Detainees Rights Commission (PDRC) noted numerous deficiencies with health services at most facilities, and human rights organizations noted some prisoners with chronic medical conditions lacked access to medical care. To address some of these concerns, the government maintained a separate ward for prisoners with infectious diseases. According to the government, eight prisoners died during the year; the cause of death of five was deemed a result of medical conditions, while the other three were under investigation at year's end.

Human rights organizations reported that during the year prison authorities at Isa Town Prison prevented Hajer Mansoor Hassan Ali, mother-in-law of activist Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, from receiving adequate medical attention for several health

conditions. Activists alleged that prison authorities intentionally denied Hajer medical care as a means of pressure and intimidation. The United Nations and human rights organizations alleged the government imprisoned, abused, and tortured Ali and two other members of Alwadaei's family in reprisal for his activism. On February 25, the Court of Cassation upheld Ali's 2017 conviction on terrorism-related charges.

Administration: Authorities generally allowed prisoners to file complaints to judicial authorities without censorship, and officials from the Ombudsman's Office were available to respond to complaints. Human rights groups reportedly sometimes had to file multiple complaints to receive assistance. Prisoners had access to visitors at least once a month, often more frequently, and authorities permitted them 30 minutes of calls each week, although authorities denied prisoners communication with lawyers, family members, or consular officials (in the case of foreign detainees) at times. There were reports authorities denied prisoners access to religious services during special commemorations, such as Ashura, and prayer time. The government maintained it afforded prisoners reasonable accommodations for religious practice within the limits of prison administration.

Independent Monitoring: Authorities permitted access for the quasi-governmental NIHR and the PDRC, as well as the Ombudsman's Office and the SIU (see section 5). International human rights organizations questioned the independence and effectiveness of these organizations. During the year the Ministry of Interior reported on the work of the Internal Audit and Investigations Department, which received and examined complaints against security forces. According to the ombudsman's *Annual Report 2018-2019*, the Internal Audit and Investigations Department received 289 complaints between May 2018 and April, and it referred nine of the cases to the SIU for further action and 60 for disciplinary proceedings. The largest number of referred cases came from Jaw Prison and the CID. The Ombudsman's Office also received 778 assistance requests, which included securing prison visits, telephone calls, medical services, or access to education.

On April 13, the ombudsman referred to the SIU complaints that prison guards were responsible for physically attacking inmates at Jaw Prison on April 12. Some sources alleged the confrontation started after prisoners claimed they were served spoiled food. The ministry stated that video surveillance had been included in the evidence provided to the SIU. As a result of the SIU's investigation, 12 prison guards, including two senior officials, went on trial May 20 on charges of physically assaulting inmates. After a September 19 hearing, the Lower Criminal

Court convicted five of the prison guards, sentencing them to three months in prison, and acquitted the other seven guards included in the case.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention. Local and international human rights groups reported that individuals were detained without being notified at the time of the arrest of the legal authority of the person conducting the arrest, the reasons for the arrest, and the charges against them. Human rights groups claimed Ministry of Interior agents conducted many arrests at private residences either without presenting an arrest warrant or presenting an inaccurate or incomplete one. Government sources disputed these claims.

In 2017 King Hamad reinstated the arrest authority of the Bahrain National Security Agency (BNSA), after it had been removed following criticism in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). There were no reports of the BNSA using its arrest authority during the year.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law stipulates law enforcement officers may arrest individuals without a warrant only if they are caught committing certain crimes for which there is sufficient evidence to press charges. Additionally, the code of criminal procedure requires execution of an arrest warrant before a summons order to appear before the public prosecutor. Local activists reported that police sometimes made arrests without presenting a warrant and that the PPO summoned political and human rights activists for questioning without a warrant or court order.

By law the arresting authority must interrogate an arrested individual immediately and may not detain the person for more than 48 hours, after which authorities must either release the detainee or transfer the person to the PPO for further questioning. The PPO is required to question the detainee within 24 hours, and the detainee has the right to legal counsel during questioning. To hold the detainee longer, the PPO must issue a formal detention order based on the charges against the detainee. Authorities may extend detention up to seven days for further questioning. If authorities require any further extension, the detainee must appear before a judge, who may authorize a further extension not exceeding 45 days. The High Criminal Court must authorize any extensions beyond that period and any renewals at 45-day intervals. In the case of alleged acts of terror, law enforcement officers may detain individuals for questioning for an initial five days, which the PPO may

extend up to 60 days. A functioning system of bail provides maximum and minimum bail amounts based on the charges; however, judges often denied bail requests without explanation, even in nonviolent cases. The bail law allows the presiding judge to determine the amount within these parameters on a case-by-case basis.

Attorneys reported difficulty in gaining access to their clients in a timely manner through all stages of the legal process. They reported difficulty registering as a detainee's legal representative because of arbitrary bureaucratic hurdles and lack of official government notaries; arbitrary questioning of credentials by police; lack of notification of clients' location in custody; arbitrary requirements to seek court orders to meet clients; prohibitions on meeting clients in private; prohibitions on passing legal documents to clients; questioning of clients by PPO on very short notice; lack of access to clients during police questioning; and lack of access to consult with clients in court. While the state provides counsel to indigent detainees, there were reports detainees never met with their state-appointed attorney before or during their trial.

According to reports by local and international human rights groups, authorities held some detainees for weeks with limited access to outside resources. The government sometimes withheld information from detainees and their families regarding detainees' whereabouts for days.

Arbitrary Arrest: Human rights groups reported the Ministry of Interior sometimes arrested individuals for activities such as calling for and attending protests and demonstrations, expressing their opinion either in public or on social media, and associating with persons of interest to law enforcement. Some of these detained individuals reported arresting forces did not show them warrants.

In December 2018 the Court of Cassation upheld a five-year prison sentence against Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) president Nabeel Rajab for tweets in 2015 criticizing the treatment of prisoners in Jaw Prison and Saudi-led coalition's military operations in Yemen. On September 17, the Supreme Court of Appeals denied Rajab's motion to overturn a lower court's ruling that he was ineligible to receive an alternative sentence.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: There were reports that authorities sometimes delayed or limited an individual's access to an attorney. There were no reports of courts finding individuals to have been unlawfully detained and recommending compensation.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, political opposition figures reported the judiciary remained vulnerable to political pressures, especially in high-profile cases. The judiciary has two branches: the civil law courts deal with all commercial, civil, and criminal cases, including family issues of non-Muslims, and the family law courts handle personal status cases of Muslims. Based on the Unified Family Law, the government subdivided family court cases into Sunni and Shia sharia-based court proceedings. Many of the country's approximately 160 judges were foreign judges serving on limited-term contracts (which are subject to government approval for renewal and residence in the country). The Supreme Judicial Council reported working with the Judicial Legal Studies Institute to prepare on average 10 new Bahraini judges per year, in an effort to increase their number. The Supreme Judicial Council is responsible for supervising the work of the courts, including judges, and the PPO.

Trial Procedures

The constitution presumes defendants are innocent until proven guilty. By law authorities should inform detainees of the charges against them upon arrest. Civil and criminal trial procedures provide for a public trial. A panel of three judges makes the rulings. Defendants have the right to consult an attorney of their choice within 48 hours (unless the government charges them pursuant to counterterrorism legislation); however, there were reports that defendants and their lawyers had difficulty getting police, public prosecutors, and courts to recognize or register representation by an attorney. The government provides counsel at public expense to indigent defendants. Plaintiffs are required to provide their own interpreters, except in labor dispute cases, when the Ministry of Justice may provide assistance.

Defendants have the right to present witnesses and evidence on their behalf. While defendants have the right to question witnesses against them, the judges may declare the questions to be irrelevant and prohibit a line of questioning without providing reasoning. Prosecutors rarely present evidence orally in court but provide it in written and digital formats to judges in their chambers. In criminal trials prosecutors and judges walk into the courtroom together. Defendants are not compelled to testify or to confess guilt, and they have the right to appeal. The government frequently tries defendants in their absence.

Family status law varied according to Shia or Sunni interpretations of Islamic law, especially for women (see section 6). In 2017 King Hamad ratified a Unified Family Law, which for the first time included a civil code for Shia family law. According to supporters of the law, the unified civil code protects women's rights, in particular Shia women, from the imposition of arbitrary decisions by unregulated clerics. Women's rights groups reported the family courts granted divorces more quickly and judicial decisions adhered to the new civil code.

In 2017 King Hamad also ratified a constitutional amendment that grants military courts the right to try civilians accused of threatening the security of the state. Government media reported the government approved the amendment to better fight terrorist cells, while activists claimed the change would jeopardize fair trial standards. The government did not use this mechanism during the year.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

According to human rights organizations, the government continued to imprison members of the opposition, along with scores of others detained for what these organizations assert is peaceful political activity. The government denied holding any political prisoners, although it acknowledged holding several dozen high-profile individuals, including leaders or prominent members of formerly legal, now banned political societies and organizations and others who were publicly critical of government institutions or government actions prior to their arrests. Authorities held some high-profile prisoners separately from the general prison population.

Ali Salman, the secretary general of opposition political society Wifaq, was detained beginning in 2014 for "inciting violence" and eventually convicted and given a four-year prison sentence that was upheld by the Court of Cassation in 2017. In 2015 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention determined that Salman had been arbitrarily detained by the government. In 2017 the government further charged Salman with "attempting to overthrow the regime" and "giving away state and military secrets to foreign powers in exchange for money." Although the High Criminal Court acquitted Salman on all charges in June 2018, the public prosecutor appealed the acquittal. In November 2018 the Supreme Court of Appeals reversed the lower court's decision, finding Salman guilty of treason and sentencing him to life in prison (a 25-year term). Salman appealed his sentence to the Court of Cassation, which rejected the appeal on January 28.

Khalil al Halwachi was arrested in 2014, convicted of "possession of a weapon" and "insulting the judiciary" in 2017, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Human

rights groups expressed concerns that the evidence against al Halwachi was fabricated and that he was punished for his political beliefs and participation in an opposition political society. The Court of Cassation upheld al Halwachi's conviction on May 6.

Politically Motivated Reprisal Against Individuals Located Outside the Country

In November 2018 Thai authorities detained soccer player Hakim al-Arabi because of an INTERPOL "red notice" the Bahraini government had filed for al-Arabi. Al-Arabi, who had resident status in Australia as a refugee, was in Thailand on vacation. He fled Bahrain in 2014 after being convicted of burning and looting a police station, although human rights organizations claimed he was participating in an international soccer match at the time of the alleged crime. On February 11, the Thai attorney general dropped the case, and Hakim was able to return to Australia. Human rights groups criticized INTERPOL and the Bahraini government for failing to rescind the red notice after al-Arabi had been granted refugee status in Australia in 2017.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens may submit civil suits before a court seeking cessation of or damages for some types of human rights violations. In many such situations, however, the law prevents citizens from filing civil suits against security agencies.

In cases where a person has no previous criminal history, is a minor, or is charged with minor legal infractions, the law provides alternative penalties and measures to reduce the number of inmates in detention centers and prisons. The government reported using the alternative penalty mechanism for more than 1,800 convicts between January and December. They were ordered to perform community service, repair the damaged they had done, or participate in rehabilitation classes. The law on minors prohibits the imposition of prison terms on children, defined as younger than 15.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Although the constitution prohibits such actions, the government violated prohibitions against interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence. Human rights organizations reported security forces sometimes entered homes

without authorization and destroyed or confiscated personal property. The law requires the government to obtain a court order before monitoring telephone calls, email, and personal correspondence. Many citizens and human rights organizations believed police used informant networks, including ones that targeted or used children younger than 18.

Reports also indicated the government used computer programs to surveil political activists and members of the opposition inside and outside the country.

According to local and international human rights groups, security officials sometimes threatened a detainee's family members with reprisals for the detainee's unwillingness to cooperate during interrogations and refusal to sign confession statements.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press, "provided that the fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine are not infringed, the unity of the people is not prejudiced, and discord and sectarianism are not aroused." The government limited freedom of speech and the press through prosecution of individuals under libel, slander, and national security laws that targeted citizen and professional journalists.

Freedom of Expression: The law forbids any speech that infringes on public order or morals. Speech is curtailed in both traditional media and social media. While individuals openly expressed critical opinions regarding domestic political and social issues in private settings, those who expressed such opinions publicly often faced repercussions. During the year the government took steps against what it considered acts of civil disobedience, which included critical speech. The penal code allows penalties of no less than one year and no more than seven years of imprisonment, plus a fine, for anyone who "offends the monarch of the Kingdom of Bahrain, the flag, or the national emblem."

On May 22, King Hamad ratified amendments to the Protection of the Community against Terrorist Acts law spelling out penalties of up to five years in prison for encouraging or possessing materials that support terrorist activities. The law appeared to give law enforcement and prosecutors greater authority to submit audio, emails, and social media posting as evidence in court. Activists expressed

concern the provisions could be used to curtail dissent and criticism, especially in social media forums.

Press and Media, Including Online Media: The government did not own any print media, but the Ministry of Information Affairs and other government entities exercised considerable control over privately owned domestic print media.

The government owned and operated all domestic radio and television stations. Audiences generally received radio and television broadcasts in Arabic, Farsi, and English from countries in the region, including by satellite, without interference. The Ministry of Information Affairs reviewed all books and publications prior to issuing printing licenses. The Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs also reviewed those books that discussed religion.

Since the 2017 closure of *al Wasat* newspaper, opposition perspectives were available only via online media sources based outside the country, some of which the government blocked.

Violence and Harassment: According to local journalists and human rights groups, authorities sometimes harassed, arrested, or threatened journalists, photographers, and “citizen journalists” active on social media due to their reporting. Authorities claimed, however, that some individuals who identified themselves as journalists and photographers were associated with violent opposition groups and produced propaganda and recruiting videos for these groups. International media representatives reported difficulty in obtaining visas to work as journalists. The government brought criminal complaints against journalists who worked without accreditation.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Government censorship occurred. Ministry of Information Affairs personnel actively monitored and blocked stories on matters deemed sensitive, especially those related to sectarianism, national security, or criticism of the royal family, the Saudi royal family, or the judiciary. Journalists widely practiced self-censorship. Some members of media reported government officials contacted editors directly and told them to stop publishing articles on certain subjects.

The press and publications law prohibits anti-Islamic content in media and mandates imprisonment for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.” The law states, “Any publication that prejudices the ruling system of

the country and its official religion can be banned from publication by a ministerial order.”

Libel/Slander Laws: The government enforced libel and national security-related laws restricting freedom of the press. The penal code prohibits libel, slander, and “divulging secrets,” and it stipulates a punishment of imprisonment of no more than two years or a fine of no more than 200 dinars (\$530). Application of the slander law was selective. The Ministry of Interior reported the government fined or imprisoned 172 individuals for “slander,” “libel,” or “divulging secrets” between January and September, compared with 19 cases in 2018. Twenty-four persons were convicted of “insulting a government institution,” and 529 were convicted of “misusing a telecommunications device.”

On March 13, former senior opposition leader Ebrahim Sharif received a six-month suspended sentence and a 500-dinar (\$1,300) fine from the Lower Criminal Court for defaming the then president of Sudan Omar al Bashir in a tweet by referring to him as a “despot.” The government maintained that Sharif’s case was about an illegal act, not a narrowing of freedom of expression. The Court of Cassation upheld his conviction on December 31.

National Security: National security-related law provides for fines up to 10,000 dinars (\$26,500) and prison sentences of at least six months for criticizing the king or inciting actions that undermine state security, as well as fines of up to 2,000 dinars (\$5,300) for 14 related offenses. Punishable activities include publicizing statements issued by a foreign state or organization before obtaining ministry approval, publishing any reports that may adversely affect the dinar’s value, reporting any offense against a head of a state that maintains diplomatic relations with the country, and publishing offensive remarks concerning an accredited representative of a foreign country due to acts connected with the person’s position.

Internet Freedom

The government blocked access to some websites from inside the country, including some opposition-linked websites. The government continued blocking Qatari news websites such as *al-Jazeera*, *al-Sharq*, and *Raya*, an action it began after cutting relations with Qatar in 2017. The government restricted internet freedom and monitored individuals’ online activities, including via social media, leading to degradation of internet and mobile phone services for some neighborhoods and to legal action against some internet users.

Several reports alleged the government monitored political and human rights activists' social media accounts and electronic communications.

Political and human rights activists reported being interrogated by security forces regarding their postings on social media. They sometimes reported repeated interrogations that included threats against their physical safety and that of their families, threats against their livelihood, and threats of denial of social services such as housing and education. Several activists reported shutting down or deciding to cease posting to their social media accounts because of the threats.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Some academics engaged in self-censorship, avoiding discussion of contentious political issues.

Human rights advocates claimed government officials unfairly distributed university scholarships and were biased against Shia students, for both political and religious reasons, when admitting students into certain programs. The government continued using interviews in the university selection process, partially to correct for grade inflation, as there is no national standardized test to account for different grading practices across secondary schools; however, students reported authorities questioned them on their political beliefs and those of their families during interviews. The government maintained it distributed all scholarships and made all placements based on merit.

On September 17, the Ministry of Youth and Sports banned al Urooba Sports Club from holding a seminar on the 200-year history of United Kingdom-Bahrain relations. Al Urooba cancelled the event after receiving a letter from the ministry stating the event violated a law prohibiting sports clubs from engagement in political activities.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution provides for the right of free assembly, but a number of laws restrict the exercise of this right. The Ministry of Interior maintained a prohibition on public demonstrations, stating that the purpose was to maintain public order in view of sectarian attacks in the region. For the fourth year, there were no

authorized demonstrations, although the ministry generally did not intervene in peaceful, unauthorized demonstrations, including spontaneous labor demonstrations. For the fourth year, the government declined to issue permits for a “May Day” rally in support of workers’ rights by the more than 45 trade unions affiliated with the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU). According to the government, there were no applications submitted to hold a demonstration or protest during the year.

The law outlines the locations where functions are prohibited, including in areas close to hospitals, airports, commercial locations, security-related facilities, and downtown Manama. The General Directorate of the Police may prevent a public meeting if it violates security or public order, or for any other serious reason. The law states that mourners may not turn funeral processions into political rallies and that security officials may be present at any public gathering.

The law states every public gathering shall have a committee consisting of a head and at least two members. The committee is responsible for supervising and preventing any illegal acts during the function. According to the law, the Ministry of Interior is not obligated to justify why it approves or denies requests to allow protests. The penal code penalizes any gathering “of five or more individuals” that is held for the “purpose of committing crimes or inciting others to commit crimes.” Lawyers asserted authorities should not prevent demonstrations in advance based on assumptions that crimes would be committed. Authorities prohibited the use of vehicles in any demonstration, protest, or gathering unless organizers obtained special written permission from the head of public security.

Organizers of an unauthorized gathering faced prison sentences of three to six months. The minimum sentence for participating in an illegal gathering is one month, and the maximum is two years’ imprisonment. Authorities gave longer sentences for cases where demonstrators used violence in an illegal gathering. The maximum fine is 200 dinars (\$530). The law regulates election campaigning and prohibits political activities at worship centers, universities, schools, government buildings, and public institutions. The government did not allow individuals to use mosques, *maatams* (Shia religious community centers), or other religious sites for political gatherings.

The government did not prevent small, nonviolent opposition demonstrations that occurred in traditional Shia villages that often protested government policies or were intended to show solidarity with prisoners. Police reportedly broke up some of these protests with tear gas, however. While groups participating in these

protests often posted photographs on social media of these events, participants were careful to hide their faces due to fear of retribution.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for freedom of association, but the government limited this right. The government required all groups to register, civil society groups and labor unions with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development and political societies with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs. The government decided whether a group was social or political in nature, based on its proposed bylaws. The law prohibits any activity by an unlicensed society, as well as any political activity by a licensed civil society group. A number of unlicensed societies were active in the country (see section 3).

A civil society group applying for registration must submit its bylaws signed by all founding members, together with minutes of the founding committee's meetings containing the names, professions, places of residence, and signatures of all founding members. The law grants the Ministry of Labor and Social Development the right to reject the registration of any civil society group if it finds the society's services unnecessary, already provided by another society, contrary to state security, or aimed at reviving a previously dissolved society. Associations whose applications authorities rejected or ignored may appeal to the High Civil Court, which may annul the ministry's decision or refuse the appeal.

NGOs and civil society activists asserted the ministry routinely exploited its oversight role to stymie the activities of NGOs and other civil society organizations. Local NGOs asserted officials actively sought to undermine some groups' activities and imposed burdensome bureaucratic procedures on NGO board members and volunteers. The Ministries of Justice and Interior must vet funding from international sources, and authorities sometimes did not authorize it.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The constitution provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government did not always respect these rights.

Foreign Travel: The law provides the government may reject for “reasonable cause” applications to obtain or renew passports, but the applicant has the right to appeal such decisions before the High Civil Court. Individuals, including citizens of other countries, reported authorities banned them from travel out of the country due to unpaid debt obligations or other fiduciary responsibilities with private individuals or with lending institutions, as well as for open court cases. The government maintained an online website during the year that allowed individuals to check their status before they traveled, although some persons reported the website was not a reliable source of information. Authorities relied on determinations of “national security” when adjudicating passport applications. During the year authorities prevented a number of activists from leaving the country without providing options for legal recourse.

Exile: There were no reports the government prohibited the return of individuals whom the government considered citizens. The government, however, prohibited the return of those whose citizenship it formally revoked, or those it no longer considered citizens.

Citizenship: The government may revoke citizenship in both criminal and political cases, including for natural-born citizens. Authorities maintained the revocation of citizenship of some opposition political and religious figures. The government did not consider whether individuals may become stateless by these actions. At times it threatened to halt payments of pensions or remove families from government-assisted housing if a head-of-household lost his citizenship. Some family members, especially women and minor children, reported difficulties renewing their passports and residence cards and obtaining birth certificates for children. The government did not report how many persons had their citizenship revoked during the year; international human rights NGOs placed the total number of such cases at more than 700 since 2012. On June 27, King Hamad declined to finalize the more than 550 revocations in process, effectively cancelling the process and returning full citizenship to individuals named in those cases.

Also on June 27, King Hamad issued Royal Decree-Law No. 16, which ended the practice of automatically recommending citizenship revocation when individuals were convicted of certain terrorism-related crimes. The decree appeared to clarify that the prime minister and the minister of interior, rather than King Hamad and the courts, would now determine citizenship revocations. Some activists expressed concern that the new law reduced the transparency of the citizenship revocation process.

e. Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees. The government at times provided protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion; however, protection was mostly limited to those who had been able to obtain and maintain employment in the country. Such individuals generally had access to health care and education services while employed but were at risk of deportation if they became unemployed or if their country of origin revoked their passports. The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees reported that as of September, there were 312 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the agency.

g. Stateless Persons

Individuals generally derive citizenship from the father, but the king may confer or revoke it. Since the government considers only the father's citizenship when determining citizenship, it does not generally grant children born to a non-Bahraini father citizenship, even if they were born in the country to a citizen mother (see section 6, Children). Likewise, the government does not provide a path to citizenship for foreign men married to Bahraini women, unlike the process by which foreign women married to Bahraini men may become citizens. Human rights organizations reported these laws resulted in stateless children, particularly when the foreign father was unable or unwilling to pursue citizenship from his country of origin for his children, or when the father himself was stateless, deceased, or unknown. It was unknown how many stateless persons resided in the country. Stateless persons had limited access to social services, education, and employment. There were reports authorities refused applications for birth certificates and passports for children whose Bahraini fathers were in prison because the fathers were not able to submit the applications in person (see section 6, Children).

In 2017 the BCHR issued a report documenting 13 cases of children who had not received citizenship because their fathers were dissidents. As of December the

government had granted citizenship to all the children named in the report, with the exception of Sarah Ali Salman, daughter of Ali Salman (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees).

The government charged individuals whose citizenship it revoked with violating immigration law.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Citizens have limited ability to choose their government and their political system. The constitution provides for a democratically elected Council of Representatives, the lower house of parliament. The constitution permits the king to dissolve the Council of Representatives, but it requires that he first consult the presidents of the upper and lower houses of parliament as well as the head of the Constitutional Court. The king also has the power to amend the constitution and to propose, ratify, and promulgate laws.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Approximately 67 percent of eligible voters participated in parliamentary elections held in November 2018, according to government estimates.

The government did not permit international election monitors. Domestic monitors generally concluded that authorities administered the elections without significant irregularities. Some observers expressed broader concerns regarding limitations on freedom of expression and association as well as continued concerns over voting district boundaries. The dissolution of the country's principal opposition societies and laws restricting their former members from running for office, the absence of an independent press, and the criminalization of online criticism created a political environment that was not conducive to free elections, according to Human Rights Watch.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The government did not allow the formation of political parties, but some "political societies" developed political platforms, held internal elections, and hosted political gatherings. In 2017 the government dissolved the two most prominent opposition political societies, al-Wifaq and Wa'ad, through legal actions.

On January 21, the Court of Cassation rejected a final appeal by Wa'ad, officially dissolving the political society.

To apply for registration, a political society must submit its bylaws signed by all founding members, a list of all members and copies of their residency cards, and a financial statement identifying the society's sources of funding and bank information. The society's principles, goals, and programs must not run counter to sharia or national interest, as interpreted by the judiciary, nor may the society base itself on sectarian, geographic, or class identity. A number of societies operated outside these rules, and some functioned on a sectarian basis.

The government authorized registered political societies to nominate candidates for office and to participate in other political activities. The law bans practicing clerics from membership in political societies (including in leadership positions) and involvement in political activities, even on a voluntary basis. In 2018 the government passed an amendment to the Exercising Political Rights Law that prohibits "active" members of political societies that had been dissolved by court order to run as candidates in elections. Although the law allows for former members of these societies to ask a court to determine their status, none of them were permitted to run.

Political societies are required to coordinate their contacts with foreign diplomatic or consular missions, foreign governmental organizations, or representatives of foreign governments with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which may elect to send a representative to the meeting. Although this requirement was enforced in the past, there were no reports of the government enforcing the order during the year.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities in the political process, and women did participate. In the November 2018 elections, six women won seats in the 40-member Council of Representatives, doubling the number of women. The royal court appointed nine women during the year to the Shura Council, the appointed 40-member upper house, and the prime minister appointed a woman to the 26-seat cabinet.

Shia and Sunni citizens have equal rights before the law, but Sunnis dominated political life; the majority of citizens are Shia. In November 2018, 11 Shia candidates were elected to the Council of Representatives. The appointed Shura Council included 19 Shia members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member. Five of the 24 appointed cabinet ministers were Shia citizens, including one of five deputy prime ministers.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for conviction of official corruption, but the government did not implement the law adequately, and some officials reportedly engaged in corrupt practices. The law subjects government employees at all levels to prosecution if they use their positions to engage in embezzlement or bribery, either directly or indirectly. Penalties may be up to 10 years' imprisonment. The General Directorate of Anticorruption and Economic and Electronic Security held workshops for various ministries throughout the year.

Corruption: The National Audit Office (NAO) is responsible for combating government corruption. The Government Executive Committee, chaired by the crown prince, reviews any violations cited in the NAO's annual report. In December 2018 the government released the office's annual report, and the government released some findings to the public; however, the full report was not published or made available online. The government reported that six officials were charged with or jailed on embezzlement or bribery-related charges during the year.

Significant areas of government activity, including the security services and the Bahrain Defense Force, lacked transparency, and the privatization of public land remained a concern among opposition groups.

Financial Disclosure: The law does not require government officials to make financial disclosures.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

Government officials sometimes met with local human rights NGOs but generally were not responsive to the views of NGOs they believed were politicized and unfairly critical of the government.

Domestic human rights groups operated with government restrictions, with some human rights activists imprisoned, exiled, or coerced into silence, according to reporting by international human rights organizations. Domestic human rights groups included the Bahrain Human Rights Society and Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, the primary independent and licensed human rights organizations in the country; the BCHR, although dissolved by the government in 2004,

continued to operate and maintain an online presence; and the unlicensed Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights. The unlicensed umbrella human rights organization Bahrain Human Rights Observatory also issued numerous reports and had strong ties to international human rights NGOs.

Domestic human rights groups faced significant difficulties operating freely and interacting with international human rights organizations. The government sometimes harassed and deprived local NGO leaders of due process. Local NGO leaders and activists also reported government harassment, including police surveillance, delayed processing of civil documents, and “inappropriate questioning” of their children during interviews for government scholarships. Activists reported forgoing travel, in particular to international human rights events, fearing a reimposition of international travel bans.

Individuals affiliated with international human rights and labor organizations, or who were critical of the government, reported authorities indefinitely delayed or refused visa applications, or at times refused entry to the country for individuals who possessed a valid visa or qualified for the country’s visa-free entry program.

Government Human Rights Bodies: A 2016 amendment to a royal decree re-established the country’s National Human Rights Organization, now called the NIHR. The decree strengthened the NIHR by giving it the right to conduct unannounced visits to police facilities and increasing its financial independence. Throughout the year the NIHR conducted numerous human rights workshops, seminars, and training sessions, as well as prison visits, and referred numerous complaints to the PPO. It issued its latest annual report in March 2018 and contributed to PDRC, ombudsman, and SIU investigations. It also operated a hotline for citizens and residents to file human rights-related complaints and offered an in-person walk-in option for filing complaints.

The government reported that between January and August, there were 12 referrals of law enforcement for misconduct and one conviction of a police officer on criminal charges, noting 46 other cases were pending further investigation.

The SIU investigates and refers cases of security force misconduct, including complaints against the police, to the appropriate court, which includes civilian criminal courts, the ministry’s Military Court, and administrative courts (see section 1.c.). As of September the SIU received 53 complaints of police misconduct, one of which was against the Special Security Force Command. The SIU referred one case to the criminal court for prosecution. The ministry generally

did not release the names of officers convicted, demoted, reassigned, or fired for misconduct, although it reported the highest-ranking police officer prosecuted for any crime was a captain.

There was also a BNSA Office for the Inspector General and a Ministry of Interior Ombudsman's Office, created as a result of the BICI. While both offices were responsible for addressing cases of mistreatment and abuse by the security forces, there was little public information available regarding the BNSA inspector general's activities. The ombudsman's sixth annual report, released in September, reported 289 complaints and 778 assistance requests between May 2017 and April from alleged victims of mistreatment by police and civilian staff, their families, or organizations representing their interests. Of these complaints, 70 were referred to the relevant disciplinary body, including police administrative hearing "courts" and the PPO, 50 were still under investigation, and 144 were closed without resolution. The ombudsman reported receipt of 43 complaints against the CID, of which seven cases were referred for criminal or disciplinary proceedings, and 86 complaints against Jaw Prison, of which 40 cases were referred for criminal or disciplinary action. The ombudsman referred 15 of the cases against the CID and 73 against Jaw Prison for criminal or disciplinary procedures; four and 19 additional cases were still under investigation, respectively.

The PDRC, chaired by the ombudsman, monitors prisons, detention centers, and other places where persons may be detained, such as hospital and psychiatric facilities. The PDRC is empowered to conduct inspections of facilities, interview inmates or detainees, and refer cases to the Ombudsman's Office or SIU.

The ministry organized various human rights training programs for its employees, including a year-long human rights curriculum and diploma at the Royal Police Academy. The academy regularly negotiates memoranda of understanding with the NIHR to exchange expertise. The academy continued to include a unit on human rights in international law as part of the curriculum for its master's degree in Security Administration and Criminal Forensics. The NIHR had a memorandum with the BNSA to organize workshops and training sessions for BNSA officers relating to human rights and basic rights and to collaborate on future research.

During the year two women in the police force held the rank of brigadier general and general director.

In part to address concerns about inadequate Shia representation in the demographics of police and security forces, in 2005 the government established the community police program, which recruited individuals to work in their own neighborhoods. Local activists and human rights organizations reported, however, that the demographics of the overall security forces still failed to represent adequately Shia communities. Official statistics documented 1,374 community police officers, of whom 307 were women. The ministry did not keep official statistics on the number of Shia members of the community police force, however, and did not recruit new community police during the year. Community members reported that Shia citizens were among those integrated into the community police and the police cadet programs. Information was not available on recruitment rates of Shia citizens into other security forces.

The government also maintained the Ombudsman's Office within the Ministry of Interior, the SIU within the PPO, and the PDRC. These organizations worked with each other throughout the year. The Ombudsman's Office maintained a hotline for citizens to report police abuse via telephone, email, or in person.

Many human rights groups asserted that investigations into police abuse were slow and ineffective and questioned the independence and credibility of investigations by government-sponsored organizations. Amnesty International and other human rights organizations reported that government-affiliated human rights institutions did not fully investigate or follow up on claims of abuse. Furthermore, Amnesty reported that detainees faced reprisals for their or their families' attempts to engage with the Ombudsman's Office.

Local and international observers and human rights organizations also continued to express concern the government had not fully implemented BICI recommendations, including dropping charges against individuals engaged in nonviolent political expression, criminally charging security officers accused of abuse or torture, integrating Shia citizens into security forces, and creating an environment conducive to national reconciliation.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is illegal, although the penal code allows an alleged rapist to marry his victim to avoid punishment. The law does not address spousal rape. Penalties for rape include life imprisonment and execution in cases

where the victim is a minor younger than 16, if the rapist is the custodian or guardian of the victim, or when the rape leads to the victim's death.

The law states violence against women is a crime. Nevertheless, domestic violence against women was common, according to the BCHR. Although government leaders and some members of parliament participated in awareness-raising activities during the year, including debates on additional legislation, authorities devoted little attention to supporting public campaigns aimed at the problem. The government maintained a shelter for women and children who were victims of domestic violence. The law provides that local police officials should be contacted in cases of domestic violence and that the public prosecutor can investigate if information is passed from the police to them. Victims of domestic violence, however, reported difficulty knowing whom to contact or how to proceed when filing a complaint.

The government continued to document and prosecute physical or sexual abuse of women. The Ministry of Justice reported documenting 420 cases of physical or sexual abuse as of September, of which 116 involved children. Of the 420 cases, 47 resulted in conviction. Twelve cases of rape were reported between January and September, one of which was referred to court; proceedings for the case were underway as of November.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): FGM/C was rarely practiced, and instances mostly occurred within immigrant populations. There is no specific law prohibiting the practice, although legal experts previously indicated the act falls under criminal code provisions that prohibit "permanent disability to another person." There were no cases of prosecuting FGM during the year.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: By law "honor" killings are punishable, but the penal code provides a lenient sentence for killing a spouse caught in the act of adultery, whether male or female. There were no cases of honor killings reported during the year.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment, including insulting or committing an indecent act towards a woman in public, with penalties of imprisonment and fines. Although the government sometimes enforced the law, sexual harassment remained a widespread problem for women, especially foreign female domestic workers.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: Women have the right to initiate divorce proceedings in family courts, but Shia and Sunni religious courts may refuse the request. In divorce cases the courts routinely granted mothers custody of daughters younger than nine and sons younger than seven for Shia women, with fathers typically gaining custody once girls and boys reached the ages of nine and seven, respectively. Sunni women can retain custody of daughters until age 17 and sons until age 15. Regardless of custody decisions, 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 their citizen father “without just cause.” Any woman who remarries loses custody of her children.

The basis for family law is sharia as interpreted by Sunni and Shia religious experts. In 2017 King Hamad ratified the Shia portion of the Unified Family Law codifying the rights of Shia citizens, in particular women, according to the civil code on issues such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Shia and Sunni family law was enforced by separate judicial bodies composed of religious authorities charged with interpreting sharia. The revised civil law provides access to family courts for all women, ensuring the standardized application of the law and further legal recourse, since decisions made by family court judges are subject to review by the Supreme Judicial Council. In instances of mixed Sunni-Shia marriages, families may choose which court hears the issue.

Women may own and inherit property and represent themselves in all public and legal matters. In the absence of a direct male heir, Shia women may inherit all of their husband’s property, while Sunni women inherit only a portion, with the brothers or other male relatives of the deceased also receiving a share. The government respected wills directing the division of assets according to the deceased.

Labor laws prohibit discrimination against women, but discrimination against women was systemic, especially in the workplace, although the law prohibits wage discrimination based on gender.

Women experienced gains in business. The number of women elected to parliament increased from three to six representatives, and for the first time in the history of the country, the Council of Representatives elected a woman as speaker

in December 2018. In the business sector, female-led entrepreneurial ventures constituted more than half of filings for new businesses.

Children

Birth Registration: Individuals derive citizenship from their father or by decree from the king. Women do not transmit their nationality to their children, rendering stateless some children of citizen mothers and noncitizen fathers (see section 2.d.).

Authorities do not register births immediately. From birth to the age of three months, the mother's primary health-care provider holds registration for the children. When a child reaches three months, authorities register the birth with the Ministry of Health's Birth Registration Unit, which then issues the official birth certificate. Children not registered before reaching their first birthday must obtain a registration by court order. The government does not provide public services to a child without a birth certificate.

Education: Schooling is compulsory for children until age 15 and is provided free of charge to citizens and legal residents through grade 12. Authorities segregated government-run schools by gender, although girls and boys used the same curricula and textbooks. Islamic studies based on Sunni doctrine are mandatory for all Muslim public-school students and are optional for non-Muslim students.

Child Abuse: The Family Courts, established in 2017, have jurisdiction over issues including child abuse. NGOs expressed concern over the lack of consistently written guidelines for prosecuting and punishing offenders and the leniency of penalties in child-abuse-conviction cases in the sharia courts.

There were reports police approached children outside schools and threatened or coerced them into becoming police informants.

Early and Forced Marriage: According to the law, the minimum age of marriage is 15 years for girls and 18 years for boys, but special circumstances allow marriages below these ages with approval from a sharia court.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits exploitation of a child for various crimes, including prostitution. Penalties include imprisonment of no less than three months if the accused used exploitation and force to commit the crime and up to six years if the accused exploited more than one child, as well as penalties of at least 2,000 dinars (\$5,300) for individuals and at least 10,000 dinars

(\$26,500) for organizations. The law also prohibits child pornography. The Ministry of Justice reported prosecuting 113 cases of sexual exploitation of children as of September, a significant increase over the prior year.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

According to community members, there were between 36 and 40 Jewish citizens (six families) in the country. Some anti-Jewish political commentary and editorial cartoons occasionally appeared in print and electronic media, usually linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, without government response.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The law stipulates equal treatment for persons with disabilities with regard to employment, and violations of the law are punishable with fines. The constitution guarantees social security, social insurance, and health care for persons with disabilities. The government administered a committee to ensure the provision of care for persons with disabilities that included representatives from all relevant ministries, NGOs, and the private sector. The committee is responsible for monitoring violations against persons with disabilities. During the year the government did not prosecute any cases for violations against persons with disabilities.

Authorities mandated a variety of governmental, quasi-governmental, and religious institutions to support and protect persons with disabilities. In March 2018 a law established a High Commission for Disabled Affairs to develop a social awareness campaign, prepare a national strategy, and develop legislation to address the needs of persons with disabilities. New public buildings in the central municipality must

include accessible facilities. The law does not mandate access to other nonresidential buildings for persons with disabilities.

No information was available on the responsibilities of government agencies to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, although building codes required all new government buildings to be accessible. According to anecdotal evidence, persons with disabilities routinely lacked access to education and employment. The sole government school for children with hearing disabilities did not operate past the 10th grade. Some public schools had specialized education programs for children with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, speech disabilities, and intellectual disabilities, including Down syndrome.

Eligible voters may vote either in their regular precincts or in a general polling station. The local precincts, which are mostly in schools, sometimes posed problems to voters with mobility disabilities due to lack of physical accessibility. General polling stations in public spaces such as malls allowed for assistive devices. There was no absentee ballot system.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Development continued to work with the UN High Committee for Persons with Disabilities in cooperation with the UN Development Program.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The law grants citizenship to ethnic Arab applicants who have resided in the country for 15 years and non-Arab applicants who have resided in the country for 25 years. There were numerous reports that authorities did not apply the citizenship law uniformly. Human rights and civil society groups stated the government allowed foreign Sunni employees of the security services who had lived in the country less than 15 years to apply for citizenship. There were also reports authorities had not granted citizenship to Arab Shia residents who had resided in the country for more than 15 years and non-Arab foreign residents who had resided more than 25 years. Rights groups reported discrimination, especially in employment, against Shia citizens in certain professions such as security forces.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law does not criminalize same-sex sexual conduct between consenting adults at least 21 years old, but it does not extend antidiscrimination protections to

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. According to Human Rights Watch, the government prosecuted acts such as organizing a “gay party” or cross-dressing under penal code provisions against “indecent” and “immorality.”

Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity occurred, including in employment and obtaining legal identity documents. In some cases, however, courts permitted transgender individuals to update identity documents if they had undergone sex reassignment surgery.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

There were no known cases involving societal violence or discrimination against persons based on HIV/AIDS status, but medical experts acknowledged publicly that discrimination existed. The government mandated screening of newly arrived migrant workers for infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS. In prior years the government deported migrant workers found to be HIV/AIDS positive, but the status of deportations during the year was unclear.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

The Ministry of Interior reported that violent extremists perpetrated one attack against police from January to August and reported two injuries of police officers while on duty. Other unidentified individuals conducted numerous attacks aimed at security personnel during the year, which perpetrators often filmed and posted to social media. These videos showed attackers using Molotov cocktails and other improvised weapons against police patrols and stations, including in close proximity to bystanders. Police usually avoided responding with deadly force.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The constitution and labor code recognize the right to form independent trade unions and the right to strike, with significant restrictions. The law does not provide for the right to collective bargaining.

The law prohibits trade unions in the public sector. Public-sector workers may join private-sector trade unions and professional associations, although these entities may not bargain on their behalf. The law also prohibits members of the military

services and domestic workers from joining unions. Foreign workers, composing nearly 80 percent of the civilian workforce, may join unions if they work in a sector that allows unions, although the law reserves union leadership roles for citizens. The law prohibits unions from engaging in political activities.

The law specifies only an official trade union may organize or declare a strike, and it imposes excessive requirements for legal strikes. The law prohibits strikes in 10 “vital” sectors--the scope of which exceeds international standards--including the oil, gas, education, telecommunications, transportation, and health sectors, as well as pharmacies and bakeries. The law makes no distinction between “vital” and “nonvital” employees within these sectors. Workers must approve a strike with a simple majority by secret ballot and provide 15 days’ notification to the employer before conducting a strike.

The law allows multiple trade union federations but prohibits multisector labor federations and bars individuals convicted of violating criminal laws that lead to trade union or executive council dissolution from holding union leadership posts. The law gives the labor minister, rather than the unions, the right to select the federation to represent workers in national-level bargaining and international forums. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination; however, in practice independent unions faced government repression and harassment. The law does not require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

Relations between the main federations and the Ministry of Labor and Social Development were publicly contentious at times. The government sometimes interfered in GFBTU activities, such as preventing public May Day observances, although the ministry supported GFBTU partnership with international NGOs for training workshops.

Some workers and union affiliates complained union pluralism resulted in company management interfering in union dues collection and workers’ chosen union affiliation. They stated that management chose to negotiate with the union it found most favorable--to the detriment of collective bargaining agreements and the legitimate voice of workers.

In 2014, after signing a second tripartite agreement, the International Labor Organization (ILO) dismissed the complaint filed in 2011 regarding the dismissal of workers. During the year the government reported it considered efforts at reinstatement, as reflected in the tripartite agreement, to be completed. The government reported that 154 of the 165 cases had been resolved through either

reinstatement or by financial compensation. Human rights organizations and activists questioned the government's claims and reported continuing, systemic labor discrimination.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor except in national emergencies, but the government did not always enforce the law effectively. There were reports of forced labor in the construction and service sectors. The labor law covers foreign workers, except domestic workers, but enforcement was lax, and cases of debt bondage were common. There were also reports of forced labor practices that occurred among domestic workers and others working in the informal sector; labor laws did not protect most of these workers. Domestic workers have the right to see their terms of employment.

In many cases employers withheld passports, a practice prohibited by law, restricted movement, substituted contracts, or did not pay wages; some employers also threatened workers and subjected them to physical and sexual abuse. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development reported 2,445 labor complaints from domestic workers and construction workers, mostly of unpaid wages or denied vacation time.

Estimates of the proportion of irregular migrant workers in the country under "free visa" arrangements--a practice where workers pay individuals or companies to sponsor visas for persons who are then "free" to work informally wherever they want--ranged from 10 to 25 percent of the foreign workers in the country. The practice contributed to the problem of debt bondage, especially among low-wage workers. In numerous cases employers withheld salaries from foreign workers for months or years and refused to grant them permission to leave the country. Fear of deportation or employer retaliation prevented many foreign workers from complaining to authorities.

In 2017 the Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) launched a flexible work-permit pilot program, which permits an individual to self-sponsor a work permit. It is available only to workers who are out of status and costs approximately 450 dinars (\$1,200), in addition to a monthly fee of 30 dinars (\$80). Some NGOs expressed concerns regarding the cost of the visa and the fact that it shifts responsibilities, such as health insurance, from the employer to the worker. According to government reports from September, despite significant political opposition, more than 25,000 persons had received the flexi permit since its

launch. Governments of origin countries stated it was an important first step in regularizing undocumented workers but also criticized the program for being too expensive. The Philippine government provided some funding to cover application costs for its citizens who were eligible for the program. The LMRA reported that as of September there were approximately 70,000 undocumented workers in the country.

In 2016 the LMRA instituted procedures that allowed workers to change the employer associated with their visa--either without permission from their old employer or without their passport. The LMRA threatened employers who withheld passports with criminal and administrative violations and prohibited at-fault employers from hiring new workers. During the year the government shut down recruitment agencies and revoked licenses of others for infringing on workers' rights. Recruitment agencies complicit in illegal practices may be subject to license revocation, legal action, shutdown of business operations, or a forfeit of license deposits.

The LMRA employed inspectors who were sworn officers of the court, with the authority to conduct official investigations. LMRA inspector reports may result in fines, court cases, loss of work permits, and termination of businesses. These inspectors focus on the legal and administrative provisions under which individuals fall, including work permits, employer records, and licenses. The Ministry of Labor employed general inspectors and occupational safety inspectors. Their roles are to inspect workplaces, occupational health and safety conditions, and the employer/employee work relationship.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The minimum age for employment is 15, and the minimum age for hazardous work is 18. Children younger than 18 may not work in industries the Ministry of Health deemed hazardous or unhealthy, including construction, mining, and oil refining. They may work no more than six hours a day--no more than four days consecutively--and may be present on the employment premises no more than seven hours a day. Child labor regulations do not apply to family-operated businesses in which the only other employees are family members.

The law requires that before the ministry makes a final decision on allowing a minor to work, the prospective employer must present documentation from the minor's guardian giving the minor permission to work; proof the minor underwent a physical fitness examination to determine suitability; and assurance from the employer the minor would not work in an environment the ministry deemed hazardous. Generally, the government effectively enforced the law.

The law does not allow expatriate workers younger than 18 to work in the country.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect for Employment and Occupation

The constitution provides for equality between men and women in political, social, cultural, and economic spheres without breaching the provisions of Islamic law. The labor law deems dismissal for sex, color, religion, ideology, marital status, family responsibilities, and pregnancy to be arbitrary and illegal, but provides for no right to reinstatement. The law also prohibits wage discrimination based on sex, origin, language, religion, or ideology. There are no other specific protections regarding political opinion, race, disability, language, sexual orientation or gender identity, HIV-positive status or having other communicable diseases, or social status.

Women continued to face systemic discrimination and barriers to advancement, especially in fields traditionally dominated by men, including leadership positions. They often faced hiring discrimination because of a perception they would become pregnant or their family lives would interfere with their work.

In the business sector, female-led entrepreneurial ventures constituted more than half of filings for new businesses.

The law stipulates equal treatment for persons with disabilities with regard to employment, and violations of the law are punishable with fines (see section 6, Persons with Disabilities). The constitution guarantees social security, social insurance, and health care for persons with disabilities. In 2018 the Ministry of Labor issued an edict that workers with significant disabilities and their first-degree relative caregivers should receive two hours of daily paid rest. In April the government began implementing the policy. The government administered a committee to monitor provision of care for persons with disabilities and violations

against them that included representatives from all relevant ministries, NGOs, and the private sector. During the year the government did not prosecute any cases for violations against persons with disabilities.

No information was available on the responsibilities of government agencies to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, although building codes required all new government buildings to be accessible. According to anecdotal evidence, persons with disabilities routinely lacked access to employment.

The law requires the government to provide vocational training for persons with disabilities who wish to work. The law also requires employers of more than 100 persons to hire at least 2 percent of its employees from the government's list of workers with disabilities. The government did not monitor compliance. Some persons with disabilities were employed in the public sector.

It remained rare for persons with disabilities to find employment in positions of responsibility. Many workplaces remained difficult to access for those needing assistance due to a lack of ramps, narrow doorways, and unpaved parking lots. The Ministry of Labor continued to fund a center offering employment and training services for citizens with disabilities.

Many workers in the country were foreign workers. Although the government asserted the labor code for the private sector applies to all workers, the ILO and international NGOs noted foreign workers faced discrimination in the workplace. There are no provisions to provide for equality in the hiring process. It was common for employers to advertise positions for specific nationalities or languages without justifying why only persons from that specific nationality or language group would be acceptable.

After a Bangladeshi mosque caretaker killed a Bahraini imam in 2018, the government increased scrutiny of foreigners entering the country. In August 2018 the Ministry of Interior announced an indefinite ban on issuing new visas to Bangladeshi workers. NGOs active in migrant worker issues estimated that Bangladeshi workers constituted the majority of undocumented residents.

Lack of transparency in hiring processes, especially for government positions, led to many complaints of discrimination based on sect or ethnicity. Human rights organizations reported that Shia citizens faced widespread employment discrimination in both the public and private sectors. Sunni citizens often received preference for employment in sensitive government positions, notably in the

managerial ranks of the civil service, as well as positions in the security services and the military.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no national private-sector minimum wage. A standardized government pay scale covers public-sector workers, with a set minimum monthly wage. While the minimum wage for Bahrainis is generally considered a living wage, there is no minimum wage for foreign workers in the public sector; however, the government issued “guidelines” advising employers in the public and private sectors to pay a minimum monthly wage. There was no official poverty level.

Subject to the provisions of the private-sector law, employers may not employ a worker for more than 48 hours per week without including contract provisions for overtime pay. Employers may not employ Muslim workers during the month of Ramadan for more than six hours per day or 36 hours per week.

The Ministry of Labor sets occupational safety and health standards. The labor law and relevant protections apply to citizens and noncitizens alike, with the exception of domestic workers. The revised labor law improved the legal situation for many workers as it pertains to access to contracts and additional holidays, although it excludes domestic workers from most protections.

The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing the labor law and mandating acceptable conditions of work. The labor law stipulates that companies that violate occupational safety standards be subject to fines.

The Ministry of Labor enforced occupational safety and health standards; it also used a team of engineers from multiple specialties primarily to investigate risks and standards at construction sites, which were the vast majority of worksites.

Inspectors have the authority to levy fines and close worksites if employers do not improve conditions by specified deadlines. A judge determines fines per violation, per worker affected, or both. A judge may also sentence violators to prison. For repeat violators, the court may double the penalties.

Despite the improvements, NGOs feared resources for enforcement of the laws remained inadequate for the number of worksites and workers, many worksites would not be inspected, and the regulations would not necessarily deter violations.

A ministerial decree prohibits outdoor work between noon and 4 p.m. during July and August because of heat conditions. Authorities enforced the ban among large firms, but according to local sources, violations were common among smaller businesses. Employers who violated the ban are subject to up to three months' imprisonment, fines, or both. The ministry documented 156 companies in noncompliance with the summer heat ban during the year.

The government and courts generally worked to rectify abuses brought to their attention. Workers could file complaints with the ministry. The vast majority of cases involving abused domestic workers did not reach the ministry or the public prosecutor. Police referred 40 cases to the National Referral Mechanism in the first half of the year. Individuals with referred cases received a range of services, including shelter provided by the National Committee for Combating Trafficking in Persons (NCCTIP).

The Migrant Workers Protection Society (MWPS) reported it visited unregistered camps and accommodations, including accommodations of irregular "free visa" workers, who often lived in overcrowded apartments with poor safety standards.

The government continued to conduct workers' rights awareness campaigns. It published pamphlets on foreign resident workers' rights in several languages, provided manuals on these rights to local diplomatic missions, and operated a telephone hotline for victims.

Violations of wage, overtime, and occupational safety and health standards were common in sectors employing foreign workers, such as construction, automotive repair, and domestic service. Unskilled foreign workers, mostly from South and Southeast Asia, constituted approximately 60 percent of the total workforce. These workers were vulnerable to dangerous or exploitive working conditions. According to NGOs, workplace safety inspection and compliance were substandard.

The labor law does not fully protect domestic workers, and this group was particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Domestic employees must have a contract, but the law does not provide for same rights accorded to other workers, including rest days. In 2017 the LMRA announced that all newly arrived domestic workers would be required to use new tripartite work contracts. The recruitment agency, the employer, and the employee must agree upon the contents of the new contracts. According to local press reports, the new contracts include daily working hours, weekly day off, and mandatory wage receipts, among other conditions. Activists

reported that usage of the forms among employers and recruitment agencies remained low throughout the year.

There were credible reports employers forced many of the country's 91,000 domestic workers, most of them women, to work 12- to 16-hour days and surrender their identity documents to employers. Employers permitted very little time off, left female workers malnourished, and subjected them to verbal and physical abuse, including sexual molestation and rape. Reports of employers and recruitment agents beating or sexually abusing foreign women working in domestic positions were common, but most cases involving domestic workers did not reach the Ministry of Labor. The press, embassies, and police received numerous reports of abuse. The MWPS provided female domestic workers with temporary housing and assistance with their cases, although its shelter closed permanently in March. Additionally, the NCCTIP provided workers with shelter. Most women in these cases sought assistance with unpaid wages and complaints of physical abuse.

According to NGO sources, the construction sector employed more Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis than other nationalities. Worker deaths generally were due to a combination of inadequate enforcement of standards, violations of standards, inadequate safety procedures, worker ignorance of those procedures, and inadequate safety standards for equipment. While some workers may remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, the level of freedom workers enjoyed directly related to the types of work they performed.

A Ministry of Labor order requires employers to register any labor accommodations provided to employees. The order also mandates minimum housing standards for employer-provided accommodations. Many workers lived in unregistered accommodations that ranged in quality from makeshift accommodations in parking garages, to apartments rented by employers from private owners, to family houses modified to accommodate many persons. Conditions in the many unregistered or irregular worker camps were often poor. Inspectors do not have the right to enter houses or apartment buildings not registered as work camps to inspect conditions.