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This report
comprises
research
conducted
between
October
2023 and
September
2024

BAHRAIN - ADVANCING DEMOCRACY:

“A HOPE THAT IS ACHIEVABLE”

SALAM FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS
(SALAM DHR)



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Glossary, acronyms, spelling and some of the terms used in the report

This text, written with American (US) English spelling, adheres to widely used spelling and usage of Arabic names and expressions, such as those used in popular media, save for where the individual or organization prefers a specific formulation or there is a specialized meaning.

The text mixes the usage of hyperlinks with footnotes for citations.

Where it occurs, the spelling of Arabic names adheres to the common English-language practice of keeping the definite article al-, whether the word contains a sun or moon letter.

The report refers to members of parliament, or MPs. This refers to members of Bahrain's wholly-elected, 40-person House of Representatives (HoR, or Majlis al-Nuwab), not members of its wholly-appointed, 40-person, Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura). Together, these two bodies form Bahrain's National Assembly (NA), its national parliament.

In respect to other terms and acronyms:

- 'Ashoura - The tenth day of the Islamic lunar month of Muharram, marking the anniversary of the killing of Hussein (Ibn 'Ali), the son of Ali, the Fourth Caliph of Islam and the grandson of the Prophet Mohamed, by the then reigning caliph.
- CSOs - civil society organizations, similar to NGOs, nongovernmental organizations. In Bahrain, the government imposes sweeping restrictions on the type of CSO that can be formed, who can be on its board and its chair.
- Diwaniya; plural diwaniyat, open-house gathering or meeting, usually of a public figure
- Majlis; plural majalis - gathering; open meeting, held usually by public figures

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Summary

Amidst regional strife, massive loss of life, and violence, the Government of Bahrain (GoB) presents itself as embodying calm and good governance; as having recovered from its own domestic strife in 2011. The evidence from this study indicates that a re-invigorated and increasing silencing of dissent is emerging in Bahrain, amidst a regional context where rule of law has been weakened since the end of 2023. Simmering discontent risks becoming a renewed unfolding internal crisis, but it does not have to become so. Participants in this study indicated that they did not want it to be so, but that they believed themselves disempowered.

Article 25

Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions:

- (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;
- (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;
- (c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.

This report comprises research conducted between October 2023 and September 2024. It assesses and analyzes the character of citizens' participation in public life in Bahrain over the research period. The research assumes that inclusive and participatory democracy is a lever for reducing human rights violations and that a government that engages its people, ensuring that all - or as many communities as possible - have a voice and stake in public affairs and state governance often tends to be a state in which human rights violations are minimized and that when they occur, there are measures to provide for justice and accountability. This helps prevent recurrence.

Accordingly, the study measures the scope, depth, and shortcomings in the character and conduct of participatory democracy in Bahrain. In respect to elections, for example, it looks at who can be elected, under what conditions, and what powers those elected to

Bahrain's 40-person House of Representatives (HoR) have. It assesses popular engagement with a range of government agencies and initiatives, weaving into these the roles of both HoR members as well as government.

The report also marks the start of an initiative to advance democracy in Bahrain, to ensure that the general election expected in Bahrain in late 2026 fulfills the right of people to participate in public affairs in as inclusive and participatory manner as possible.

This report does not, however, examine Bahrain's adherence to international human rights standards insofar as these relate to freedom of expression, assembly or association, but rather the narrower, enabling role carried by Article 25 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Bahrain is a state party. The article guarantees the right of citizens to take part in the conduct of public affairs. It provides for the right to vote and to access public services.

Set out in detail below, the research base of the study comprised a survey to which 308 people provided responses relating to governance, three themed, in-person roundtable discussions in Manama. A further four themed online sessions and a systematic assessment of the conduct and working of HoR and its members, including informal, open-house gatherings many public figures routinely hold, called majlis. Additionally, there was an assessment of government engagement with citizens as expressed through legislation enacted, and a broad-based assessment of government-licensed media to assess how columnists and news platforms facilitated citizens' participation in public affairs, as expressed through their coverage.

As discussed in detail below, 76% of survey respondents claimed that the National Assembly, that is, the combination of the appointed 40-person, wholly appointed Consultative Assembly (Majlis al-Shura) and the wholly elected, 40-person House of Representatives, or HoR (Majlis al-Nuwab), which form the National Assembly, and the executive branch of the Government of Bahrain (GoB) do not work together to meet citizens' needs while 84.6% recorded they were not confident in the ability of the HoR to hold the executive to account. As constituents, 74% expressed some form of dissatisfaction with HoR member's engagement with them and 86.3% claimed that members of the HoR do not represent their interests. The majority of those surveyed continued to maintain a belief in democracy and expressed hope that reform could make the HoR more representative and democratic in the future

The roundtables discerned considerable dissatisfaction with the current state of representative democracy among citizens in Bahrain. The HoR and its members currently face severe limitations on how they can serve constituents if their wishes are not overly pro-government. There are currently no political parties in the HoR, with many experienced politicians either unable to run due to political restrictions placed upon them. Additionally, HoR members currently appear to be in more of a consulting role to the King and the executive, frequently enacting decrees rather than crafting legislation of their own and ensuring that laws they do make do not challenge the King or GoB in any meaningful way. This appears to have contributed to widespread pessimism about the HoR and elected members from voters.

Analysis of the conduct of the Government of Bahrain (GoB), as expressed by statements made by and legislation and policies promulgated by Cabinet revealed a highly deferential attitude from policy makers towards the King and Prime Minister, the institution appearing to mainly enact directives developed by offices under these two figures, rather than a structured method to ensure that the citizens participate in public affairs, including by way of the Cabinet engaging in any substantive way with legislation developed in the HoR or concerns expressed by the chamber. The character of governance suggests an asymmetrical power structure in which citizens come last.

Analysis of media coverage portrayed the HoR as functional, while members were depicted - rightly or wrongly - as inexperienced, at times unaware of their duties and powers, and as unwilling to even criticize the executive or make use of accountability mechanisms. The HoR appeared to be the target of criticism for decisions and outcomes that might, in other contexts, be seen as government-linked. Analysis also suggests that a reason for the character of the HoR's media coverage could be the 2016-17 forceful and arbitrary dissolution of Bahrain's two largest opposition groups, al-Wefaq and Wa'ad, as well as "political isolation" laws that prevent numerous former HoR members from holding political office or even voting. Currently, there are no members of the HoR that are members of a cohesive or effectively coordinated political group, atomizing the political process.

Events during the research period that may have informed discourse outcomes

Following the 7 October 2023 armed action by Hamas and Israel's response and conduct, first in relation to Gaza and, towards the end of the research period, from around August 2024 onward, in respect to Lebanon, many hundreds and, at times, thousands of Bahrainis took part in repeated, peaceful, demonstrations in support of Gazans. On at least ten occasions, demonstrators condemned the GoB, which has formal relations with Israel, citing alleged Israeli war crimes or conduct which many commentators, organizations and states termed genocide.

By way of reaction, the GoB carried out [hundreds of arrests and summonses](#), including of minors, in relation to the peaceful exercise of the right to [expression and association](#). The GoB's arrests of political activists such as [Ebrahim Sharif](#) for criticizing government policy on social media and [Ali Muhanna](#) for participation in a sit-in, appear to represent the kinds of tensions that formed a backdrop to the implementation of the research in respect to events relating to, mainly, Gaza.

The GoB's unprecedented releases of prisoners in 2024 also shaped public discourse during the project period. In April 2024, the GoB announced the release of over 1,000 detainees, and a further 457 people in September. The releases included a range of political prisoners, including those convicted for their exercise of fundamental human rights. As of 11 September 2024, the daughter of one of the highest profile political prisoners, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, had met with her father amidst rumors of his possible release. There has not been any reported consideration of the release of Sheikh Ali Salman, the former leader of Bahrain's largest single political entity, al-Wefaq.

The reasons for the prison releases are as manifold as they are unknown. Domestically, SALAM DHR contacts speak of the Crown Prince's wish to resolve the problem of prisoners, prison numbers and prison conditions. The [poor, overcrowded conditions](#) within Jau Central Prison could itself be a driver. It may be recognition that the "open prison" programme or other semi-custodial programs have succeeded. Regionally, the conflict in Gaza and Lebanon, along with the backlash the GoB has faced over its relations with Israel may have induced the GoB to present public opinion with a different phenomena; while engagement with Iran and the promise of renewed diplomatic relations may have

induced the Bahraini government into the releases. They may also present the expression of citizen participation in public affairs, through sheer force of numbers.

The government's August 2024 suspension of the elected status of a HoR member, Mohamed al-Husseini, followed by the stripping of his nationality and expulsion, discussed below, encapsulates government respect towards the HoR and its members.

"Advancing democracy" in Bahrain?

Research findings detailed below indicate that the legitimacy of Bahrain's governing institutions is under an intense and increasingly public scrutiny.

While the findings comprise a spectrum of opinion, many hundreds of Bahrainis from across the country, across confessional and professional communities and age groups told the project team that neither the government nor HoR and its members listened to them and certainly did not reflect their concerns over - for example - living standards, employment opportunities, wage levels, housing, or access to social services. In this regard, the findings exhibit a cross-community convergence of frustration and alienated dissatisfaction that merits, if not demands, government attention.

Research findings in relation to the HoR frame the institution as legally weak and, through government policy, fragmented. Its powers are limited and it cannot, institutionally, effectively hold the executive to account. While functional, its members were divided, inexperienced, and at times unaware of their duties and powers. They were unwilling or unable to criticize the executive or make use of even limited accountability mechanisms available to the HoR. At the same time, the 2017 "political isolation" laws that bans formerly popular political associations and prohibited specific figures from standing for election or even voting further undermines the perceived legitimacy of the HoR.

Individual HoR members, however, engaged poorly with constituents, irrespective of their political outlook: they inadequately reflected citizens' concerns in the HoR. Citizens, too, displayed misapprehension about the HoR. Findings found widespread pessimism amongst the electorate about the elected HoR.

SALAM DHR could not find a single instance in which the GoB - the Cabinet - expressly consulted the public in relation to the development of legislation or other aspects of its administration. The evidence depicts governance as asymmetrical, top-down. The Cabinet exhibited a highly deferential attitude towards the King and its own Prime Minister. It lauded and enacted royal directives, eclipsing legislation developed by the voice of the people: the HoR.

Participants in this research project were, on the whole, conflict-averse and inclined towards optimism, despite what may appear to outsiders a bleak situation in terms of adherence to democratic principles. Continued government disavowal of the very democratic principles cited in the constitution risks creating a slow gradual downward socio-political and security spiral.

Younger members of society, whose will to be heard could turn to the streets, could do so not in relation to Palestine or Lebanon, as in recent months, but in relation to Bahrain.

Extensive, in-depth, and multi-sourced evidence indicates that unless the government enacts reforms that recognizes, but also facilitates the right of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs in advance of Bahrain's late 2026 general elections, the government's long standing practice of imposing an uneasy peace through laws and practices that repress the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly, allowing for a narrowly defined character of expression or socio-political criticism, risks falling apart and alienating whole communities.

Despite widespread and possibly generalized alienation and disengagement from participatory political processes - which some of those who took part in the research argue is what the Bahraini government wants - scores of the many hundreds who took part in the research exhibited striking resilience in the face of serial, grave human rights violations and, in around ten instances, optimism. In relation to deepening and advancing democracy in Bahrain, one said that it is "a hope that is achievable".

Towards the end of the project period, SALAM DHR recorded instances that indicated that HoR members' meetings with constituents appeared to increase. Media discourse, notably social media, evidenced a small, but discernible trend towards enquiring into HoR and members conduct and work. Political activists made themselves known to the SALAM DHR team in order to enquire more as to the objectives of the project.

Following publication of the research, SALAM DHR will engage with the GoB and set out the merits of democratic reform, and argue that ensuring citizens' participation in public life can and will reduce a spectrum of human rights violations. We call upon Bahrain's international partners to persuade the authorities that democratic reform will improve security of all Bahrainis and reduce human rights concerns. SALAM DHR seeks to see concrete change in advance of the late 2026 general election in Bahrain.

Innovative initiative

The research and findings of this project are innovative: it is work whose pivot on Article 25 of the ICCPR as a lever for resolving a spectrum of other human rights challenges constitutes the first of such work. The approach removed a challenging us-and-them or government-opposition dichotomy that is present in scores of other, similar research work.

Statements made by participants in the research work, during in-person roundtable events in Manama

"[T]his is the first time we have had a chance to meet like this and discuss these issues [...]" and:

"[W]e broke the fear barrier with these meetings [...], or:

"[T]his is the first time this kind of project has been attempted - you need to continue it [...]"

Rather, it problematized the overall socio-political structure of governance in Bahrain, and put citizens at the heart of it. As a result, Bahrainis from a variety of backgrounds, including sect, age, regional origin, education, and other social backgrounds - who not otherwise generally encounter each other - could find commonalities. These included shared concerns about governance and the profound lack of citizen participation in public affairs. They found, together, that the members of the HoR, and it as an institution is failing to fulfill its limited mandate; that the GoB either fails to listen to their needs and aspirations or disregards them. This project provided this broad community with a means to establish greater consensus and the basis to advocate for increased democratization in Bahrain.

Methodology

To assess the degree character in which citizens have the right to engage in public affairs in Bahrain, in an inclusive, participative democracy, between October 2023 and September 2024, the SALAM DHR team:

- Convened with its partner organization in Manama, three in-person, thematically-focused roundtable discussions, each of which directly engaged around 15 people; and a further 10 indirectly;¹
- Staged a further four online, themed discussions, engaging around a further 150 people;²
- Held two public webinars on issues relating to the initiative, engaging around 1000 each time;³ and
- Engaged with 308 respondents to a survey that explored governance in Bahrain.

SALAM DHR's Manama team carried out a systematic analysis of:

- The work of members of the elected House of Representative (HoR) and their conduct in informal, majalis meetings; as well as the government response to HoR work;
- Government conduct in relation to the promulgation of laws; and
- Government-licensed press and, mainly, Bahrain-based social media, to assess whether and how the media provided a voice for the people in shaping governance

1 The themes were: (1) National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP); (2) the UPR process; (3) the National Institution for Human Rights in Bahrain (NIHRB)

2 The themes were (1) Participation in public affairs; (2) the 2030 and 2050 Economic Visions; (3) Role of civil society organizations in public affairs; (4) Right to Participation in Public Affairs

3 Webinars were: (1) "13 years after unprecedented unrest, do Bahrainis have a voice?" and (2) "Does the existence of 'parliaments' in the Gulf states mean that citizens really have a voice in public affairs?"

In implementing this project, SALAM DHR utilized a discourse analysis model.⁴ We cross-referenced issues and language raised in government-approved media, in majalis / diwaniyat, social media, and public discourse in order to arrive at an approximate measure of issues' relevance and relative importance. Expressions used below, in political commentary, reflect these terms or expressions.

Research Chronology

SALAM DHR - Advancing democracy initiative - chronology and milestones					
No.	When	Type of event & language	Where	Who / Target group	Outcome / Impact
1	12.2023	Roundtable - Bahrain's National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP) (Arabic)	Manama	Human rights activists	14 participants; empowered members and partners in Bahrain; provided research
2	02.2024	Roundtable - (Citizen) Participation in Bahraini Public Affairs (Arabic)	Online	Stakeholders, partners, activists	20 people took part; mostly in Bahrain; provided research findings; served to build civil society.
3	02.2024	Public webinar - "13 years after unprecedented unrest, do Bahrainis have a voice?" (English)	Online	Stakeholders and interested parties	Provided to international civic space and engaged stakeholders. At its maximum, 1000 people engaged with the event.
4	02.2024	Denial of research visit to SALAM DHR staffer	London / Manama		GoB denied SALAM DHR staffer entry into Bahrain to advance
5	03.2024	Roundtable - Evaluating the performance of the GoB with respect to to 2030 and 2050 Economic Visions (Arabic)	Online	Stakeholders or interested persons in Bahrain	15 participants, aimed at the Bahraini community; provided research material.

⁴ According to the computer coding platform, Delve, "Discourse analysis (DA) is a broad term for various qualitative methods that explore the structure and expression of language within its social and cultural context. It looks at the linguistic content (what's said) and language use (how it's used) in a given text to convey meaning in different social settings." See: [https://delvetool.com/blog/discourseanalysis#:~:text=Discourse%20analysis%20\(DA\)%20is%20a,meaning%20in%20different%20social%20settings](https://delvetool.com/blog/discourseanalysis#:~:text=Discourse%20analysis%20(DA)%20is%20a,meaning%20in%20different%20social%20settings) ,(Last Accessed: 11 September 2024).

6	02-05.2024	Survey dissemination	Online; and in person in Manama, by way of field team's efforts	Multiple communities	Core part of the research material
7	04.2024	Roundtable - Role of civil society organizations in public affairs issues in Bahrain (Arabic)	Online	Stakeholders	18 participants from a variety of backgrounds.
8	03.2024	Private meeting (English)	Online	Bahrain National Institute for Human Rights	Opportunity to engage with the NIHRB directly and assess its own position on citizen engagement in public
9	05.2024	Roundtable - Discussion on the Recommendations of the Fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for 2022	Manama	Human rights activists	Attended by 17 activists and human rights defenders from various organizations in Bahraini civil society.
10	06.2024	Workshop - The Right to Participation in Public Affairs in Bahrain (Arabic)	Online (Zoom)	Stakeholders and partners	20 people took part; it served to advance knowledge about the initiative and its objectives; provided a degree of research
11	06.2024	Public Webinar - "Does the existence of 'parliaments' in the Gulf states mean that citizens really have a voice in public affairs?" (English)	Hybrid - in person in Geneva and online	Interested parties; activists	At its peak, just over 1000 viewers, averaging over 30 minutes per view. Provided an opportunity to speak about the
12	06-09.2024	Online advocacy campaign on participation in public life	Online advocacy		Consisted mainly of a series of social media posts, aimed at engaging partners in the same, to empower partners and activists.
13	09.2024	Roundtable - Discussion on the evaluation of the National Institution for Human Rights in Bahrain (NIHRB) (Arabic)	Manama		13 participants from civil society took part; empowered participants and provided research material.

Summary Historical Background

Officially, Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy: power is invested in the country's bi-cameral National Assembly (NA). Both in historical and contemporary practice, however, the Al Khalifa ruling family exercises overwhelmingly decisive power over policy and political affairs in the country.

The Al Khalifa have ruled the archipelago since 1783. How the ruling family came into prominence is a matter of contestation. Pro-government narratives depict the then-Qatar-based Al Khalifa occupying the island to resolve a factional dispute, at the request of specific tribes, acting as a "guardian" from hostile, expansionist neighbors, such as Oman and Iran.⁵

More critical narratives present the establishment of the Al Khalifa dynasty as an act of conquest or "colonization", where the new ruling elites defeated the indigenous Shi'a Baharna and 'Ajam populations, subjugating them and treating Bahrain's resources and lands as the rightful property and inheritance of their own Sunni tribe.⁶

Both interpretations ultimately reflect the primacy of Al Khalifa power in shaping Bahraini society and politics for over two centuries. Accounts relating to historical divisions of labor and status between Sunni and Shi'a groups in Bahrain depict wealthier, mainly urban Al Khalifa members engaged in coercive practices over largely rural Shi'a farmers, extracting production surplus from them via taxes. This developed into socio-political cleavages between Bahrain's rulers and those living in the villages in terms of profession, class, kinship, sect, and accent. Combined with a direct and unequal relationship of extraction between the two, this frequently involved physical repression from ruling elites.⁷

5 N. al-Khairi, *Qala'id al-Nahrain fi Tarikh al-Bahrain*, Al-Ayyam Publishing: Manama, 2003, pp 225-226; al-Tajir, 'Iqd al-Li'al, 103-105, 106; QDL, 'Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf. Vol I. Historical. Part IA & IB. J G Lorimer. 1915' [857- 865] (1012-1020/1782), IOR/L/PS/20/C91/1; Omar Al-Shehabi, *Contested Modernity: Sectarianism, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Bahrain*, Oneworld Academic: London, 2019, pp 42-43, 45.

6 Marc Owen Jones, *Political Repression in Bahrain*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2020, p 1.

7 Al-Shehabi, *Contested Modernity*, p 69.

Bahrain has had two prime ministers in its history, both of whom were from the Al Khalifa family, directly appointed by the ruler, whom the Al Khalifa term "King" (see below). He has wide-ranging powers and appoints all members of the 40-person upper house of Bahrain's National Assembly (NA), the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura). He has the authority to cancel any laws that pass through the NA, as well as create and enact decrees that cannot be challenged by any legal means.

Such asymmetrical power relations cause some of the GoB's critics to claim that Bahrain is not, in fact, a democracy: there is no clear delineation between the government, citizens, and non-citizens, but is instead a fief, where the country's wealth and people are viewed as possessions or subjects of the ruling Al Khalifa.⁸

Governance is shaped and regulated by acts of royal patronage (al-makrama al-malakiyya) from the nation's oil wealth, based upon loyalty to the King and the Al Khalifa family.⁹ For some Bahraini loyalists, the country's ostensibly democratic process is one such "gift" to the people from the ruler, complicating perceptions on the separation of powers and the current legitimacy of the democratic system among Bahrainis. Critics have long complained that, despite elections, there are no true options besides the ruling family.

The ruling family, however, has and does not rule entirely uncontested. The British Empire, of which Bahrain was a protectorate between 1861-1971, shaped Bahraini institutions, legal codes, and demographics. During this period, sectarianism became officially codified. The British authorities helped crush dissent with modern sophistication. During this period, the state-issued documentation of these purported differences in Bahraini population shaped the sectarian systems that helped centralize power within the Sunni elite and securitize the Shi'a population.

Today, the Bahraini system remains centralized, asymmetrically-structured, authoritarian, and sectarian, where securitization is justified by ruling factions as both a means of survival and maintaining regional stability. Nevertheless, the country's consultative traditions, both from the Arab history of using majalis (see below) and the British

⁸ Jones, Political Repression in Bahrain, p 6.

⁹ Ala'a Shehabi, "Inviolable Sheikhs and Radical Subjects: Bahrain's Cyclical Sovereignty Crisis", *The Arab Studies Journal*, No. 1, (Spring: 2016), p 235; Michael L. Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?", *World Politics*, 53, (April 2001), p 328. See also Steffen Hertog, "Defying the Resource Curse: Explaining Successful State-Owned Enterprises in Rentier States," *World Politics*, 62, No. 2, (April 2010).

parliamentary model, remains influential, even when citizens feel it falls short of its potential. The ruling Al Khalifa family currently oversees a mainly managed, part-consultative regime. In it, forms of patronage secure power and resources.

The Majalis

The tradition of majlis (plural: majalis), "assembly", or "sitting room", is a social practice where prominent figures hold, on a regular basis, an open meeting, or reception, and perhaps offer limited hospitality to guests. It enables individuals and communities to discuss issues of concern with a leading local figure, perhaps discreetly. The practice is reported to have its roots in pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁰ In the modern period, it is a method of consultation.



10 Josef Meri, *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, (Routledge: London), 2005, p 171; Ludwig Adamac, *Historical Dictionary of Islam*, (Rowman & Littlefield: New York), 2001, p 271.

The National Assembly

Bahrain's parliament, the National Assembly (NA) has a bicameral composition. It features an elected lower house, the House of Representatives (Majlis al-Nuwab), and an appointed upper chamber, the Consultative Council (Majlis Al Shura or Shura Council). Both chambers hold 40 representatives.

The 1973 Constitution of independent Bahrain provided for a single, elected chamber, called the NA, with universal male suffrage and enabled the election of the lower house that same year.¹¹ There were 30 elected members offset by 14 cabinet ministers answerable to the Al Khalifa family. The government disbanded this model in 1975, after a large majority of its members rejected the government sponsored State Security Law, which undermined many of the political rights and civil liberties guaranteed and protected by the 1973 constitution and criminalized a wide range of non-violent political activities. The then ruler, 'Isa ibn Salman al-Khalifa [dissolved the HoR](#) by decree and ignored constitutional provisions that new elections be held within two months.¹²

In response, the GoB postponed elections indefinitely.¹³ The rulers transferred legislative powers to the Emir and his personally appointed Council of Ministers. The subsequent decades were considered some of Bahrain's darkest, in terms of human rights and democratic practice, where Bahrain functioned as a security state, and political parties and organizations were officially banned.

In 1992, the authorities created the Upper House of the National Assembly, the Consultative Council, whose 30 members the ruler appointed. Its legislative powers were considered ornamental by human rights critics.¹⁴

Its establishment failed to assuage demands for the restoration of the House of Representatives and the 1973 Constitution. Mass protests in December 1994 ensued,

11 Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Contentious Politics in Bahrain: From Ethnic to National and Vice Versa", The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies: The Middle East in a Globalizing World, Oslo, 13-16 August, 1998, Retrieved: 8 May 2024,

12 Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, (St. Martin's Press: New York), 1999, p 125.

13 Although it was unknown at the time, the National Assembly and elections would remain suspended for 27 years.

14 Amnesty International, "Bahrain: A Human Rights Crisis", Amnesty International, 10, 26 September 1995.

precipitating unrest to 1999. A coalition of Bahraini leftists, liberals, and Islamists termed the movement the "Uprising of Dignity".

Following the arrest of Ali Salman, one of the protest leaders, demonstrations became violent, resulting in a new wave of violent suppression from security forces, which reportedly deployed [live ammunition](#) on protesters. In December 1995 and January 1996, a mall and hotel were bombed, with no casualties. In response, members of the opposition were arrested without charge or evidence connecting them to the incidents. Despite their arrest, bombings continued intermittently, resulting in eight deaths.¹⁵

The GoB blamed the violence and bombings on a Hezbollah cell operating within Bahrain at the behest of Iran. [Human Rights Watch](#) stated the claim was not credible. Nevertheless, the GoB used it to justify mass arrests and excessive use of force in the name of combating terrorism. By the time violence had subsided, 40 civilians had been killed, and 500-600 arrested, most of them Shi'a.¹⁶

Following the death of ruler Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, in 1999 his son, Hamad Isa bin Khalifa became ruler. In 2001, he abolished the State Security Law and the then-Security Courts. He enacted a new constitution and re-established the HoR in 2002. In February of the same year, a national referendum officially transformed Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy and re-classified the Emir as King.

King Hamad directly oversaw the drafting of the new constitution and ensured that the Council of Representatives would not have representation proportional to Bahrain's population. Reform ultimately took a top-down approach and public dissent remained restricted. Resentments over these restrictions, and what many felt was a broken promise of reform, came to head with mass protests in 2011, spurred by a regional wave of similar demonstrations.

In early 2011, politicians, activists, religious leaders and citizens of a variety of backgrounds converged at Manama's Pearl Roundabout for an extended sit-in, along with demonstrations. On occasion, violent clashes erupted between demonstrators and police throughout the country. Accusations of districts being gerrymandered to minimize Shi'a representation in the NA during the 2010 general election contributed to a [crisis of representation](#) in the country, where opposition parties such as al-Wefaq called for proportional representation.

¹⁵ Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, "Decade of Oppression: Authoritarianism in Bahrain, 2011-2021", 2021, p 17, <https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Salam9FEB2021.pdf>, (Last Accessed: 8 May 2024).

¹⁶ Ibid.

The protest's leaders and the government engaged in official dialogue. Yet, violence between police and protesters escalated, resulting in deaths. These events caused the collapse of negotiations to end protests. On 13 March 2011, Saudi Arabia-led military forces, called the Gulf Cooperation Council's Jazeera Shield Forces, entered Bahrain as the authorities declared martial law. The Bahraini authorities detained tens of elected parliamentarians during this period.¹⁷

The conflict resulted in significant damage to public trust in the National Assembly and its ability to be representative of the Bahraini public. Along with numerous acts of [censorship and securitization](#), the government restricted avenues of dissent within civil society.

The autumn 2011 election was highly contentious. All 18 of al-Wefaq's members resigned in protest of GoB actions, triggering by-elections. The political group boycotted the elections and protests resulted in [dozens of arrests and reports that police deployed excessive force](#). With a [low turnout](#) of 17.4% for the 14 contested districts due to the boycott from all opposition parties, the majority of independent candidates, unofficially regarded as pro-government, [easily won](#).

Five opposition parties, including al-Wefaq and Wa'ad, the two largest opposition blocs in the country, boycotted the subsequent 2014 general election. They claimed that under an atmosphere of suppression and surveillance, the election would not be fair, and was instead an exercise by the government to establish ["absolute rule in Bahrain"](#). The election proved to be another major victory for independent, pro-government candidates, where even pro-government societies lost seats.

In December 2014, the government [arrested](#) Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of al-Wefaq, on charges of inciting hatred against the GoB, calling for its overthrow, and spying and colluding with Qatar. In 2018, following an unfair trial, he was sentenced to life in prison for treason. Both al-Wefaq and human rights NGOs claim these charges are [politically motivated](#). In 2014, the GoB [suspended](#) al-Wefaq for three months. In June 2016, the GoB [banned](#) the political association outright, with the The authorities liquidating its assets. In May 2017, the government [banned](#) the secular leftist party, Wa'ad, citing involvement in "terrorism".

¹⁷ Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 23 November 2011, <https://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>, p 148, (Last Accessed: 16 May 2024).

With the two largest political blocs banned and many of their members either imprisoned or forced into exile, formal opposition ceased to exist in Bahraini politics.

The Current HoR

The 2018 and 2022 elections (the logos for which are below) were [condemned as "shams"](#) by members of the opposition and human rights NGOs. Freedom House called Bahrain's elections [uncompetitive](#) due to the government's ban on opposition parties and former members being banned from being able to vote. The government prohibited former members of the opposition [from running as candidates](#), due to Bahrain's 2018 Political Isolation Laws. The elections also witnessed continued losses by pro-government blocs. In the November 2022 election, candidates considered, in effect, independents were elected.



Bahrain is classified, at the time of writing, as ["Not Free"](#) by Freedom House and "Authoritarian" by the Economist Intelligence Unit.¹⁸ According to International IDEA, Bahrain exhibits, in representation and participation, a ["low performance"](#). The US Department of State reports that the GoB [regularly engages in censorship and curtails journalism](#), both in print and online, further hindering the democratic process.

¹⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict, 2023, p 59.

At the opening of the October 2024 session of the HoR, the Speaker ruled to halt live media broadcasts of the HoR but to have them broadcast following accumulation of month's worth of material. Representatives reported not having been told of this decision prior to its announcement. Nevertheless, no HoR member spoke out against the decision; the Speaker reportedly indicated to members that the decision came from a "higher" authority. The latest example of asymmetric power explains why no HoR member objected, despite it being an infringement on HoR power and, in effect, a denial of their right to express their opinions and positions.

Legal Framework

Bahrain acceded to the UN's [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) in 2006.¹⁹ Law No. (56) of 2006 is the instrument that brought it into domestic law.²⁰ Amidst national unrest, between 15 March 2011 and 1 June 2011, the GoB derogated from six articles of the treaty.²¹ The ICCPR, which is legally binding, guarantees the right of peaceful expression, assembly and association, while Article 25 provides that:

“Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity [...] to take part in the conduct of public affairs directly or through freely chosen representatives [and to] to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors [...]”

Like other states, the GoB engages in the [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR). It is a “peer review” in which other UN member states draw on both binding and non-binding human rights law to make recommendations to other states. As a process, its recommendations, which are not binding, constitute soft law, since a state can either support them or “note” them, a de facto rejection. In 2022, Bahrain supported the recommendation to “Guarantee all citizens and political parties the right to participate in public affairs and in political life” during the Universal Periodic Review’s 41st session.²² The government has not, insofar as it is generally known, implemented any measure to make this commitment a reality. As discussed below, one source has estimated that the government has banned as

19 Following accession to the Convention, the government set out ‘reservations’ or ‘interpretations’ in respect to the treaty. These comprise a government statement setting out how it intends to implement the treaty. In broad terms, the GoB set out an interpretation in relation to the administration of justice and asserted that ‘Islamic Shariah’ subordinates the application of international law. Scroll to mentions of Bahrain at: https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-4&chapter=4&clang=_en#EndDec (accessed 21 October 2024), a UN site that contains all such ‘reservations’. At least 15 countries, including Australia, Canada, Estonia, Portugal, United Kingdom, Portugal and others stated that they did not accept the GoB’s assertions on the basis of the manner in which they were submitted. Bahrain is also a state party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1998) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2007)

20 Kingdom of Bahrain, Universal Periodic Review, Interim Report, September 2014, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session13/BH/Bahrain_UPR2_Mid_Term_English.pdf, (Last Accessed: 3 October 2024).

21 See: https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-4&chapter=4&clang=_en#EndDec, accessed 21 October 2024. By way of ‘Royal’ Decree 18/2011, the government declared a state of emergency and suspended implementation of Articles 9, 12, 13, 17, 21 and 22 of the Covenant. By way of ‘Royal’ Decree 39/2011, issued on 8 May 2011, the government lifted the state of emergency, effective from 1 June 2011.

22 Universal Periodic Review, 4th Cycle - 41st Session, 24 August 2022, Thematic List of Recommendations, 124.136, Source of Position: A/HRC/52/4/Add.1 - Para.46, p 37.

many as 80,000 citizens and those stripped of citizenship but still residing in Bahrain, from running for political office.²³

Bahrain is a signatory to the [Arab Charter on Human Rights](#). Article 24 provides that every citizen has the right "to freely pursue a political activity", to "stand for election or choose his representatives in free and impartial elections, in conditions of equality among all citizens that guarantee the free expression of his will," and "to freely form and join associations with others."

Political 'isolation' laws: reducing citizen participation in public affairs

Excerpts of the 2012 Constitution of Bahrain:

- **Article 4** asserts that "freedom, equality, security, trust, knowledge, social solidarity and equality of opportunity for citizens are pillars of society guaranteed by the state."
- **Article 23** guarantees that "Everyone has the right to express his opinion and publish it verbally, in writing or otherwise under the rules and conditions laid down by law [...]"
- **Article 27** guarantees the freedom to form associations "for lawful objectives and by peaceful means", where, like a specification on Article 23, "provided that the fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine are not infringed, the unity of the people is not prejudiced, and discord or sectarianism is not aroused."

Article 1 of the 2012 [Constitution of Bahrain](#) states that: (1b) "The regime of the Kingdom of Bahrain is a hereditary constitutional monarchy" but that (1d) "The system of Government in the Kingdom of Bahrain is democratic, sovereignty being in the hands of the people, the source of all powers" and that (1e) "Citizens, both men and women, are entitled to participate in public affairs and enjoy their political rights, including the right to vote and the right to contest for elections [...]"

The citizen's participation in public affairs, however, appears to falter here.

²³ Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, "The Entire Political Process is Fraudulent: A Legal and Political Study of the 2022 Parliamentary Elections in Bahrain", November 2022, p 3, <https://birdbh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/The-Entire-Political-Process-is-Fraudulent-A-Legal-and-Political-Study-of-the-2022-Parliamentary-Elections-in-Bahrain-%C2%A9BIRD.pdf>, (Last Accessed: 3 October 2024).

Article 32a, in Chapter IV / Public Authorities of the Constitution, asserts that: "The system of Government rests on a separation of the legislative, executive and judicial authorities while maintaining cooperation between them in accordance with the provisions of the present Constitution. [...]"

Despite this provision, the Constitution also asserts that the ruler oversees both executive and legislative powers. According to Article 32b, states that "Legislative authority is vested in the King and the National Assembly in accordance with the Constitution. [and that] Executive authority is vested in the King together with the Council of Ministers and Ministers, and judicial rulings are issued in his name, the whole being in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution."

“The judiciary is not fully independent from Bahrain’s monarchy, as judges are appointed by the king, and many are members of the ruling Al Khalifa family. The king also heads the Supreme Judicial Council. Bahrain’s courts fail to consistently and meaningfully uphold freedom of expression, association, and political rights. In practice, there is a lack of implementation of constitutional guarantees regarding these rights, in addition to a comprehensive legal regime that actively undermines them. [...]"

- [Human Rights Watch: You Can't Call Bahrain a Democracy / Bahrain's Political Isolation Laws](#), October 2022

Regulatory and domestic legal practice further narrows that scope for citizen engagement in public affairs.

Law No.25 of 2018 imposed new limitations to Article 3 of Legislative Decree No.14 of 2002, With respect to the exercise of political rights.²⁴ Often termed "political isolation" laws, despite the Constitutional guarantee of the right of citizens to participate in public affairs, Law No.25 of 2018 deprived of "political rights" (the right to vote) those sentenced "of a felony, or a crime breaching honor or integrity until rehabilitated"; "to imprisonment in any of the election offenses ..." provided for in the law. It also prohibited from standing for election those who convicted "to a criminal offense, even if a special pardon has been granted in respect of the sentence or if the person has been rehabilitated"; "to a term of imprisonment for intentional offenses of more than six months,

²⁴ See Legislative decree no. (14) of 2002 With respect to the exercise of political rights, incorporating amendments made by way of Law No. (35) of 2002, Law No. (36) of 2006, Law No. (57) of 2014, y Law No. (14) of 2016 and Law No. (25) of 2018, at <https://www.mola.gov.bh/MediaManager/Media/Documents/Laws/L1402.pdf>, accessed 23 August 2024

even if a special pardon has been granted" and the "present leaders" of all political bodies whose governmental ban was confirmed by courts that were, effectively, government controlled.

The 2018 provision also imposed a sweeping, vague prohibition on "Anyone who deliberately harms or disrupts the course of Constitutional or Parliamentary life, by terminating or leaving representative work within the Council [either of the two chambers of parliament] or whose membership has been revoked for the same reasons."

Generally speaking, the administration of justice in the cases that resulted in the convictions required to exclude political leaders, activists or those who demonstrated in support of the objectives expressed by those who took part in demonstrations in 2011, were unfair and a result of arbitrary arrests and unfair trials.²⁵ Moreover, the government applied these restrictions retroactively.

Article 7 of the Legislative Decree No.14 of 2002, with the amendments set out above, states that the "Soundness of Referendum & Election Supervision Committee", formed by order of the Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs in every electoral district determines who can vote and stand for election in a given electoral district.²⁶

Civil "isolation" laws: reducing citizen participation in public affairs in the CSO space

August 2018's Law 26/2018 echoed 25/2018 discussed above by restricting governance of civil society organizations (CSOs), including human rights organizations, sports and specialist clubs, and community groups, so that "a member of the board of directors including the chair must enjoy full civil and political rights." That is, the individual may not have a conviction or the other stipulations set out above.

²⁵ See, for example, Amnesty International, Report 2012: The State of the World's Human Rights, 24 May 2021, Bahrain entry, at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/001/2012/en/>, accessed 23 August 2024. Under Arbitrary arrests and detentions, it states that "More than 1,000 people were arrested in connection with the protests; some were Sunni Muslims but the vast majority were Shi'a Muslims" and that "masked security officers who did not produce arrest warrants and often assaulted those they arrested and, sometimes, their relatives" carried out the arrests. Those detained were "held incommunicado for up to several weeks, during which they were interrogated and, in many cases, allegedly tortured and otherwise ill-treated." They faced, according to Amnesty International, Unfair trials, where "Hundreds of people were prosecuted for offences allegedly committed in connection with the protests, including political opposition activists, medical professionals, teachers, students and human rights activists [...]". They "faced grossly unfair trials before a special military court - the National Safety Court (NSC) - set up under the state of emergency. Those convicted and sentenced to imprisonment included prisoners of conscience."

²⁶ See Legislative decree no. (14) of 2002 With respect to the exercise of political rights, at <https://www.mola.gov.bh/MediaManager/Media/Documents/Laws/L1402.pdf>, accessed 23 August 2024.

Moreover, in January 2020, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development informed civil society organizations that all candidates for their boards of directors, who sit for a duration of two years, will be subject to security checks.

Under Law 21/1989 and indeed earlier versions of this provision, CSOs are prohibited from "engaging in politics" though the law does not define what constitutes "politics", and all such organizations are required to register with the Ministry of Labour and Social Development.²⁷ While registration can now take months, the Ministry is empowered to dissolve any CSO summarily if it is "unable to achieve the objectives it was established to undertake or if it violates the Law of Associations, public order or norms."

The sweeping restrictions, imposed following largely arbitrary arrests and trials in previous years, have no horizon or sunset clause: they will always be applicable, whether in relation to the political or CSO sphere.

Whither impact on participation in public affairs?

As a result, in a country where an estimated [1.57 million, holds 719,333 citizens](#), or approximately [345,000 voters](#). One estimate states that the government has prohibited [6,000 to 11,000](#) Bahraini citizens from voting or standing for election, or 2.45% of the total population. In a context where sectarian concerns and social cohesion are routinely scrutinized, this is a dangerously high level of exclusion from the political process.

A common challenge for those deprived of CSO or political rights is obtaining a government-issued "good conduct certificate". In general, available only after a period of two years following release from custody where the individual has been in, the certificate can determine employment, access to state services and legal standing: it is one of the methods deployed by the government as a lever for pliability and leverage: rejection can and does mean repeated, renewed applications as well as directing the applicant towards

²⁷ Even before enactment of the 2018 provision, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development required CSOs to adhere to a series of regulations in order to maintain their registration. For example, CSOs had to upload core identity documents and administrative documents, such as minutes from Annual General Meetings; an account of activities and finance-related documentation.

It may be impossible to calculate the impact of these restrictions on the CSO sector in numbers alone, including cases of concern and the repeated harassment of a longstanding human rights society and members who sought to be on its board.

About the Survey

Between 19 February and 16 April 2024, SALAM DHR disseminated a survey to ascertain opinions on the role and adequacy of the House of Representatives (HoR) and MPs. Readers can access the full survey and all the results in the report [Survey: Evaluating Public Perception of Parliament and Government Cooperation in Bahrain](#), which sets out the entirety of the findings.²⁸

SALAM DHR sought to ensure that the character of the yes/no and multiple choice questions were likely to engage the widest possible variety of respondents; the 31-question survey also included one open-ended question on improvements respondents would like to see in civil and democratic affairs in the country.²⁹ The purpose of the survey, set out at the start of the text, sought to be as transparent as possible.³⁰

A total of 308 people provided responses. In part on account of concerns expressed by those consulted prior to circulation, the survey did not account for gender.

SALAM DHR disseminated the survey online, so that it could be taken anonymously by members of the public. To minimize possible falsification, SALAM DHR imposed an Internet Service Provider (ISP) limit of one survey per ISP, so as to reduce the possibility of repeat submissions and tampering. In tens of instances, respondents filled in surveys as a result of SALAM DHR team engagement and/or the presence in Manama of a team member.

At least ten individuals expressed concern for their personal security and possible state reprisal if they were found to have engaged with the survey; SALAM DHR estimates that as many others shared these concerns but did not relay them. A further 10-15 respondents expressed pessimism in the ability of the HoR to be a representative body. One said that

²⁸ SALAM DHR - Survey: Evaluating Public Perception of Parliament and Government Cooperation in Bahrain, 18 September 2024, at: <https://salam-dhr.org/bahrain-enhanced-democracy-a-hope-that-is-achievable/>

²⁹ The open-ended question addressed improvements the respondent would like to see in civil and democratic affairs in the country.

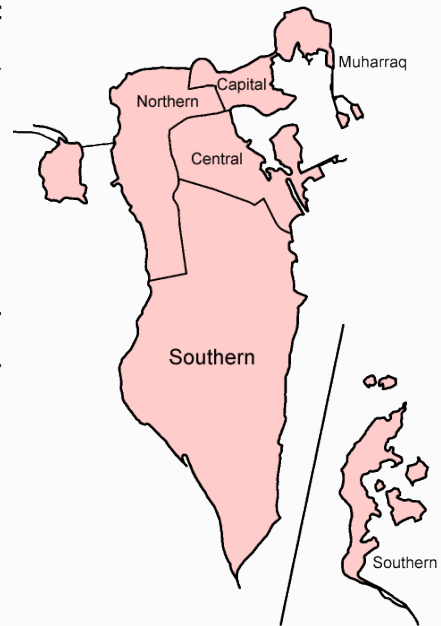
³⁰ It stated: "This survey is being conducted for academic research to understand citizens' opinions and evaluation of the Council of Representatives. All answers will be recorded anonymously. You will not be asked to give your name and do not have to provide any personal information. Your input is essential and contributes to evaluating the performance of the Council of Representatives to develop the parliamentary experience and the work of the government in Bahrain."

filling in the survey was "a waste of time". SALAM DHR's field researchers found that the two most common reasons individuals gave for not completing the survey were:

- Fear of reprisal from security forces for making any statements that could be considered subversive; and
- A deep pessimism in the ability of the HoR to be representative, thus making their contribution a "waste of time".

People generally believe that the Government of Bahrain (GoB) can or continues to surveil civil society thoroughly and imposes both formal and informal control and [restrictions](#) over expression, assembly, and association in the country.

The conduct of formal surveying, such as market surveys, is highly regulated in Bahrain and with respect to Bahrain. Surveys inside the country are subject to government licensing and fees, neither of which were possible in this instance, both in terms of political content and cost. Surveys run on platforms based outside the country, such as Instagram, might have been possible, but with a degree of subterfuge or massaging the purpose and content of the survey since the platform itself is wary about being banned. In sum, structural obstacles limited dissemination of the survey.



Survey metrics

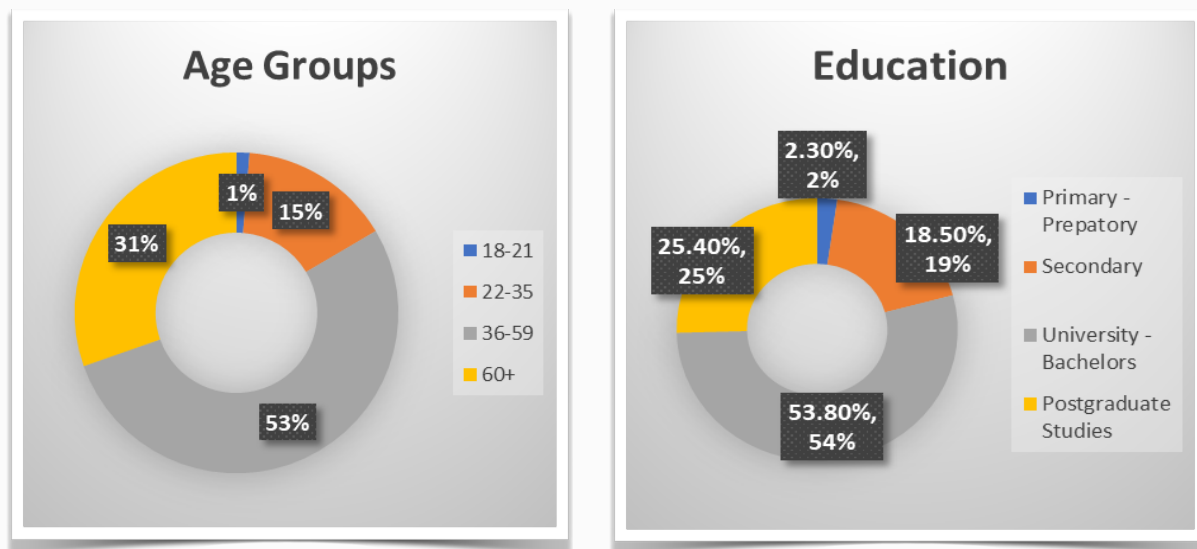
As set out in [Survey: Evaluating Public Perception of Parliament and Government Cooperation in Bahrain](#), a total of 53.8% of the survey's 308 respondents reported being from Bahrain's Northern Governorate.³¹ It is mainly rural, primarily Shi'a, and less prosperous. Towns there are economically deprived, have high unemployment rates, decaying infrastructure, and fewer amenities.³² Socio-political unrest has taken place in the

31 SALAM DHR - Survey: Evaluating Public Perception of Parliament and Government Cooperation in Bahrain, 18 September 2024, at: <https://salam-dhr.org/bahrain-enhanced-democracy-a-hope-that-is-achievable/>

32 Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shia*, (St Martin's Press: New York), 1999, p 137.

region. For example, amidst unrest and confrontations with the security forces in Diraz (Duraz) in 2017, the security forces detained [at least 286 people while five were killed](#).

22.4% of the respondents were from the Capital Governorate, where Manama is located. It is primarily Sunni and home to the majority of Bahrain’s migrant communities.



A total of 30.4% of respondents to the survey were 60 years old or older; 53.1% were between 36-59. According to the government, in 2010, the age distribution of Bahrain was:³³ 25.% - Under 19; 71.1% - Between 20-64 and 2.1% - Above 65.

With regard to education, 79.2% said they possess a bachelor’s degree or higher; the vast majority were employed or retired. A total of 52.3% of respondents asserted that they understood parliamentary mechanisms “moderately well”, 36.4% “very well”; 75.2% claimed they followed parliamentary sessions in some form.

The survey itself was divided into several sections:

Personal information – meant to identify trends regarding age, location, employment, education level, and previous democratic engagement

- Civic knowledge - Gauging general knowledge of Bahraini politics and familiarity with parliamentary procedures;
- Civic participation - Determining how active the participants were in democratic politics, such as how often they interacted with MPs;

33 Government of Bahrain, Ministry of Information: Population and Demographics, <https://www.mia.gov.bh/kingdom-of-bahrain/population-and-demographics/?lang=en>, accessed 16 October 2024

- Civic satisfaction - Gauging public perception of the HoR and MPs, and providing options for their strengths and weaknesses; and
- Civic balance - Seeking opinions on the separation of powers in Bahrain, as well as accountability to voters.

Substantive questions relating to the HoR and government are set out in the relevant sections below.

While in no way definitive, SALAM DHR ascertained that the likely majority of respondents were educated Shi'a Bahraini nationals; politically literate and more likely to have critical views of the government. However, the fact that most respondents were older, employed, and/or retired also suggests that they are less likely to be attracted to forms of political militancy in the Bahraini context. Although the views of this demographic were generally negative towards the GoB, they were also typically framed within a desire to peacefully reform civil society.

In broad terms, the character of responses to the survey questions reflected disappointment and discontent with the current state of the HoR and pessimism regarding the HoR's independence and ability to represent public interest, much less compose meaningful legislation that strengthens democratic practices or the rule of law in Bahrain. Others expressed the view that the inordinate strength of Bahrain's executive means that criticism of the HoR or its members is futile.

In contrast to the views set out in the survey, SALAM DHR documented government-neutral and government-friendly views in at least four webinars and three workshops that SALAM DHR organized while the survey was in circulation.

Findings from Roundtables and Confidential Online Engagements

In the course of the research, SALAM DHR organized and facilitated eight engagements with representatives of civil society (see list below). Of these, partner Bahraini activists organized three in Manama. A further five were by invitation and held on Zoom.

1. 23.12.2023 - Bahrain's National Human Rights Action Plan (in-person)
2. 07.02.2024 - (Citizen) Participation in Bahraini Public Affair (online)
3. 17.03.2024 - Evaluating the performance of the GoB with respect to to 2030 and 2050 Economic Visions (online)
4. 15.04.2024 - Role of civil society organizations in public affairs issues in Bahrain
5. 25.05.2024 - Discussion on the Recommendations of the Fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR), 2022 (in person)
6. 25.06.2024 - The Right to Participation in Public Affairs in Bahrain / Advocacy and capacity building workshop (online)
7. 22.08.2024 - Consultation meeting on overall project objectives and findings (online)
8. 08.09.2024 - Discussion on the evaluation of the National Institution for Human Rights in Bahrain (NIHRB) (in person)

In total, in person events in Bahrain engaged around 15 people per session while online events engaged between 30-50 persons. For security reasons, none of those who took part can be cited or credited; all Bahrain-based engagement has been anonymized.

Two further online events - webinars - were public, outward-facing awareness-raising and advocacy events. These were the 9 February 2024, [13 years after unprecedented unrest, do Bahrainis have a voice?](#) and 26 June 2024, [Does the existence of 'parliaments' in the Gulf states mean that citizens really have a voice in public affairs?](#) events. Each engaged, while livestreaming, at their peak and at least for some time, around 1,000 persons. As these events and their contents are already in the public domain, we do not discuss them here.

The specific topics were chosen as thematic issues against which participants would comment on and assess engagement, where relevant, with the HoR and its members, and/ or the government. A brief summary of the events is as follows:

Bahrain's National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP)

An in person meeting was held with 14 Bahraini activists from a variety of backgrounds and political leanings to ascertain their views on the effectiveness and transparency of the NHRAP, as well as their opinions on its future implementation. The expressed dismay over the quasi-secretive character of the plan and a pointed lack of public consultation in relation to the development and implementation of the NHRAP, what is purportedly an expression of national aspiration. Participants stated that:

- "The government did not make any discernible effort to consult the public or civil society in the development of the NHRAP; I would be surprised if any of the HoR members even know about it."
- "The periodic publication and open discussion by the government of specifically-themed reports on implementation of the NHRAP would test the commitment of the GoB to the objective of the exercise itself";
- "Bahraini human rights activists should consider the production of social media posts on the NHRAP, in order to challenge and engage with the GoB on the plan itself, and prompt engagement"; and more than five participants urged that in order to have their voice heard in public affairs, they - civil society - need to;
- Hold public events in the spirit of the NHRAP, to discuss how to make it work and a living aspiration.

Participants unanimously agreed that in the absence of the government or HoR enabling them to participate in public affairs, that:

- Civil society itself should publicize critical assessments of the NHRAP in the hope that the authorities will engage with civil society, with a view for future engagement.

Participation in Bahraini Public Affairs

Participants expressed concerns over the frequency and substance of engagement between elected representatives and the electorate. Additionally, over five participants questioned its oversight capabilities.

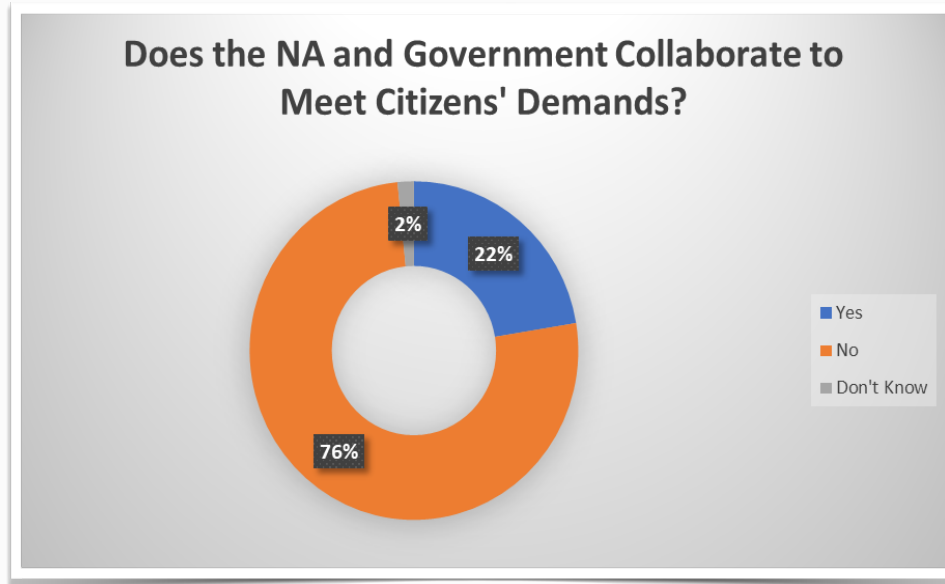
The session did not formally discuss the place of the wholly-appointed, 40-person Consultative Council. Most participants agreed that it is, in effect, an extension of executive power that is utilized to diminish or marginalize citizens' participation in public life.

Factual observations in relation to the HoR from participants included that:

- It has limited if any real impact in terms of the development of timely or relevant legislation, in line with evolving social needs, capturing all segments of the population;
- It has experienced a decline in terms of public respect or standing since 2011, and with it, a decline in terms of its moral or social (as opposed to formal, legal) power;
- It has limited, if any, effective oversight of government conduct and formal or enforceable way to ensure good or effective governance;
- It fails, despite some HoR members' efforts, to champion citizen concerns;
- It fails, on account of the legal framework, to effectively represent and/or advocate for individual or community concerns or aspirations;
- It does not reflect or capture what participants voiced as high levels of community frustration in relation to its legal standing and neutered character;
- Its legal basis, taken alongside the fully appointed second chamber - the Shura Council - constitute significant barriers to effective oversight and legislative action, with the two chambers of parliament compared to an "enlarged municipal council" lacking autonomy and authority; and
- It fails to bring in fresh, new faces, figures, and ideas; notably those with experience from a variety of walks of life; and/or structural means for renewal.

Participants expressed a desire to to see:

- Legal and in-practice or practical, de facto reforms to enhance the HoR's legislative powers; its socio-political role, its public perception and its accountability to the electorate;
- The HoR recognize social disparities and advocate gradual reform that reflects



Bahrain's sectarian realities;

- Encouragement for the political opposition to renew its strategies so it may become a more effective voice in critiquing government policies and engaging with a broader segment of the Bahraini populace; and
- Electoral reform of the HoR that abolishes restrictive political laws in terms of who can stand for election; and
- The fostering of closer relations between all political stakeholders to facilitate a more inclusive and efficacious parliamentary process.

Participants concluded that the opaque, diminished legal and accountability functions of the HoR have left its role as the people's voice structurally and socially hollowed-out, in terms of participation in public life. The GoB, through the laws it has enacted, has rendered the HoR ineffective. The authorities neutered the elected chamber; making it stagnant, in terms of ideas and solutions; timid and profoundly ill equipped to reflect the needs and aspirations of the Bahraini people.

Evaluating the Performance of the GoB with Respect to the 2030 and 2050 Economic Visions

Held online, SALAM DHR engaged with MENA experts and activists, both in the region and internationally, to measure the aims and current delivery of the GoB's plans for developing Bahrain's economy. The 15 participants observed that in respect to the development and implementation of the 2030 Economic Vision, the GoB did not involve civil society in any meaningful way, at least not those who took part in this consultation. Along with an absence of institutional (HoR) oversight, participants indicated that the 2030 Economic Vision was primarily a government exercise, in part for the purpose of directing the civil service, but just as much a public relations exercise.

The participants:

- Critiqued the performance of the government and the HoR, highlighting the failure to engage; to give a voice to the people in the formulation of the plan and the consequential gap between citizens' aspirations and government performance, particularly falling living standards and enhancing support;
- Expressed dismay over the lack of two-way, public-government and/or public-parliamentarian communication in respect to the scope, aspiration and implementation of the plan, creating an avoidable expectations gap; and they
- Decried what they believed was the passive role of the HoR.

With regard to the Economic Vision 2050, the assessment echoed that of the 2030 plan, but with additional points. Participants condemned the:

- Lack of an implementation plan;
- Absence of ministry involvement with civil society in planning, claiming there have been no shared plans or programs linked to the 2050 Vision's implementation;
- Unchecked and de facto arbitrary government decisions and the perception of corruption in the absence of effective oversight;
- Absence of a critical assessment, undertaken as a genuine consultative exercise, of the 2030 plan

- A perceived failure of the GoB to reform, along with the perceived changes suggested by the 2050 plan;
- Negative role of the HoR, insofar as it appears to have been marginalized at a time of growing public debt.

Apart from a lack of executive consultation, participants called on the GoB to achieve a fiscal balance in relation to government spending, strengthen legislative oversight, enhance transparency of the overall initiative, openly and publicly align objectives with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to support environmental and economic sustainability, and commit to comprehensive political reforms.

In relation to the question of the peoples' voices in public participation on the 2050 plan, going forward, participants urged that:

- The GoB and HoR conduct, as a matter of urgency, genuine open-door consultations on the 2050 plan;
- The GoB and HoR establish a standing mechanism through which to consult and assess on the advance of the 2050 plan;
- The GoB establishes a forum to determine the spatial location and scope of economic losses and to assess these with a view to establishing an equitable compensation fund, viz. for retirees; and that
- The GoB empowers civil society in the context of the 2050 plan.

Role of Civil Society Organizations in Public Affairs Issues in Bahrain

Participants including from civil society organizations (CSOs); youth, human and political rights activists; former HoR members and lawyers discussed the place, role; challenges and opportunities faced by CSOs.

Summarizing the discussion, the context of misapprehension, generalized animosity and, in respect to the work of a range of CSOs, mutual distrust between government and the CSO sector limits socio-political and economic development in Bahrain. The legal framework regulating CSOs - in which the government can determine who can be on their boards - has created a sector that is subservient to and, critics might assert, an extension of government and its will.

This context has also created an alternative CSO sector - uniformly outside the country - that is highly and axiomatically critical of government: the GoB has eliminated the possibility of CSOs that can be publicly critical of government conduct and decisions.

At the same time, the longstanding repression of the CSO sector induces some CSOs towards deliberate and expressly radical positions, arguably on the cusp of being a CSO and bordering on being a political project.

Participants recognised the potential for CSOs to be powerful voices - a "fifth power" - but also noted the timidity and caution under which they must now function, on account of legislation imposing restrictions that violate international standards in relation to freedom of association. Participants called for an overhaul in the legislative framework governing the CSO sector.

Participants also explored the actual and potential CSO-HoR relationship. They noted that this is an area that can be explored and pushed going forward. They suggested that professional bodies like the Lawyers Association could play a more significant, consultative role in the development of legislation and acclimatization of bodies like the HoR to civil society engagement and involvement in a way that is familiar in other countries. They

noted that municipal councils, viz. Manama, have positive cooperation with CSOs in projects such as road and infrastructure improvements.

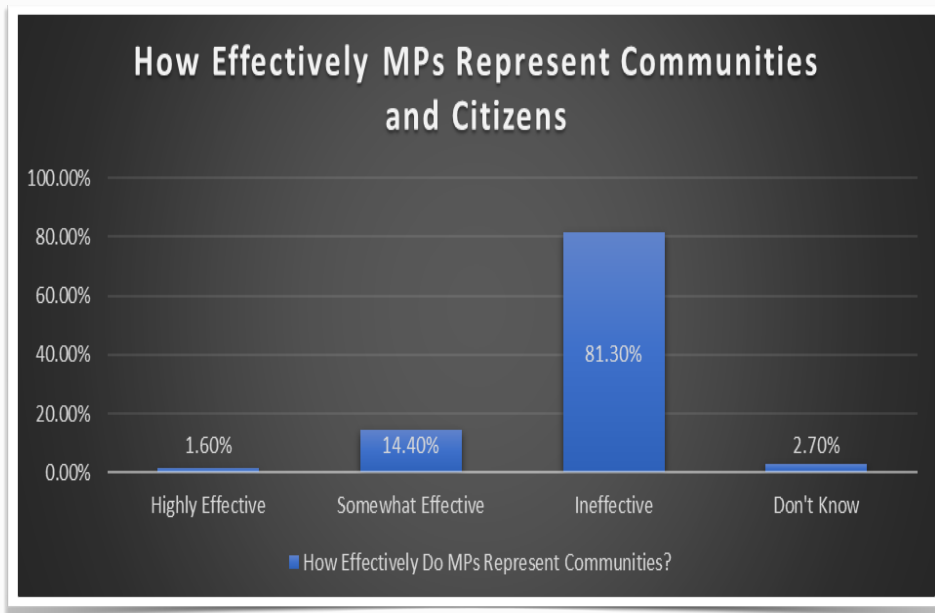
Participants noted that the GoB has currently halted funding - on verbal orders - to previously funded CSOs. The departure of experienced staff from the Ministry of Development also negatively impacted CSO operations, compounded by new bureaucratic challenges.

While some of the participants suggested that no solutions can be implemented amid current tensions without broader political reforms, others suggested, to resolve the ongoing impasse, that:

- Specialists and lawyers challenge restrictive laws such as the "political isolation laws" through legal complaints;
- Recruit personalities with experience to rejuvenate and lead CSOs;
- Establish a higher committee for voluntary work;
- Form a union of CSOs; and
- Change in Bahrain must originate from the top if there is a genuine desire for reform.

Discussion on the Recommendations of the Fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR), 2022

This 17-person, Bahraini participants-only event included political experts and human rights activists. They agreed that despite guidelines for the state under review to consult with its civil society in the course of the review, the GoB had not done so in any meaningful way since 2011. While the activists took part in consultations between 2008 to 2011, the GoB no longer engages them on account of restrictions the government imposed from 2012 onward. Since then, it was not a process through which civil society participants were involved in.



Participants agreed that the UPR is one of the most important and visible human rights processes in which the government engages and for that reason, consultation as well as and reflecting the views of civil society is imperative.

Participants asserted that long standing demands be fulfilled - such as visits to Bahrain by UN Special Rapporteurs as well as the lifting of restrictions on the exercise of expression, association, and assembly, amongst other fundamental freedoms.

In order to have the collective CSO voice heard, participants considered:

- Legal action over legislation that violates, in their assessment, Bahraini law (to force a reaction or engagement);
- Attempting to hold public dialogues on matters relating to human rights; and
- Forming a joint CSO-HoR body to advance matters relating to participation in public life, including in relation to laws and practices that restrict it.

The Right to Participation in Public Affairs in Bahrain / Advocacy and Capacity Building Workshop

SALAM DHR held an online workshop with 20 participants, including representatives of CSOs, human rights activists, and former HoR members and lawyers. The group explored:

- The connection between declining living standards, housing, and rising unemployment with the lack of a voice - even through the HoR - faced by the people;
- The restrictive nature of the electoral system and the political environment that impedes the scope and effectiveness of the HoR, depriving people of a voice in public affairs;
- How power and official discourse are highly centralized if not asymmetric in practice;
- How state oversight bodies do not perform their roles and/or there is little or no confidence in them or even their legitimacy;
- How the HoR cannot - on account of its legal framework - and does not represent popular will;
- How the GoB has imposed specific restrictions on entities meant to engage with the public in order to restrict citizen participation in public life; and that
- How the GoB has chilled socio-political discourse so as to limit engagement by young people in public service such as by standing for the HoR.

One participant said that "We have no independent media here; our NGOs need to get permission from the government to choose their boards. In our context, it is impossible to think about effective advocacy."

Discussion on the Evaluation of the National Institution for Human Rights in Bahrain (NIHRB)

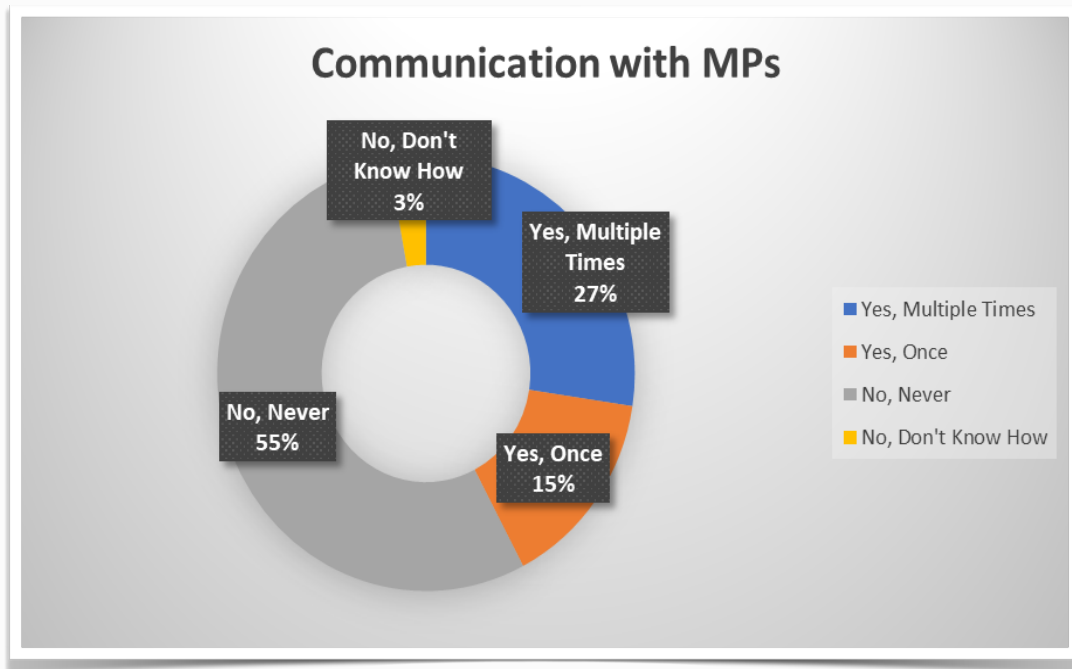
The 13 participants expressed disappointment over the pall of misapprehension and mistrust between CSOs and the NIHRB, along with the latter's inability, unwillingness or

being prevented from engaging with CSOs in areas of mutual and shared concern. They lamented its flawed complaint procedures and likewise expressed their disappointment in respect to the apparent failure of the institution to fulfill its mandate of holding the government to account for human rights violations. They contrasted its existence to the generalized sense expressed by participants that government adherence to international human rights standards has declined. The NIHRB has become, rather, a place where mediation and moderate or minor remuneration can take place.

Participants problematized the legal foundation, structure and composition of the NIHRB but above all, opaque and inconsistent governmental practices towards civic space in Bahrain. Individual and smaller groups of participants made the following points:

- The NIHRB was established in 2009 and formed in 2010. Unfortunately, the nomination of members to the institution comes from official bodies, specifically the Royal Court as announced, which poses a barrier to its independence and performance of its duties.
- There is a lack of representation from independent CSOs and an absence of a mechanism for such representation in the NIHRB, which creates a significant gap between the two parties.
- The NIHRB expressed its desire to act as a mediator between CSOs and the government, which is illogical as it confiscates the role of CSOs and diminishes the required role of the NIHRB. Cooperation is welcomed if there is positive response and development in the institution's performance.
- With the establishment of the NIHRB, human rights conditions in Bahrain have deteriorated, and legislation opposing human rights has been issued, indicating that the institution's establishment has not impacted the improvement of human rights conditions in Bahrain.
- There is a lack of belief in partnership in human rights work, as evidenced by the formation and operation of the NIHRB which confirms that its establishment was for cosmetic purposes and to cover up violations, not to reform the human rights situation in Bahrain.
- The appointment and selection of individuals to assume the duties of the NIHRB demonstrated that the selection was based on their ability to cover up violations and their ability to adopt the official narrative, and avoid highlighting the human rights reality in Bahrain.

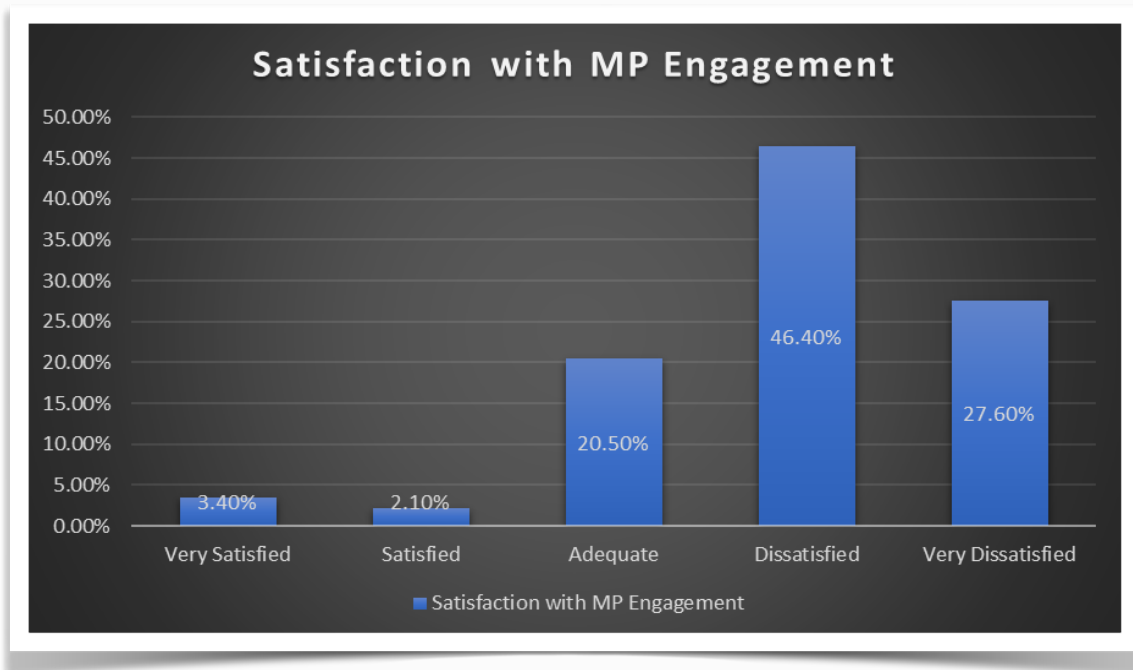
- A former political prisoner noted that the NIHRB's handling during their imprisonment was very negative, with its main goal being to whitewash the actions of the authorities and obscure and cover up violations. Despite this they continued to attempt to engage with the NIHRB.
- Prisoners expressed a strong desire to open ways for cooperation with the NIHRB, despite all the negatives and obstacles but with great caution to avoid being exploited to polish the image of the authorities without improving human rights on the ground. They also recommended forming an internal committee of activists, human rights defenders, and representatives from independent CSOs in Bahrain to push for reconciliation, justice for victims, and their rehabilitation.
- The NIHRB has diminished and distorted the role of human rights defenders in Bahrain, contributed to their targeting, and exploited families' communication to polish its image without any real change on the ground. This indicates that the institution's goals are not about development and reform but about covering up violations. And there's no accountability.
- Following recent cooperation and participation in workshops organized by the institution, they were targeted, subjected to interrogation, arrest, and travel bans, and the NIHRB did not take any action to prevent this targeting or even condemn it. It reflects the true role of the institution.
- The NIHRB only records complaints and takes pictures of detainees without addressing the violations they suffer from.
- The NIHRB is part of the official system/administration that leans towards control and domination, and is directed externally for image enhancement and propaganda rather than internal reform.
- We live in a declining human rights reality in light of laws that violate the state of human rights and hinder restorative justice in Bahrain. Despite this, we do not find a clear position from the NIHRB regarding these laws that violate human rights. This indicates the reality of the goals of establishing the NIHRB, which is to hide violations and polish the image of the authority and that there is an institution that cares for human rights in Bahrain without any impact on the ground.
- The problem with the NIHRB is the lack of independence in decision-making and finances, existing solely to adopt the official narrative and polish its image without any real improvement on the ground. Despite this, they are ready for cooperation and improvement, although there is no genuine official desire for reform, reconciliation, and human rights care.



Participants did not rule out engaging with it but appeared to seek an equitable engagement rather than one in which the NIHRB presents as a front for and a proxy of the government, a government lite, and they wanted it to champion Bahrain's own human rights defenders, reconciliation, compensation, and rehabilitation.

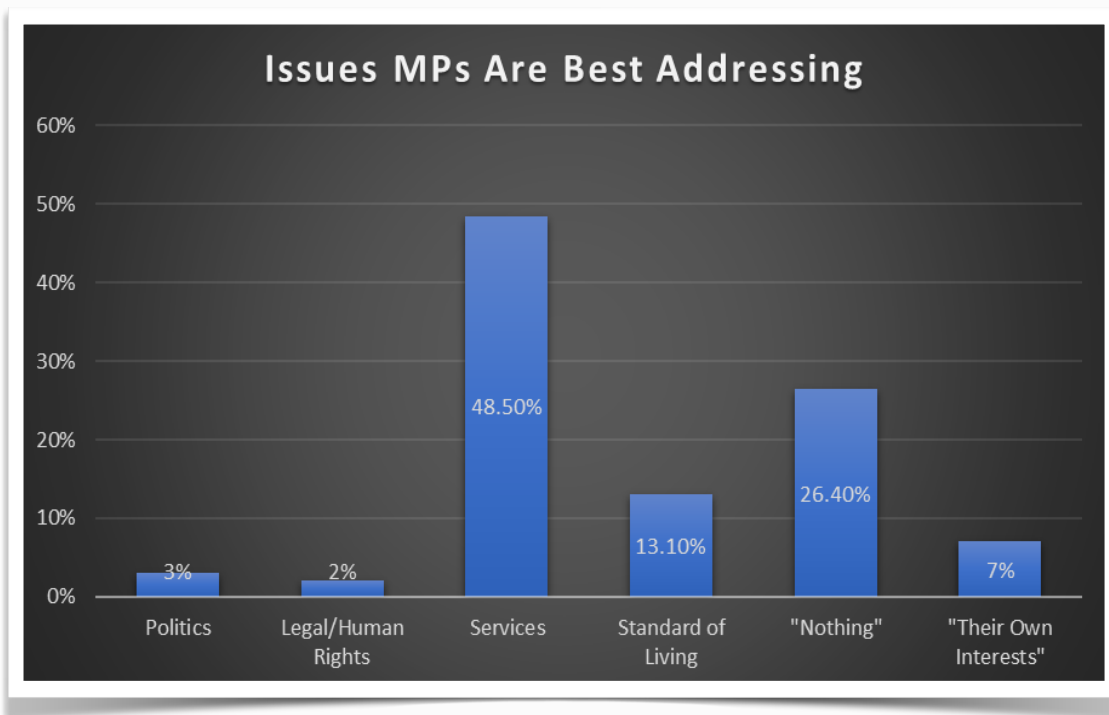
Findings in Relation to Elected Members of the HoR

According to the findings of the survey (see above) opinions about the HoR and its members reflected pessimism and political disengagement: 81.3% of respondents said they believed the HoR and its members ineffectively represented citizens and communities; 81.1% claimed they did not feel the HoR reflected a fair representation of the Bahraini citizenry.



Only 27.4% claimed that they had contacted their HoR member multiple times over matters that concern them, with 54.8% saying they had never done so at all. Although the majority claimed that their HoR member had been responsive, 74% expressed dissatisfaction with how their representative engaged with them. A total of 84.9% respondents said they were dissatisfied with the overall performance of their representative, over half of which (56.5%) claimed to be "highly dissatisfied".

Views from these respondents on HoR members representing their interests were also very poor, with a total of 86.3% expressing some form of alienation, believing that had little to no effective representation. When the question was framed towards how HoR members represented young people, 85.8% claimed that the young are poorly represented.



Only 26.2% of respondents claimed that they viewed engagement between HoR members and citizens to be adequate while 3% said that they were "satisfied". A total of 76% of respondents felt that the HoR and the executive branch of the government do not work together to meet citizens' needs.

At the same time, 84.6% were not confident in the HoR's ability to hold the executive branch accountable, with 30.8% claiming it rarely engaged in government oversight and 54.3% claiming it simply could not or does not hold the government to account.

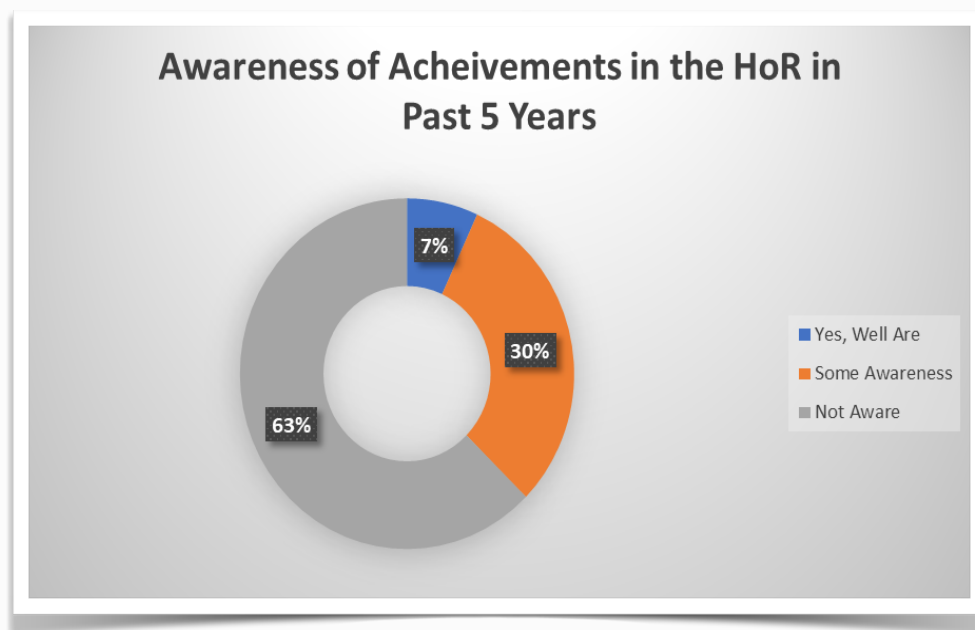
Moreover, 71.8% claimed that they felt the government does not implement the decisions of the HoR and 62.6% said they were not aware of any major achievements made by the HoR in the past five years.

Analogously, 77% claimed that the HoR had no impact on legislation in Bahrain.

Although many felt HoR members were ineffective overall, 48.5% of respondents claimed that the HoR was best placed to address services to citizens; 26.4% claimed they addressed "nothing" well.

Similarly, while 62.6% of respondents were not aware of any recent achievements by the HoR, a 37.4% claimed they were. Respondents were then asked to cite examples. From these answers, several themes were repeatedly cited:

- Approval for the HoR's response during the Covid-19 pandemic and their work addressing infrastructure, increased housing, the national budget, retirement, and amending cost of living allowances to address inflation;
- Improvement of women's rights via the StEP Program, although this was co-attributed to the King rather than the HoR alone; and
- Individual HoR members such as Zainab Abdul Amir were lauded for presenting "bold proposals" in the HoR, even if they were ultimately "ignored".



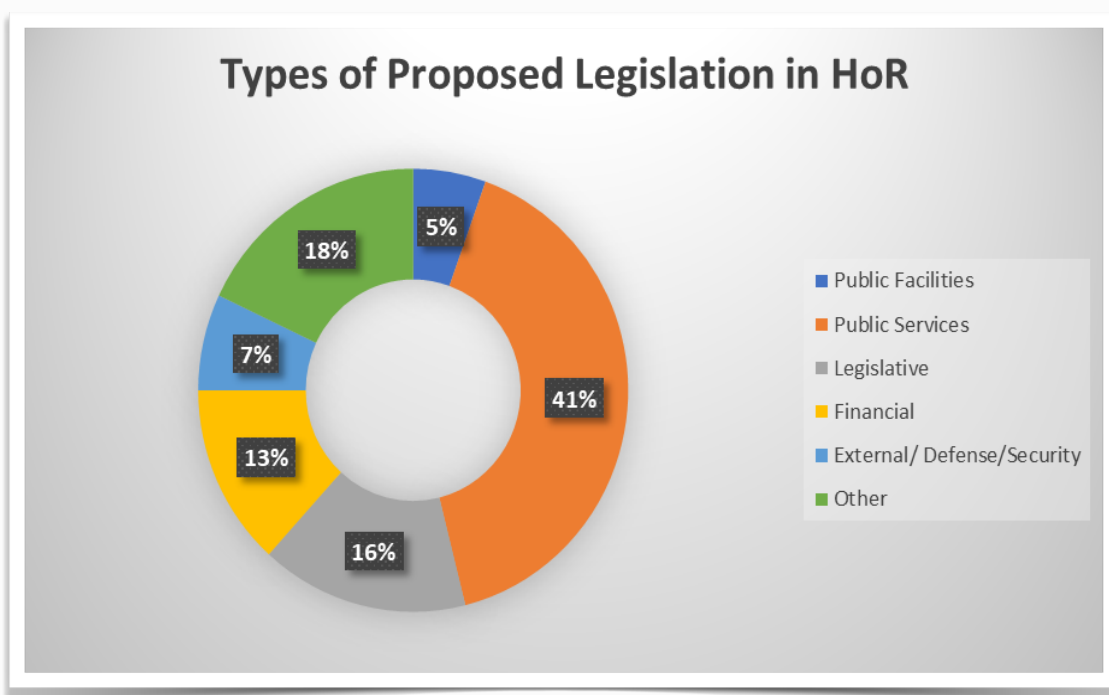
At the end of the survey, SALAM DHR gave respondents the option to write what they would like to see change to improve representation in Bahrain.

A small minority reflected complete estrangement from the political process. One noted "I have no hope in these councils at all; both are participants in crimes against the people"; another said "I support boycotting voting and I do not participate in elections willingly",

while another commented, "In the presence of monopolized authorities, our participation will only be formal and worthless, whether today or in the future."

Many more called for comprehensive reform, calling for:

- "A fair representation and redistribution of districts; amendment of the election law, cancellation of general districts, abolition of the Shura Council"
- "Amendment of the internal regulations of the House of Representatives, empowering parliament with an influential role"
- [G]ranting parliament the ability to activate its legislative role to issue laws that serve the citizens' interests; granting the legislative authority real incentive and oversight powers, conducting voting on critical issues, establishing a legitimate constitution, lifting political and civil isolation from political activists, allowing opposition to form political parties, equal citizenship, freedom of opinion and access to information, and the real application of democracy, along with redistributing electoral districts and elections based on proportional representation"
- "Granting the right to freedom of expression to all citizens, abolishing laws that restrict citizens and hinder their participation in public affairs, and abolishing laws that restrict the work of civil society institutions and hinder them from playing their leading and fundamental role in society."



On the basis on the 305-person survey's observations about the HoR and its place in Bahraini socio-political life, those who deride it constitute, for the moment, a smaller component than those who want - or rather, who need it - to constitute the "democratic system" of government in which "sovereignty [is] in the hands of the people."³⁴

On the basis of the survey alone, SALAM DHR believes that the government needs to act immediately to ensure that the 2026 general elections in Bahrain reflects the breadth of opinion and aspiration in the country: electoral reform, removing or amending laws on who can stand for office and/or vote; equitable reform of the electoral districts, amongst other reforms.

Failure to do so risks widening the gap between the rulers and the ruled, exacerbating the possibility for socio-political unrest or inducing an even more intensive repression that currently exists.

HoR Members' Activities and Conduct in the Chamber

While it's not possible to discern the motivations of HoR member's interventions in the chamber, research indicates that a variety of sources of information shape HoR members' actions. These include engagement with government representatives, commentary in government-regulated media platforms, a degree of private and direct communication with other HoR members and constituents (often referred to as "citizens" in political discourse), consensus views emerging from diwaniyat (see below), and the personal assessments of each HoR member. However, during the reporting period, SALAM DHR could not find a single instance in which an HoR member actively sought the views of citizens.

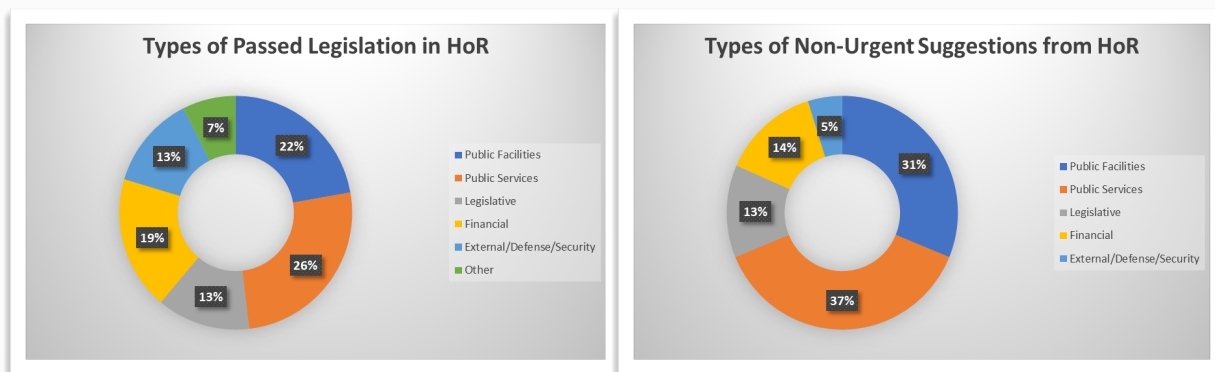
SALAM DHR monitored 32 regular and two extraordinary sessions of the House of Representatives (HoR) between October 2023-May 2024. These can be viewed online.

³⁴ Article 1d states, in full, that: "The system of Government in the Kingdom of Bahrain is democratic, sovereignty being in the hands of the people, the source of all powers. Sovereignty shall be exercised in the manner stated in the present Constitution." See <https://bahrain.bh/wps/wcm/connect/5711fc2a-e02d-4e8e-8b38-11320876866c/Constitution+Kingdom+of+Bahrain.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=o8-mJ.G>

Under the Bahraini constitution, the HoR has the power to propose constitutional amendments, legislation, and accept or refuse decrees of law. Under legislation in place at the time of writing, however, the HoR can only introduce legislation. It cannot be passed on their own accord. The HoR can comment on and review executive-developed and introduced bills. Members are also able to make requests framed as a bill, for the government to review. More informally, HoR members can express their desires regarding public matters, question cabinet ministers in writing or in person. It can also table a vote of no confidence against cabinet ministers, and the Prime Minister, known as a "motion of non-cooperation". A motion of non-cooperation has never been issued in the history of the HoR.

The HoR typically sits from October to June, breaking for national and religious holidays. Sessions are started and ended by ruler’s decree.

Although SALAM DHR did not monitor the attendance of HoR members, we found, broadly, that they engaged in chamber work. Some members sometimes appeared



unfamiliar with the full remit of their responsibilities, such as confounding national and municipal responsibilities. Additionally, HoR members appeared unwilling or unable to utilize the HoR’s oversight mechanisms to encourage executive accountability.

In the project period, the HoR proposed 128 laws, of which 54 passed, or 42%. It made 274 “suggestions”, 149 of which were non-binding and limited to HoR members; requests for government consideration of their feasibility, termed “urgent suggestions”. Of these, 69% related to public facilities and public services, of which the GoB accepted 41, or 27.5%.

A total of 46% of proposed legislation and 68% of non-urgent suggestions in the HoR related to delivering public services and facilities, such as improvements to infrastructure.

In the project period, the HoR addressed 166 questions to the government, and obtained 103 official responses. The HoR convened four investigation committees while members made one request to question a government representative in relation to public facilities but the government declined the request.

HoR members reflected popular concern over access to social services as the authorities forecast 50,000 new entrants to the labor market. They explored expanding support for private sector institutions.³⁵ HoR members amended the criteria related to the fifth category of housing beneficiaries to include divorced, abandoned, or widowed women without children, or orphaned single women.³⁶

Most HoR interventions manifested as the efforts of individual members: a lack of coordinated, cohesive efforts resulted in weakened legislative outcomes and diminished oversight of government policy and action. With every HoR member serving - as per the current law - as an independent, there are structural obstacles to collaboration.

Character of Majalis / Diwaniyat

In Bahrain, as across other Gulf Arab states, prominent male (overwhelmingly so) social and/or political figures routinely hold informal open-house meetings called majalis (singular, majlis, sitting or gathering) or diwaniyat (singular, diwaniya, or open-general meeting).³⁷ Informal political or social groups may also hold such gatherings and three such were held in the reporting period. Neighbors, associates or members of other - often leading - families or members of political bodies attend such gatherings. The overwhelming majority of HoR members' majalis / diwaniyat adhered to the informal meeting structure

35 Bahrain House of Representatives, Topics, "Encouraging Private Sector Cooperation with 'Tamkeen' to Achieve the Goals of the Recently Launched Program Packages, Including Increasing Wages for Citizens in the Private Sector and Their Career Development", 13 November 2023.

36 Bahrain House of Representatives, Decisions, "Memo From the Legal and Legislative Affairs Committee Regarding a Draft Decision to Amend the Housing Regulation Decision", 20 November 2023.

37 Generally speaking, there are far more male-only or overwhelmingly male gatherings; women can stage their own. A small number may be mixed in terms of gender.

most commonly found across the Gulf; four staged open or quasi-open discussions relating to matters of socio-political concern.

The impact on domestic policy of such gatherings is negligible. The most they can do is provide space for discussion of topics and ideas, normalizing the discussion of some, serving to dampen others.³⁸

In the course of the 10 month monitoring period, scores of routine gatherings generally focused on events in Gaza. Concern over events in Gaza and Palestine crosses ethno-sectarian divides and stirs many Bahrainis.

The four occasions at which issues relating directly to Bahrain, giving voice to citizens' concerns in public life were as follows:

- 25 November 2023 - lawyer Mahmoud Rabei discussed the Press Law in the Al-Minbar Society majlis, outlining its implications;
- 26 November 2023 - Hassan Ismai presented, at his gathering, the HoR bill on Protection from Domestic Violence;
- 28 November 2023 - The Bahraini Girl's Renaissance Society hosted at its majlis a dialogue session marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.
- At the majlis of now former HoR member (see below), Mohamed al-Hussaini, who represented the first district of Muharraq Governorate, the Speaker of the HoR, Ahmed Salman Al-Muslim, met with a number of his constituents. Citizens expressed dissatisfaction with the HoR, stressing the need for tangible achievements. They explained their grievances and asserted that officials previously ignored them. They decried the HoR's and other institutions' lack of transparency. They requested that Mohamed al-Husseini escalate their demands for access to employment and better living standards to the Prime Minister or King, since the HoR seemed unable to address them.

In sum, issues of popular socio-economic concern, whatever their nature, do not generally appear to be discussed openly in majlis, or only in limited circles. In the 10 month monitoring period, amidst hundreds of such gatherings where private discussions are

³⁸ During the month of Ramadan, SALAM DHR recorded around 300 majalis, sometimes over 10 per evening. None of them appeared to feature any in-depth or prolonged discussion about socio-economic matters in Bahrain.

exactly that, SALAM DHR recorded three occasions that openly addressed socio-economic concerns.

One the HoR member's majlis provided citizens with the direct opportunity to participate in public affairs. The government summarily removed him from the HoR and exiled him from Bahrain. In so doing, the government took away the voice of citizens represented by that HoR member.

A Shi'a Bahraini of Arab heritage, not active in politics, told a SALAM DHR team member:

"If they do that to one they chose to represent their interests in the HoR, then you will understand that they [the government] don't hesitate to arrest or beat up peaceful demonstrators; torture them in detention and then make them face unfair trial. For what? Since they did not want to hear complaints about everyday suffering over the cost of food, access to healthcare or - God forbid - that we have a voice."

Unprecedented Dissent by Members of the HoR

On 30 April 2024, at the HoR's 31st session, nine members of the HoR, both Sunni and Shi'a, called for the release of political prisoners. HoR members Zainab Abdul Amir, Abdunabi Salman, and Mamdouh al-Saleh spoke of reconciliation, a reactivation of political life, and political prisoners. During the same session, Mamdouh al-Saleh called for exiled Bahrainis to be allowed to return.³⁹ Another HoR member, [Jameel Mulla Hassan questioned whether Bahrain has prisoners of conscience](#), and that, if so, it is a police state.

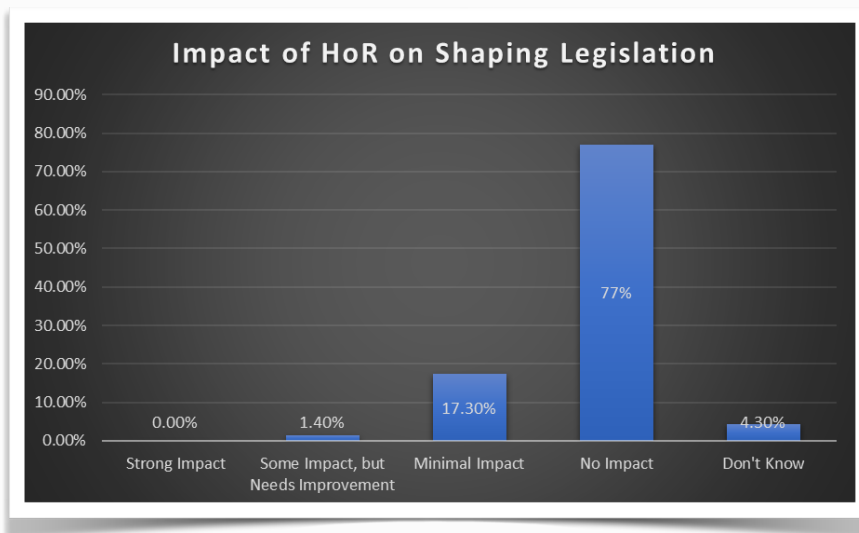
[Eman Hasan Showaier](#), who represents Area 10 / al-'Asema - the southeastern part of Bahrain and the island adjacent to Qatar, called for the release of prisoners of conscience and condemned the collective failure to acknowledge the existence of prisoners of conscience. Citing the case of her own husband, she [questioned the fate](#) of "martyrs" who lost their lives under torture in Bahrain amidst national unrest in 2011.

³⁹ Clip of House of Representatives, Mohammed Rafiq Al-Husseini, 30 April, 2024 https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IRxx_EfzPWBf8tv-6wuQPmCK9X2v6iHC/view, (Last Accessed: 31 July 2024).

Then still a member of the HoR, Mohamed al-Husseini (see above and below) called for [national reconciliation](#) and for the [release](#) of arbitrarily detained, former al-Wefaq leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, as well as other prisoners.⁴⁰

During the session, the designated government representative in the HoR, the [Minister for Shura Council and House of Representatives Affairs](#), Ghanim bin Fadhel al Buainain, provided a response.⁴¹ He insisted that Bahrain does not have political detainees or prisoners of conscience and that all those in prison were tried according to the law. This assertion does not correspond with the findings of scores of human rights groups, UN's human rights mechanisms and states. Minister Ghanem al-Buainain also claimed the topic was a "distraction" from the "important matter concerning the development of rehabilitation centers".

By way of reaction, three other HoR members asserted that there are no political prisoners



in Bahrain. Mohamed Al-Rifa'i demanded that retribution be applied to those accused of assaulting police officers, and described them as prisoners due to crimes and subversive actions against the political system. At the following session of the HoR, on 7 May 2024, Speaker Ahmed Salman al-Muslim, asserted that the demands for releases, are the

40 Bahrain Mirror (not licensed in Bahrain) - MP Mohammad Al-Husseini: I Call for Return of Political Life, Societies, and Release of Political Prisoners Mainly Sheikh Ali Salman, 1 May 2024, accessed 24 August 2024 at <http://bahrainmirror.com/en/news/64564.html> According to this article, Mohamed al-Husaini "demanded 'the strong return of political life to Bahrain, the return of political societies, whitening of prisons (i.e. the release of political prisoners), and the release of Sheikh Ali Salman,' the Secretary-General of the Al-Wefaq Society from prison." He reportedly added that "We want to turn the page on the past, and for everyone to be part of society without discrimination" and emphasized that "there are those who deserve to be released from prisons and pardoned." See also the social media post on X (formerly Twitter) by Yusuf Al-Jamri, يوسف الجمري / @YusufAlJamri, at: <https://x.com/YusufAlJamri/status/1785289383026823394>, (translated from Arabic) "Dr. Mohammed Rafiq says he supports national reconciliation", accessed 24 August 2024.

41 The Parliament Affairs Minister is required to attend all sessions of the HoR and Shura Council, the entirely appointed chamber of the National Assembly. He can provide government responses - comments, objections or amendments - to matters raised but the position does not have voting rights in either chamber. Ghanim bin Fadhel Al Buainain is a former HoR member (2002-2010) linked to the Salaf party.

government or ruler's prerogative, and constitute a violation of the judicial authority, for which HoR members can have their status as elected officials revoked.

Government Backlash

At the 5 July 2024, session of the HoR - its 32nd -the [Minister for Shura Council and House of Representatives Affairs](#), Ghanim bin Fadhel al Buainain delivered a government message to HoR members. It stated that demands to release prisoners are an infringement on the judiciary and re-iterated that there is no such thing as a "prisoner of conscience" in Bahraini legislation and indicated that using the term "prisoner of conscience" is a regressive stance that contradicts national principles, and that those accused and convicted of fleeing justice are not exiled and cannot be described as such.

In May 2024, the ruler issued a royal decree that enabled the Court of Cassation - rather than a HoR vote - to remove an HoR member from the house and revoke their elected status.

On 9 July 2024, the Court of Cassation stripped HoR member, Mohamed al-Husseini, of his status as an elected member: the GoB's Directorate of Nationality, Passports, and Residence Affairs reportedly evidenced the dual Pakistan-Bahrain nationality held by Mohamed al-Husseini, which he held at the time of his candidacy for the HoR, contravening Article 57 of the Bahraini Constitution.⁴² The opaque procedure did not provide for a right to an appeal or review.

⁴² Article 57a states that every HoR member "must be a Bahraini national [...] and does not hold any other nationality except that of a GCC member state [...]" See the 2012 Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, at <https://www.bahrain.bh/wps/wcm/connect/5711fc2a-e02d-4e8e-8b38-11320876866c/Constitution+Kingdom+of+Bahrain.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=o8-mJ.G>, (Last Accessed: 24 August 2024). Dual nationality - if genuine - also violates Legislative Decree No. (14) of 2002, including its most recent amendments. See: <https://www.mola.gov.bh/MediaManager/Media/Documents/Laws/L1402.pdf>, (Last Accessed: 23 August 2024).

The Bahrain Mirror, a news platform based outside of Bahrain and not licensed by the government, reported on 28 June 2024 that the authorities began taking steps to strip al-Husseini of his nationality, even before courts had stripped him of his elected status.⁴³

On 9 August 2024, the government revoked Mohamed al-Husseini's citizenship. As Bahrain's national law confers citizenship on a patriarchal basis, his children should have lost their own nationality, but following a 9 August plea by his wife, a Bahraini, the authorities exceptionally restored their citizenship.

His wife circulated a further video, pleading with the King to renationalize her husband and allow him to remain in the country; he reportedly did likewise but received no response. On 14 August 2024 the GoB, reportedly deported him and according to his lawyer, Abdulla al-Hashim, he is currently stateless. His whereabouts are not generally known.

In the case of former HoR member, Mohamed al-Husseini, the government, in contradiction to its own laws, has made no statement. It has also silenced one HoR member whom they had fostered, further chilling socio-political discourse, notably amongst those who previously expressed loyalty to the authorities.

Perception of Conduct and Activities of HoR Members

The HoR and its members constituted a functional body, engaging in legislative work and deliberation, within the narrow legal scope they enjoyed. Many HoR members tended, in the research period, to praise the government and ruler, but tried to engage conscientiously on matters relating to welfare and access to social services.

Despite what appears to be poor citizen-HoR member communication or appreciation that such a relationship should be important, tens of HoR members appear to do (and to have done) their utmost to promote and protect the wellbeing of the citizens in their respective

⁴³ Bahrain Mirror (not licensed in Bahrain; in Arabic),

دعوى من "إدارة الجنسية والجوازات" لإسقاط عضوية النائب محمد الحسيني

Or: A lawsuit from the "Nationality and Passports Department" to cancel the membership of HoR member Mohammed Al-Hussaini, 28 June 2024, at <http://bahrainmirror.com/news/64783.html>, (Last Accessed: 24 August 2024). The article's opening line states (from Arabic) "Lawyer Abdullah Hashim [the lawyer for the former HoR member] said that the 'Nationality, Passports and Residence Department' recently filed a lawsuit against MP Mohammed Al-Hussaini to revoke his citizenship."

electoral districts. Collectively, HoR members face an executive authority both legally and in practice, endowed with considerably more power and authority.

On the basis of the 308-person survey and the in-person meetings held in Bahrain, popular perception of the HoR and its essential function of embodying the right of citizens to participate in public affairs is very poor. Its role in promoting and protecting the right of people to take part in genuine elections and securing equal - or at least equitable access to public services is, at best, extremely weak.



The HoR failed - or was made to avoid - "bread and butter" issues such as the falling living standards and lack of government support for vulnerable members of society, such as the elderly and disabled; and a desire to see laws restricting criticism of government policy repealed so citizens activists, (legal) CSOs, and HoR members can more efficiently advocate for change in Bahrain.

Public awareness and reasonable demands by citizens towards and of their representatives is weak. That is public awareness about the role, function, and capacities of the HoR are poor, underdeveloped, and arguably limited by government action. As a result, citizens tend not to contact their representative save for personal favors intercession on a likewise, personal matter, though this is not always the case.

The capacity of HoR members themselves varies, though tending to be weak. While their gender distribution may not be bad given the character of the society in which they work, their efforts are atomised on account of a government-driven legal framework designed to prevent the emergence of coordinated and cohesive groups expressing views around a core socio-political objective.

The scope of operation of the HoR itself, mollycoddled by a control-obsessed government means that its legal or informal capacity to scrutinize or hold government to account is diminished to the point of near-irrelevance.

In terms of HoR-government engagement, the removal of Mohamed al-Husseini and his forced exile neatly expresses the government's view of the HoR: it is annoying and its members must be silenced when the government deems it necessary.

The lack of cohesive political alliances or blocs in the HoR - a situation the government has sought since national unrest in 2011 - weakens the collective voice and leverage of the HoR. The moral authority of a larger socio-political alliance backing HoR decisions far exceeds the atomized will of individual HoR members and singular initiatives undertaken by sole HoR members, which tend to fail to attract popular support.

Genuine political reform is needed. While this project captured perhaps a quarter to a third of popular opinion, the government disregards its findings at Bahrain's peril. If the object of the government is the grinding down of the citizenry, the authorities can likely achieve this objective. The short-run cost may be negligible but the long term cost looks set to be the cycle of popular unrest which the state has seen over 40 years. Even now, amongst those who engaged with the project indicated their personal exasperation with the state of political engagement in Bahrain.

Findings in Relation to the Character and Conduct of Government

This project explored and sought to discover whether and to what degree the government and/or its agencies engaged with citizens, including civil society, in the development of

law or practice prior to the enactment of directives or law. SALAM DHR sought this information in order to assess the character in which the government ensured the right of citizens to participate in public affairs.

SALAM DHR did not find any such engagement of a meaningful or enduring nature.

Under current legislation, the ruler - King Hamad - appoints, by way of decree, the Council of Ministers, or Cabinet, comprising the most important government ministers, It is the chief executive body of the Government of Bahrain (GoB), and possesses legislative powers. At the time of writing, 23 ministers compose the Council of Ministers. The Crown Prince, Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, currently fills the role of Prime Minister. He and the Deputy Prime Minister, Shaikh Khalid bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, lead its work.

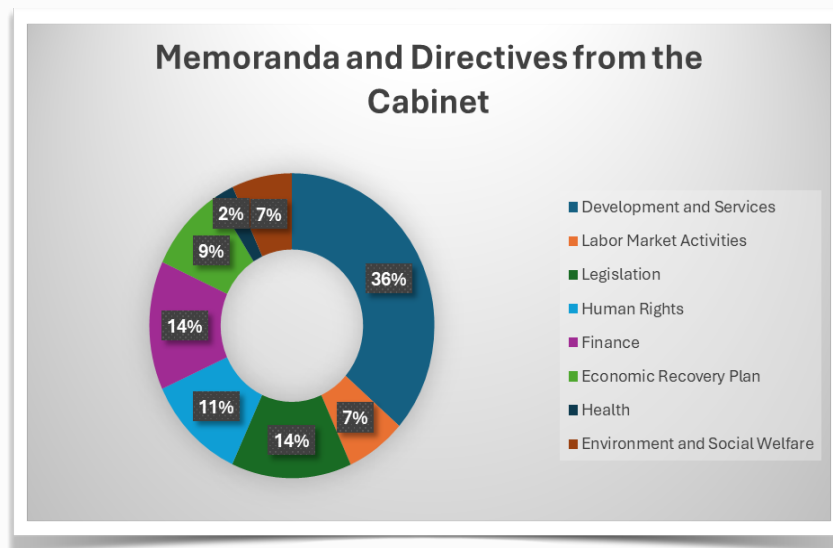


Neither law nor practice provide any clarity as to how government decisions account or provide for citizens' input. Memos and directives were most commonly recorded as the result of Prime Minister's or the King's wishes, rather than consensus from the NA.

From October 2023-May 2024 the SALAM DHR team monitored the output of the official, weekly meetings of Bahrain's Cabinet via the official website of the Government of Bahrain insofar as the output related to issues related to those addressed in the survey (see above), or, more generally, matters in which citizens' participation in public affairs could have been an essential component. With this limitation in mind, during the

monitoring period, the King issued five "directives". Such directives are laws that enjoy instant implementation and do not require HoR or Shura Council scrutiny or approval.

In the context of the same conceptual limitation, the Cabinet issued a total number of 14 directives and 37 memoranda, of which twelve memoranda and five directives addressed Development and Services, by far the largest amount. These decisions address better housing services;⁴⁴ road and sewage maintenance;⁴⁵ improving the quality; and making government services more efficient.⁴⁶



The second largest area of Cabinet work comprised amending existing legislation: it issued six memoranda, three draft decisions and three draft decrees, which primarily focused on bureaucratic reforms, although notable exceptions included amendments to housing regulation to include housing benefits for divorced, abandoned, or widowed women without children, or orphaned single women, where they added an amendment allowing them to calculate their monthly incomes and other allowances,⁴⁷ and a draft decree and decision on environmental protection.⁴⁸

44 Bahraini Cabinet Meeting, "Memo from the Ministerial Committee for Financial, Economic, and Fiscal Balance Affairs", 13 November 2023.

45 Bahraini Cabinet Meeting, "Memo from the Ministerial Committee for Projects and Infrastructure", 22 January 2024.

46 Bahraini Cabinet Meeting, "Memo from the Coordinating Committee Regarding the Proposal to Develop 500 Government Services as Part of Initiatives to Improve Government Services, and the Formation of a Working Team in Each Government Entity to Implement the Development Proposals, Aiming to Enhance their Quality and Efficiency", 11 December, 2023.

47 Bahraini Cabinet Meeting, "Memo From the Legal and Legislative Affairs Committee Regarding a Draft Decision to Amend the Housing Regulation Decision", 20 November 2023.

48 Bahraini Cabinet Meeting, "Draft Decree on the Ratification of the Middle East Green Initiative Charter", 20 November, 2023; Bahraini Cabinet Meeting, "Several Decisions Supporting the Kingdom of Bahrain's Efforts in Protecting Marine Resources and Preserving Fish Stocks" 20 March 2024.

Other, planned legislation appeared to be delayed or ignored: amendments to the Press Law, insofar as it relates to The National Human Rights Plan (2022-2026) was meant to be completed by the Cabinet between 2023-2024, but no public announcement was made or commentary given on its progress during the monitoring period.⁴⁹

Instead of citizens participating in public affairs by way of formal consultation in the development of law and practice, SALAM DHR recorded seven instances in which the Cabinet enacted memos, legislation, and directions at the instruction of the King and 14 instances at the instruction of the Prince and Prime Minister. The Prince and Prime Minister, Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, was also mentioned as the head of numerous committee meetings and had the final say in most decisions made by the Cabinet.

SALAM DHR found no instances where the HoR or its members were mentioned in the process of developing legislation or memoranda and the King and Crown Prince were most likely to be credited as both directors of policy and the final decision makers in official communications, providing them with a more authoritative and efficient framing than those of elected officials.

⁴⁹ Bahrain Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The National Human Rights Plan (2022-2023)", <https://www.mofa.gov.bh/en/national-plan-2022-2026#:~:text=On%203%20April%202023%2C%20during,the%20reformation%20project%20of%20His>, (Last Accessed: 23 August 2024).

Findings in Relation to The Content and Character of News Platforms and Social Media

Government-licensed or Owned News Platforms

Over the course of the project period, SALAM DHR systematically reviewed the government-licensed [al-Bilad](#) and [al-Ayyam](#) (Arabic) news platforms while also drawing on [al-Watan](#). We did so in order to assess their content in respect to reflecting and engaging with public opinion, relations with and perceptions of the HoR and in relation to their assessment of government policy and conduct.

SALAM DHR did not review government owned or licensed English-language news platforms in Bahrain since we found their content consistently disconnected from public discourse. These platforms did not address or access, in any meaningful way, the executive or legislative authorities.

The al-Watan platform tends to avoid critical or evaluative discussions regarding the work of the HoR and the government. Its laudatory coverage consistently praised and exaggerated government policy and accomplishments, in some cases contradicting documented developments on the ground. It occasionally wrote articles on the HoR that SALAM DHM researchers assessed as relevant but its coverage of the HoR was sparse, inaccurate and did not merit systematic assessment.

In a political lite media context, the al-Ayam platform contained less than five critical assessments of HoR and government policy in the monitoring period, three of which were by Osama al-Majid. The discourse of al-Bilad, too, appeared to blame the HoR and its members for social ills rather than the GoB: its apparent place in government-licensed media did not hold it in much esteem. The government closed the last independent news platform, al-Wasat, in 2017.⁵⁰

50 Human Rights Watch, "Bahrain: Only Independent Newspaper Shut Down", 18 June 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/18/bahrain-only-independent-newspaper-shut-down>, accessed 15 September 2024.

Each of the news platforms under review published critical assessments of the conduct of HoR members and their work.

Haifa Adwan, writing in al-Watan on 5 October 2023, urged HoR members to "activate their parliamentary tools, focus on citizens' economic and living conditions, and review media laws" in a piece entitled "On the Thresholds of the Second Session".⁵¹

Osama al-Majed, in several articles in al-Bilad, criticized HoR members and their performance.⁵² He accused members of arriving late to HoR sessions and outright absence after prayers, calling for penalties to be levied against them. He highlighted changes in members' behavior upon reaching parliament, their perceived self-centeredness, and neglect of parliamentary duties while pursuing their own interests and HoR linked benefits.⁵³ He also criticized their weak legislative proposals and lack of familiarity with Bahraini law. In another, he emphasized the need to reconsider the situation of retirees and review their benefits, considering their living conditions similar to those of working citizens. In one article, Osama al-Majed defended government policies and their joining of the prosperity alliance, advocating for greater coordination or partnership between the HoR and the GoB. He concluded another article by critiquing parliamentarians, suggesting a need for change.

Al-Bilad also featured the following pieces:

51 Al-Watan news, Haifa Adwan, "On the Thresholds of the Second Session", 5 October 2023, <https://alwatannews.net/Opinion/article/1085580/%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B9%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A>, accessed 16 September 2024.

صحيفة الوطن، هيفاء عدوان، بعنوان: على أبواب دور الانتعاش الثاني، 5 تشرين الأول 2023، تاريخ الدخول 16 سبتمبر 2024

52 Al-Bilad press, Osama al Majed, "Do not underestimate the achievements of any hardworking minister" , 15 February 2024, <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5602/columns/849856.html>, accessed 17 September 2024.

تاريخ 15 فبراير 2024، جريدة البلاد، أسامة الماجد، "لا تقلل من إنجازات أي وزير مجتهد"، 15 فبراير 2024، الدخول 17 سبتمبر 2024.

53 Al-Bilad press, Osama al Majed, "Bahrainization Committee and the frankness of MP Al-Aliwi", 5 March 2024, <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5621/columns/852516.html>, accessed 17 September 2024.

جريدة البلاد، أسامة الماجد، "لجنة بحرنة الوظائف وصراحة النائب العليوي"، 5 مارس 2024، تاريخ الدخول 17 سبتمبر 2024.

- On 2 April 2024, Osama Mehren, addressed recurring tensions and heated debates in parliament, deriding how these conflicts contrast with citizen expectations;⁵⁴
- On 21 December 2023, Ibrahim al-Naham wrote of HoR members favoring their district's children and using their proximity to ministers for employment, neglecting their general electorate;
- On 28 March 2024, Zuhair Tawfiqi, criticized HoR members for wasting time on personal disputes and private matters of on issues of importance to citizens;⁵⁵
- On 4 November 2023, Abdulaziz al-Joudar criticized HoR members' performance, noting their lack of participation in the legislative process; oversight, and questioning of ministers. He stated that members' performance falls short of voters' expectations, highlighting their focus on peripheral matters;⁵⁶
- On 10 December 2023 and 16 January 2024, Fared Ahmed Hassan, encouraged cooperation between the HoR and the government for the citizens' benefit, offering examples in articles;
- On 4 March 2024, Mohammed al-Mahfouz criticized both HoR members and the government for failing to enact legislative projects benefiting retirees under current conditions. He held the government partly responsible for rejecting proposals aimed at improving retirees' lives.⁵⁷

54 Albilad press, Osama Al Mheren, 2 April 2024, <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5649/columns/856098.html>, accessed 17 September 2024.

تاريخ الدخول 17 سبتمبر 2024، [جريدة البلاد، أسامة مهران، نواب "والله الغني"، 2 أبريل 2024](https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5649/columns/856098.html).

55 Albilad press, Zuheir Tawfiqi, "Bahrain does not deserve this!", 28 March, 2024, <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5644/columns/855485.html>, accessed 17 September 2024.

تاريخ الدخول 17 سبتمبر 2024، [جريدة البلاد، زهير توفيق، "البحرين ما تستاهل!"، 28 مارس 2024](https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5644/columns/855485.html).

56 Al-Bilad press, Abdulaziz al Joudar, 4 November 2023, "Silent MPs", <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2023/5499/columns/834654.html>, accessed on 17 September 2024.

تاريخ الدخول 17 سبتمبر 2024، ["جريدة البلاد، عبدالعزيز الجودر، 4 نوفمبر، "النواب الصامتون"](https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2023/5499/columns/834654.html).

57 Al-Bilad press, Mohammed Mahfouz, "Marginalized and forgotten", 4 March 2024, <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5557/columns/843399.html>, accessed on 17 September 2024.

تاريخ الدخول 17 سبتمبر 2024، [جريدة البلاد، محمد محفوظ، "مهمشون ومنسيون"، 4 مارس 2024](https://www.albiladpress.com/news/2024/5557/columns/843399.html).

Al-Bilad writer Abbas al-Omani published at least five critical assessments of the HoR and its members:

1. 9 December 9, 2023 - HoR members are self-important and their behavior towards the HoR Speaker is akin to students towards a teacher;
2. 16 December 16, 2023 - Representatives are caught between the government and the Shura Council's pressures, they lack a unified stance, and ignore numerous national concerns requiring strategic thought to ensure sustainable solutions that benefit people's needs;
3. 2 March 2024 - Reform is needed to ensure the improved operation of the HoR, including in respect to their use of inappropriate language;
4. 16 March 2024 - HoR members are ignorant of parliamentary and investigative mechanisms and are unable to carry such tasks effectively;
5. 30 March 2024 - HoR members have an exaggerated sense of self-importance [sic]; and an objective evaluation and assessment of the HoR's work is needed.

Social Media

Bahrainis, or those who assert a connection to Bahrain by dint of their commentary, even where the user name may be false, had marginally freer spaces for dissent in respect to HoR and government conduct on social media. With respect to Instagram and those accounts - whether institutional or personal - that continue to have a presence in Bahrain, critical comments were frequently removed or comments disabled by account administrators. Individuals active a decade ago in respect to political and human rights have generally moderated their own views so as to not aggravate conditions under which they were released from prison.

A wide range of highly critical content continued to be posted on X (Twitter), in part since it is also a platform on which Bahrainis outside the country, linked to opponents of the government, can comment. Such content tends to target the government and King. SALAM DHR was not able to assess whether or how this wide range of content had a bearing on political discourse in the country and if so, to what degree or in what way.

Those with dissenting opinions also used the semi-closed space of WhatsApp to express criticism and calls for political change. For security reasons, details of the writers and the issues about which they complained must be kept confidential. On occasion, the administrators of these groups warn members to temper their criticisms and to use milder terms to describe their grievances, out of concern that the authorities may be able to surveil all means of communication.

Imitation of project work: the growing normalization of the democratization project in Bahrain

Even prior to the formal launch of the report and project advocacy, project activities have already created "imitations" that emulate the purpose of the project.

Currently independent journalist, Mohammed al-'Alawi worked at the independent newspaper al-Wasat before the Bahraini authorities arbitrarily [closed](#) it in 2017. On the 15 September [International Day of Democracy](#), the Instagram site of the journalist, [Bahrain Sky](#) carried a [thread](#), asking his 231 thousand followers: "What do Bahrainis say about their parliament, in terms of powers and benefits?!"

This topic had not been widely discussed on Bahraini social media before, marking a precedent and confirming the noticeable development and lack of fear in the Bahraini civic space as citizens increasingly and openly criticize HoR and members' performance and demanding accountability. The thread received 535 comments and 460 likes at the time of writing, most of which criticized the parliament with sarcasm and mockery. As a snapshot, some of these comments were (real or original names used as on the original post):

Salman Al-Ali: "The harm [of the HoR] is greater than the benefit!"

Mohammed Rustum: "We only got decisions against the citizen, taxes from one side and endless calamities... but it's a waste of money for nothing, only HoR members' salaries and privileges, if they were spent on the citizen, it would have been better, by God."

Fatima Darwish: "The truth must be said. Four years ago, our representative Ammar Qambar did not neglect us, frankly, but now we have only seen our representative on the day he won. We call him and he does not answer. We do not want anything from you, just fair jobs for our children!"

Mohammed Saleh: "Members entering the House of Representatives is like going to war without weapons."

Youssef Mohammed: "From the beginning until now, they did not represent the people, but rather themselves and their interests, and their pensions are from the people."

Youssef Al-Sitrawi: "HoR members are the beneficiaries, they take salaries from the retirement fund and they are not participating in it with a penny.meaning their salaries are questionable because they come from the poor's sustenance."

Majid Al Majid: "The problem is not in the HoR, the problem is in those who control the parliament and the Shura Council."

Sayed Ali Hussein: "Comments should be read by the Speaker of the Council in the next session (Proposal of desire)."

On Media Sources and Relationships Between the People, Legislature and Executive

Government-licensed news platforms carried, in the monitoring period, an insignificant quantity of critical assessment of the HoR and, even less, of the government and King. As detailed in scores of international human rights organizations' reports and that of UN human rights bodies, the authorities continue to repress expression, association, and assembly.

SALAM DHR researchers found that this context eroded faith and trust in government and many of its agencies, including the wholly-appointed Shura Council. The HoR has become an easy proxy for popular discontent, to the small extent it can be expressed on the government-licensed news platforms.

Nevertheless, abstracting the work that appeared in al-Bilad (see above), the casual blame of the HoR and its members cited very the characteristics sought be the government to ensure its tertiary standing: lack of unified political associations or groups, an atomized and disparate character of often young and inexperienced HoR members whose position is predicated on state largesse.

Although al-Bilad columnists did place some criticism on the government (alongside a constant refrain of praise for the King) over issues such as social benefits, this was generally framed as a collective failure shared with the HoR. Such narratives channeled public frustration, but also risked further undermining Bahrain's tentative experiment with elections and its HoR by condemning the conduct of its members in the absence of historical context of the current reality: the power imbalance, militant exclusion of peaceful political groups and specific figures in previous years, and the blanket restrictions on the exercise of fundamental rights to expression, association and assembly.

Despite ample criticism of the HoR and its members in tens of shared X (Twitter) groups, SALAM DHR has also found what can only be termed a (non-quantifiable) "significant number" of Bahrainis who still believe that the HoR can act as the "voice of the people", if it is provided with the necessary tools. Like the findings of the survey, most criticism of the HoR comes from frustration with the state of democracy in Bahraini, rather than disillusionment with democracy itself.

Summary

Contemporaneous Events

Contemporaneous events, notably in the region, informed socio-political discourse in Bahrain. With respect to a citizens' participation in public life, many thousands of Bahrainis demonstrated, from October 2023 and into mid-2024, in relation to contemporaneous events in Gaza and, in August and September, in relation to Lebanon. The GoB has formal relations with Israel. A summary of such events are summarized, chronologically, in the table below:

SALAM DHR - Contemporaneous events		
Date	Event	Impact in Bahrain / on project objectives
07.10.2023	Incursion by Hamas militants into Israel & seizure of Israeli nationals	<p>Resulted in weeks of widespread, routine and significant demonstrations, impacting on government behavior. The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Bahrain and Israel in 2020, remain contentious. An estimated 76% of Bahrainis held a negative opinion of normalization prior to the war between Israel and Hamas.</p> <p>Low to mid-intensity protests in solidarity with Palestinians and against normalization began almost immediately following the attacks on October 7th and have remained constant throughout the year.</p>
02.11.2023	Israeli Ambassador to Bahrain, Eitan Na'eh, recalled.	This did not appear to be the result of parliamentary pressure, however, but from the "politics of the street".
To around 15.12.2023	GoB arrests of scores in connection with Gaza-related gatherings	<p>On 22 December 2023, Human Rights Watch reported that by 15 December 2023, the GoB had "arrested and harassed scores of participants in pro-Palestine protests across the country, including children as well as people who engaged in online pro-Palestine advocacy, since October 2023". Those detained included long time activist and politician, Ebrahim Sharif.</p> <p>The cross and multi-community engagement over Gaza resulted in close scrutiny of GoB conduct.</p>
08.04.2024	<p>GoB initiated a significant prisoner release on the occasion of 'Eid al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan.</p> <p>1,584 prisoners reportedly scheduled to be released.</p>	<p>The Guardian newspaper termed the release "the biggest royal pardon since the 2011 Arab spring uprising."</p> <p>Around 600 political prisoners reportedly, including those on death row, remain in detention following unfair trials held in previous years, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a Danish-Bahraini human rights defender serving a life sentence in Bahrain for peaceful human rights work and Hassan Mushaima, head of an opposition group, Al-Haq.</p>

04-06.20 24	A campaign of peaceful demonstrations occurs to pressure Bahraini authorities to release prisoners of conscience.	Following the release of 1,584 prisoners, the families of those still incarcerated undertook a series of sit-ins and other public action in order to induce the GoB to release their family members. This included the peaceful sit-ins, composed primarily of women and children, in front of police stations, Jau Central Prison, and the office of the NIHRB.
16.07.202 4	'Ashoura - demonstrations in Bahrain	Numerous travel bans, summons, and arrests occur during annual 'Ashoura demonstrations. Unlike previous years, a high proportion of Shi'a clerics and reciters were summoned, arrested, and or subjected to travel bans. Public commentary on Gaza and criticism of normalized relations between Bahrain and Israel from Shi'a figures appeared to be one of the main concerns from authorities.
30.04.20 24	Unprecedented House of Representatives members' expression of dissent / criticism of government conduct	See section on HoR, above
07.2024	Mohamed al-Hossaini expelled	See above

Conclusion and Recommendations

The government continues to impose restrictions on the exercise of fundamental rights to peaceful expression, association, and assembly that are inconsistent with its international obligations. Specific laws restrict who can stand for office and vote; how the HoR is, in practice, configured, the rules under which it operates and the limited scope of power it wields. This socio-political, legal, and power context discourages and chills participation in public affairs. It serves to elevate - at least in discourse - the government and ruling house, about whom members of the HoR and members of the executive itself refer to in deferential, appearing to confer upon the Al Khalifa "house" a quality of being beyond reproach. This environment has long created a context of a securitized state and it prevents Bahrain from being a democratic, representative state. It arguably creates the conditions for other human rights violations such as arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, and ill treatment in custody.

The government appears to use the HoR as the recipient of public opprobrium: the expression of public discontent, whether at majalis or in government-licensed media, can be and is often directed towards the HoR and its members rather than towards the government, the body responsible for the key economic decisions that impact on peoples' lives. Discourse that delegitimizes the HoR and its members weakens Bahrain's adherence to Article 25 of the ICCPR as well as other human rights obligations relating to expression, association, and assembly.

What is at stake?

This study revealed deep and widely-felt disenchantment with the current parliamentary system; partial or total disengagement from politics and the risk of this introducing, strengthening and normalizing notions of non-democratic and anti-democratic practice, presented as "resistance". Under the current circumstances, some of those able to engage in public life in Bahrain are in a holding pattern, fearful they will lose what leverage or

voice they believe themselves to have. On the basis of evidence in this study, this stasis, marked by official intransigence, has engendered in hundreds of ordinary Bahrainis, frustration and pessimism about the future of democracy in the country.

At the same time, while few in number and weak of voice, participants in this study also expressed hope: they have not lost faith in the democratic process; there is - or can be - a strong desire to engage in peaceful democratic reform in Bahrain, many ardently believe that political reform is both possible and urgently needed in the country. This means that channels for dialogue and accountability remain open, but they require new, collective efforts - as embodied in the recommendations below -to enlarge the space in which citizens can participate in public life

This report and the initiative to advance democracy in Bahrain is intended to constitute constructive recommendations and to make the "hope that is achievable" one that is achieved. For that reason, while the options for specific recommendations are numerous, SALAM DHR sets out below ones that we assess are achievable in respect to the targets cited, which can bring a positive change to all Bahrainis.

To the Government of Bahrain

SALAM DHR calls on the GoB to enact as many of the recommendations made by United Nations' human rights treaty bodies, the Universal Periodic Review and Special Procedures as reasonably possible. In particular, as repeatedly recommended by scores of international human rights bodies, repeal or amend the Political Rights Law of 2018 to allow greater, structural participation in participatory democracy in line with Bahrain's international human rights obligations and to enable experienced political figures to take part in the political process.

In the course of 2025 and 2026, we urge the ruler of Bahrain and his office; the Prime Minister and Crown Prince and other government members to:

1. Declare, publicly and repeatedly, the importance of Bahrain's elected House of Representatives and urge citizens to engage with their local representatives,

- whether via their offices or majalis, to convey their concerns, wishes and aspirations;
2. Engage with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the European Union and its member states, international political movements (such as the Liberal International, Socialist International and International Democracy Union; or the US-linked International Republican Institute or the National Democratic Institute) in order to develop institutional knowledge about best international practice in relation to parliamentary process and practice; and
 3. As a result of such open and transparent consultation, by the end of 2025, redraft legal provisions governing the operation of the HoR, including its powers and scope of scrutiny;
 4. Enact legislation in 2025 to protect the expression of elected HoR members in relation to matters raised in the chamber and in connection with their role as elected representatives of the Bahraini people: peaceful criticism of government policy by elected representatives, notably in the HoR, should never result in punitive action by the government or its agents, in line with international best practice;
 5. In collaboration with state and intergovernmental partners such as the European Union's External Action Service and/or agencies of the United Nations; and civil society organizations (CSOs), to stage a national majlis, no later than one year before the end of year general election in 2026, to facilitate citizens' participation in public life, on issues such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); the National Human Rights Action Plan and the UPR - to cite emblematic issues - in order to strengthen (tripartite) familiarity and common purpose of CSO representatives; HoR representatives and government officials;
 6. Empower civil society, including by amending or repealing provisions by which the government is empowered to intervene in the choice of chairpersons and board members of CSOs and by constituting a formal consultation with the CSO sector, including for the purpose of informing the government of CSO sector concerns, and those of their members;
 7. Publicly seek to reintegrate into society, through positive and proactive social policy, those released from prison in the course of 2024, notably by facilitating the prompt issue - that is, prior to the normal two year window - of "good conduct certificates" that will enable holders to access the job market without arousing the suspicion of a prospective employer and publicly commit to ensuring that they will also possess voting rights, an

8. Restore, before the end of 2024, Bahraini citizenship to former HoR member Mohammed al-Husseini and allow him to return to Bahrain, where his family resides, and review, by 1 June 2025, all other cases in which the authorities have stripped citizenship from Bahrainis, bearing in mind international human rights law and practice and decades of international opprobrium over this practice.

To the House of Representatives (HoR); its members and leadership

1. Establish a body within the HoR to examine and re-assess the the legal position of the body; its powers; rules of operation; the character of its composition and manner of election, in order to present to government, by 1 June 2025, suggestions for concrete legal reform aimed at strengthening the chamber and making it a more effective representative of the people of Bahrain;
2. In line with recommendations to the government (see above), seek engagement with international partners and counterparts (viz., via the IPU) in order to better inform HoR members in relation to international standards in relation to the scope of power and operation of elected houses and, in general terms, international best practice;
3. Establish, possibly in consultation with international counterparts (viz., IPU members) guidelines for the frequency and character of meetings of HoR members with their constituents, and establish specific times in the HoR when members will relay and collate the findings of their engagements with citizen-constituents;
4. Work to ensure that HoR members are trained in parliamentary and legislative mechanisms that can be used for effective law making and accountability in the HoR; and
5. Explore CSO and citizen involvement policy development and government oversight through structured, transparent consultation;
6. Create a mentorship function comprised of former HoR members willing to engage with newly or recently elected members, so as to create institutional memory and continuity on HoR work and increase the capacity of newer members;

To government-licensed and social media

SALAM DHR recognises that media professionals can only operate under a legislative and regulatory framework established by the government. Above, SALAM DHR urges the authorities to amend provisions relating to expression, including the print, online and other media. In the absence of such reform before 2026, SALAM DHR urges that the media sector:

1. Push at the boundaries of current 'red lines' and 'accepted' expression in order to convey the views of readers and enable citizens of Bahrain to participate in public affairs by way of expression in print, online and in person;
2. Promote the diversification of government-licensed media, enabling a great plurality of viewpoints; and
3. Consider the development of open and transparent coverage of the majalis of HoR members in order to promote citizens' participation in public affairs and to normalize public debate of issues of popular concern.

To members of Bahrain's existing CSO sector

SALAM DHR recognises that the legal framework for CSOs does not permit or facilitate their independence or engagement in public affairs and that reform in this regard is unexpected before 2026. Above, SALAM DHR urges the authorities to amend provisions relating to association, including in relation to the CSO sector, as repeatedly called for by, inter alia, UN human rights bodies and partner states in the UPR process. Accordingly, recommendations below relate to the situation as it is now.

SALAM DHR calls on members of the CSO sector to:

1. Create a single coordinating or shared body aimed at conveying to the HoR and government, sectoral recommendations and 'asks', such as in relation to human rights;

2. Consider inviting, by June 2025, international CSO partners to conduct a mission to Bahrain, in order to assess the state of their counterparts;
3. Coordinate, with a view to establishing, before 1 January 2026, an open and transparent body charged with reviewing laws and practices regarding the regulation of the CSO sector, in order to make positive recommendations to the HoR and government;
4. Engage with the HoR on an individual or sectoral basis in order to provide regular briefings to HoR members regarding CSO and members' concerns and wishes, in order to promote citizen participation in public affairs
5. Undertake, by 1 June 2025, an awareness-raising campaign aimed at the Bahraini public, as to the legal and procedural regime under which the CSO sector operates and the limitations that imposes on the opportunity for citizens to participate in public affairs; and
6. By the end of 2025, undertake an awareness-raising campaign in relation to the functions and duties of elected representatives and what citizens can expect them to do.

To intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as the IPU, EU, and non-human rights UN bodies and agencies; and international political associations

The GoB continues to have a sensitive relationship with IGOs and casts engagement with them in a good light when it is demonstrably in their interest to do so. No change to government conduct or character is expected before 2026 and so, as above, the following few recommendations address the situation as it is at the time of writing.

SALAM DHR calls on:

1. The IPU to engage with the leadership of the HoR in order to foster connections with other IPU members, with a view to developing, by the end of 2025, a framework for best practice by individual HoR members, in line with corollary efforts set out in this report;

2. The External Action Service of the EU (EEAS) to strengthen relationships with human rights advocates and defenders; pro-democracy, pro-reform activists and organizations in Bahrain, in line with EU policy;
3. The EEAS to persuade the GoB to increase the representative power of the HoR, enabling a more effective and impactful legislative branch of government and empowering citizen participation in public affairs;
4. UN and EU agencies to invest in Bahrain's CSO sector and individual organization, to enable and empower them to monitor the HoR and GoB with a view to advancing democracy and deepening citizen participation in public affairs;
5. International political movements such as the Liberal International, Socialist International, and International Democracy Union; or the US-linked International Republican Institute or the National Democratic Institute to engage with the HoR and its members in order to develop institutional knowledge about best international practice in relation to parliamentary process and practice, alongside corollary efforts cited above.

To bilateral, state partners of the GoB

SALAM DHR calls on partner governments of the GoB to:

1. Encourage the government to engage in an objectively recognisable manner with UN human rights mechanisms, notably its treaty bodies, with a view to improving human rights standards for all in Bahrain;
2. Persuade the GoB to engage in a spirit of transparency and good will, with its domestic CSO sector; international CSOs that seek to assist all Bahrainis, in developing a framework for the conduct for a manifestly democratic general election in 2026, including by pro-actively engaging with regional and international election experts, including from the CSO sector.



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