

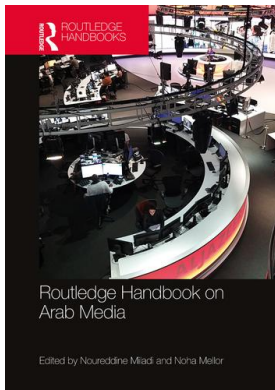
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### **Media in Bahrain – a contested sphere**

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# 3

## MEDIA IN BAHRAIN – A CONTESTED SPHERE

*Magdalena Karolak*

### Introduction

With a territory of roughly 770 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 1.2 million inhabitants, Bahrain is the smallest country in the Middle East and North Africa. It is an island nation scattered over roughly 30 islands, most of them now artificially interconnected. Its population is diverse and subject to global migratory patterns. As of 2019, it comprises more than 50% of expatriates, with the majority coming from the Indian subcontinent. Native Bahrainis are heterogeneous. The community is divided among several superimposed cleavages: tribal or community-based organization, Arab or Persian background, Sunni or Shi'a denomination, as well as patterns of settlement, namely, city or village. Khuri (1980) enumerated the following social groups: tribal Sunnis, rural Arab Shi'as (*Baharna*), urban Sunnis of Persian origin (*Hawala*), urban Sunnis of nontribal Arab origin (*Najdi*), and urban Shi'as of Arab origin. There are also more recent Persian Shi'a migrants (*Ajam*). The local civil society has experienced remarkable levels of activism since Bahrainis enjoy a high level of educational attainment. Bahrain was the seat of ancient civilizations; in modern times, it became independent from Britain only recently, in 1971. In 2002, Bahrain was proclaimed a constitutional monarchy. Despite its limited land and population size, the recent history of the country and the complex social fabric make it an interesting case to study, among others, the development of mass communication in the region.

This chapter aims at analyzing the evolution of the media sector, looking at the print press, radio, television, and social media. While the main focus of the study is the last 60 years, a historical background is necessary to understand the development of each type of media.

The growth of media in Bahrain can be divided into three periods. The first one encompasses the emergence of media during the period of colonial rule until proclaiming independence in 1971. Subsequently, Bahrain experienced maturing of the media sector but within the constraints of the authoritarian regime until 1999. At the turn of the 21st century, Bahrain witnessed important political reforms that brought about liberalization, among others, of the media sector and market, and consequently, the expansive growth of the social media and satellite channels. Following this chronological order, the study will highlight the major developments in mass communication based on data gathered through the literature review.

## Historical background

To begin with, the role of the social context in the development of media should be explained. Literacy is, for instance, primordial for the growth of printed press, and access to technology is necessary for the emergence of radio, television, and the Internet. Here, it is important to highlight that Bahrain has the oldest public education system in the Arabian Gulf, and the literacy rates are among the highest in the Arab world (Nydell, 2002: 2). Established for the first time in 1919, Bahraini schools have provided free public education on the elementary level for male students and since 1928; they included female students too. Secondary education was initiated in 1936 for boys and in 1951 for girls. In the late 1960s, Bahrain experienced the establishment of its first institutions of tertiary education. Despite the country having the earliest education system in the Arabian Gulf region, which entails increased literacy rates, the establishment of print media in Bahrain was relatively belated. Neighboring Saudi Arabia witnessed the emergence of its first newspapers in the 1920s, while Bahrainis had to wait till 1939 to see the first print edition of a local newspaper, *Jaridat Al Bahrain*, published in Arabic. Thus, the progress of media in Bahrain should be understood within the historical period and the political context that influenced technological development, regulatory frameworks, and audience needs over time.

The initial development of media was impacted by the British colonial presence and the discovery of oil. Firstly, the development of the press was hindered by the colonial British rule that lasted till 1971. *Jaridat Al Bahrain* had a short-lived success being a private venture of Abdallah Al Zaid. His printing press faced many economic challenges during the WWII period, such as shortages of paper, and the newspaper ceased with his death in 1944 (Al Khatir, 2014: 383). Also, the technology used for printing was very primitive. Subsequently, the colonial rulers thwarted the efforts to establish other, as many as 10, national Arabic newspapers in the decades of the 1930s–1960s (Jawad, 2001: 169). The reasons were due to the anti-colonial and nationalist stance of these publications, which prompted the colonial power to curtail the spread of ideas challenging its vital interests in the region (Al Shaikh and Campbell, 2013: 156). Even if some Arabic newspapers managed to emerge over the years, the anti-colonial riots of 1956 led to their closure. With the colonial rule nearing its end, three Arabic weeklies were established, namely *Al Aduwa* in 1965, *Sada al-Ushbu'a* in 1969, and *Al Mujtama al-Jadid* in 1970 (Rugh, 2004: 60). They presented topics of general interest and continued their print into the years of Bahrain's independence.

Nonetheless, the colonial presence gave a boost to the development of the English language press. The English language was introduced in the country, and the growing presence of expatriates encouraged the establishment of English language media. The trend was exacerbated since the 1930s, as the Bahraini society was gradually transformed by the discovery of oil and the shift to an oil-dependent economy. Oil revenues furthered the rapid development of the country, with the creation of modern industries and a vast range of services, exacerbating the demand for labor. In the 1930s, Bahraini society hardly had enough of a workforce to warrant the need for growth. Foreigners filled various occupations, from manual labor to highly qualified professional jobs, and their numbers have continued growing. According to Bahrain Open Data Portal, the number of native Bahrainis constituted more than 82% of the population back in 1971, but the figure was reduced to 68% in 1981, 62% in 2011, and only 46% in 2016.

The increase in foreign workers made English the lingua franca of Bahrain. Since the time of colonial rule, English-language publications were in demand, providing information to the ever-growing population of foreigners who did not master Arabic and relied primarily on English-language media for information. The impact of the connection between the presence of the

colonial power and the discovery of oil on media development is visible in the establishment of the first English-language newspaper, *The Islander*, in 1954. It was published by Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO). While Bahrain was a British protectorate, BAPCO was created by the American company Standard Oil (Commins, 2012: 142). BAPCO employed American and British professionals in the managerial and higher technical cadre, and since the 1930s it began to import large numbers of Indian skilled and semi-skilled workers to complement its workforce (Kumar, 2016: 76). *The Islander* was a weekly till 1956 when it was converted into a daily. Until its last edition in 1969, *The Islander* reported local news and other BAPCO-related information (Abdulla, 2004). In the year it ceased operations, three new English-language newspapers were launched. Subsequently, the first successful commercial English-language newspaper, *The Gulf Mirror*, saw the light of the day on 3 January 1971. It was published as a weekly, initially on Sundays, and later Thursdays. It included local news, business, and sports coverage. The editorial team was led by a Briton, Andrew Trimbee (Trimbee, 2009).

Along with the development of the print press, radio broadcasting was initiated in the Middle East by the British at the onset of WWII. As the war front expanded, both sides of the conflict strived to reach audiences in the Middle East to gather support for their cause. To begin with, the British started broadcasting in the Arabic language from London; but to better compete with the German wavelengths, in November 1940, they established the Bahrain Broadcasting Station. Ulaby (2010: 117) notes that its program included Koranic recitations, poetry recitations, music performances, and news favorable to the British. The station was closed after the end of the war in 1945. A governmental radio station opened in Bahrain only 10 years later broadcasting in Arabic. Nonetheless, broadcasts in Arabic from Cairo would reach Bahrain, and after the Egyptian Revolution in 1952, Egyptian wavelengths would spread the Arab nationalist message, which became popular among Bahrainis, fueling anti-British sentiment (Fuccaro, 2009: 182). The beginnings of radio had an important impact on the society as listening to the broadcasts became a major pastime for Bahrainis. Radio devices were available on the market before 1940, but the majority of Bahrainis would not have a personal set. Consequently, large audiences would gather in coffee shops to listen or in the homes of prominent local personalities who had a radio set and guests would visit according to the radio transmission timings (Fuccaro, 2009: 182). Radio brought people together and the topics influenced these gatherings, leading to debates on social and political topics. Ultimately, radio broadcasts fueled with nationalism and the growing social and economic grievances among Bahrainis led to the emergence of anti-British and anti-government movements that culminated in the riots of 1956 (Fuccaro, 2009: 184).

All in all, the beginnings of media in Bahrain were heavily influenced by the British presence. The colonial rulers could limit the circulation of unfavorable ideologies to a certain extent, which explains the slow progress of the local Arabic press. They allowed, however, English-language publications necessary to fulfill the needs of the growing class of expatriates; and the importance of the English language press only continued to grow after 1971 linked to the influx of foreigners to Bahrain. The constraints to the media imposed under the British rule resurfaced, however, in another form after independence in 1971.

### Media post-independence

Bahrain declared independence from Britain on 15 August 1971, following a survey conducted by the United Nations. The subsequent political developments in Bahrain had, ultimately, an important impact on the media. The formative years of independence marked a failed

experiment with a parliamentary system of government. With the withdrawal of the colonial power, Emir Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa (1961–1999) proclaimed a law concerning the formation of the Constitutional Assembly. The Assembly, composed of elected and appointed members, drafted the constitution. The very first constitution of Bahrain, adopted in 1973, stipulated that the legislative power would be vested in a unicameral parliament elected in general elections, while the executive would be controlled by the emir through appointments of the prime minister and the cabinet. The first election to the parliament took place in 1973. However, two years after its inception, the parliament was permanently dissolved for almost 30 years. Lack of consent related to the issues of foreign policy, US naval base presence in Bahrain, and especially the State Security Law promulgated in 1974, led to a split between the parliamentarians and the emir. As a result, Bahrain was ultimately ruled singlehandedly by the emir under the emergency law. Opposition to his rule grew throughout the years and left Bahrain in a state of permanent upheaval known as the Intifada (1994–1999). Open clashes with security forces were predominant in Shi'a villages, while urban Sunnis and Shi'as petitioned the emir for change (Herb, 1999: 175). The regime responded with more coercion, incarcerations, and deportation of opposition leaders. Under such circumstances, the development of media faced new constraints from the ruling establishment. The emerging mediascape became either government-owned or, if private, strictly controlled concerning the political ideas disseminated.

A regulatory body, Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation (BRTC) was formed in 1971. In 1973 the government established Bahrain Television that began a daily broadcast of an initially five-hour-long program. Radio broadcasting, functioning since 1955, continued its operations under a national agenda. In 1976, the governments of the Arabian Gulf countries established an official media agency, Gulf News Agency (GNA). It was made up of ministers of information from the countries in the region and provided an official account of the news. The agency was combined with the Ministry of Information in 1985 and the name was changed to Bahrain News Agency (BNA) in 2003. The reforms in the sphere of media saw the promulgation of the Press Law in 1979 restricting, among others, the licensing of publishers, permissions for content publications and even for events promoting literary readings, as well as imposing penalties for offenders to the long list of sensitive subjects (Jawad, 2001: 169).

Independence of Bahrain encouraged the growth of media, but the political events put a hold on their full development. The State Security Law mentioned earlier had an even more important impact on media than did the Press Law. It made dissent risky, and publicizing opposing voices carried severe penalties. Press censorship was set in place. In these circumstances, two new daily newspapers emerged, and the situation remained the same until 1989. One of them is the longest still functioning Arabic newspaper in Bahrain, *Akhbar Al Khaleej*. It was established in 1976, while its sister English language publication, *Gulf Daily News (GDN)*, began in 1978, the year when *The Gulf Mirror* ceased its operations. Both operate as private ventures and were set up by Al Hilal Corporation. The latter was established initially to import and distribute international magazines and newspapers before widening its portfolio to other publishing activities. The corporation was launched, among others, by Mahmood Al Mardi, who became the first editor-in-chief of *Akhbar Al Khaleej* and was succeeded upon his death by Anwar Abdulrahman, another businessman and founder of the corporation. The team also stood behind the publication of *GDN*. The newspaper was the brainchild of Ronnie Middleton, Al Hilal Publishing and Marketing Group managing director. Its first editor-in-chief was Mahmood Al Mardi, while Anwar Abdulrahman is the *GDN* chairman. Printing and publication of both newspapers are done by Dar Akhbar Al Khaleej Printing and Publishing House. In their news coverage, both newspapers adopt a nationalist stance. They cover a wide range of topics from international and national news to sections devoted to business, sports, classifieds, and entertainment. Both

newspapers remain close to the government, which explains their commercial success and continuity on the market, as for a long time they faced no viable competition. While in the decade of the 1990s Bahrain was engulfed in anti-government protests, the opportunities for the operations of local media were still constrained. *Akhbar Al Khaleej*, despite its pro-government stance, ran occasionally into trouble. In 1993 the newspaper was suspended after showing a map of the disputed island of Hawar as belonging to the State of Qatar rather than Bahrain. In the same year, one of its editors was fired for attempting to interview with one of the main Shi'a opposition figures (Sakr, 2003: 109). The lines of what was allowed were rather vague.

Despite media constraints, the 1990s saw a new global phenomenon, namely the emergence of satellite TV. Passing across borders, satellite channels faced fewer limitations concerning local censorship, although jamming of the signal occasionally occurred. While in theory possessing a satellite receiver in Bahrain was not allowed without approval from the government (Jawad, 2001: 171), in practice many Bahrainis were connected. The Arabic channels, such as the Egyptian Satellite Channel broadcasting from Egypt and the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) from London, aired their transmissions in the Arabian Gulf. Sakr (2003: 109) noted, however, that such channels were not interested in breaking the political status quo in the region even if they reported events unfolding on the ground in Arab countries. Besides, some channels were largely devoted to entertaining the audiences rather than spreading political ideas. Hence, other pan-Arab channels that joined the scene in the mid-1990s had a bigger impact in this domain. Such was the case of the Qatari Al Jazeera network that began broadcasting in 1996 (Rugh, 2004: 235).

The death of the former emir on 6 March 1989 marked a turn in the history of Bahrain. The day following his death, on 7 March 1989, another daily appeared on the market, the Arabic *Al Ayam*. It adopted, unsurprisingly, a pro-government stance, as political reforms were announced. Yet it differed from *Akhbar Al Khaleej* in its approach to modern journalistic editing and inclusion of a greater variety of topics, with supplements dedicated to specialized areas, such as business and cultural affairs. All in all, *Al Ayam* was a commercial success, and it soon became the most-widely circulated Arabic daily in Bahrain. Al Ayam Publishing and Printing also established the English language daily, *Bahrain Tribune*, in 1997 (Rugh, 2004: 62), relaunched later as *The Daily Tribune*.

By the end of the 1990s, Bahrain had three dailies and seven weeklies. The latter were of general interest or catered to more specific topics such as engineering, *Al Muhandis*, or commerce, *Hayat Al Tjariya* (Jawad, 2001: 169). The volume of daily newspaper publication was estimated at 70,000 (Youssry and Fikri, 2002: 1041). Radio and television were state-owned. The reforms of the successor to the late emir, namely, his son Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, help explain the fast development of the Bahraini media in the 21st century.

### Regulating the media

The end of the 20th century marked a new beginning in Bahraini politics with the introduction of sweeping liberalization reforms. In 2000, the new emir, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, initiated a plan to establish the National Action Charter. The document upheld, among others, the rights to freedom of expression, publication, and belief as well principles of democracy. It was submitted afterward for approval in a national referendum and was overwhelmingly accepted by the society with 98.4% of Bahrainis voting in favor. The Constitution promulgated subsequently in 2002 saw Bahrain becoming a constitutional monarchy. With further political reforms such as Decree of Amnesty and abolishment of the State Security Law in 2001, civil rights were restored, and political dissidents were allowed to return to the country. The

Press Law promulgated in 2002 eased the regulations for operating the private press. Bahraini authorities did not recognize political parties; however, they allowed the creation of political associations that mushroomed along with various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The opposition was pleased with the announcement of reforms. Shi'a clerics called on their followers to stop skirmishes with security forces and remain calm.

Nonetheless, the initial euphoria of the civil society soon turned into disappointment. A parliament was re-established but as a bicameral body with only the Council of Representatives, the lower house, elected in universal suffrage. The upper house of the parliament, selected directly by the king, would approve bills proposed by the lower house before they are implemented. Moreover, ultimately the king would have the right to veto all bills. In comparison to the Constitution of 1973, the role of the parliament was reduced. In a show of discontent, Shi'a political associations boycotted the parliamentary elections in 2002. This step allowed Sunni candidates to dominate the parliament. Ultimately, the most significant change brought about by the controlled political liberalization of the country is that it contributed to a growing split within the society with Sunnis almost overwhelmingly backing the new reforms, while the majority of the Shi'as called for further progressive amendments. The growing political ferment and the deepening of the sectarian split culminated in the 2011 Arab Spring uprising that was contained by the government with the help of neighboring countries. Yet, its aftermath has led to an era of increased censorship and incarcerations of dissidents.

New regulations that came into place at the beginning of the 21st century set the foundations for the operations of modern Bahraini media. While promising extensive freedom of expression, provisions limiting the latter were also introduced. Their weight increased at the end of the 2000s when the political climate witnessed a sharp increase of political confrontations between the pro-government and various opposition groups. Within Bahrain's legal framework, freedom of speech is guaranteed. The Constitution of 2002 has three articles that specifically relate to media and freedom of speech, but limitations were also set in place. Article 23, for instance, guarantees "freedom of opinion" and "scientific research." The article stipulates further,

[e]veryone has the right to express his opinion and publish it by word of mouth, in writing or otherwise under the rules and conditions laid down by law, 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.

The Press Law (Decree-Law No. 47 of 2002) provides additional limitations to the contents allowed for public circulation. Article 19 specifies,

it is possible to prohibit the circulation of publications instigating hatred of the political regime, encroaching on the state's official religion, breaching ethics, encroaching on religions and jeopardizing public peace or raising issues whose publication is prohibited by the provisions of this law.

In the initial climate of political liberalization, the Press Law opened the opportunity for licensing of further newspapers. Licensing, controlled by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, required its consent and minimum capital investments to begin operations. Daily newspapers require BD 1 million (US \$2.65 million) paid-up capital, BD 250,000 (US \$662,000) for non-dailies, and BD 50,000 (US \$132,000) for "specialized" newspapers (Internet Filtering in Bahrain, 2005: 4). Publishers took this opportunity, and new daily newspapers emerged. These are *Al Wasat* (initiated in 2002 and closed down in 2017), *Al Watan* (2005), *Al Waqt* (2006), and

*Al Bilad* (2008). Among these newspapers, *Al Wasat*, founded by a leading dissident Mansoor Al Jamri and Karim Fakhrawi, stood out as the only opposition newspaper in circulation. In addition, due to a large presence of Malayalam speakers from Southern India, dailies in this language were also established. Finally, the 2000s saw the emergence of new press catering to special interests as well as glossy print devoted to entertainment, leisure, and celebrity lifestyle, which include English-language titles such as *Woman*, *Gulf Insider*, *Fact Bahrain*, *Bahrain This Month*, *Time Out Bahrain*, and *Ohlala Magazine* and Arabic *Layalina*. Some of these publications followed global trends of reporting photographs of participants of various events, restaurants, and bars, and ceremonies held in the country.

With regard to the development of television, the situation has not changed. Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation controls all the TV channels, and private licenses are not issued. Bahrain saw, however, the establishment of headquarters of satellite TV channels on its soil. Orbit Communications Company, a Saudi-owned satellite TV network, opened its doors in Manama in 2004 and operated till 2009 when it merged with Showtime Arabia to form OSN. It offered subscriptions to various satellite channels and presented its own broadcasts. Channels progressive in terms of political ideas found it more difficult to prosper. In 2015, Al Arab television operated by Saudis under the direction of the late Jamal Khashoggi was suspended on its first day after inviting a Bahraini opposition figure to the studio. Al Jazeera network operated a bureau from Manama, but it was also closed down after a dispute over the coverage of developments in Bahrain back in 2002. To counter such restrictions, Bahraini opposition launched a satellite TV channel LuaLua TV in London in 2011. It should be noted that 99% of Bahraini households have a satellite connection and access international media channels (Reporters Without Borders, 2013).

The development of new technologies prompted legislation in other areas. Telecommunications Law was promulgated in 2002. It stipulates severe penalties for an individual who

uses telecommunications equipment or the telecommunications network intending to send any message in the knowledge that the contents of the message are false, misleading, offensive to public policy or morals, endanger the safety of third parties or prejudice the efficiency of any service.

*(Legislative Decree No. 48 Promulgating the  
Telecommunications Law 2002)*

Political reforms were accompanied by liberalization and privatization of the telecom industry in 2004. Bahrain experienced a strong growth in the ICT sector, placing the country at the top of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region in terms of phone and Internet connectivity (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2009). Consequently, various forms of communication became available to the majority of the inhabitants of Bahrain. Already in 2010, up to 88% of Bahrain's inhabitants were connected to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2010) and mobile phone penetration rates reached 158% (Gulf Daily News, 2012). While the telecommunications market was liberalized and private operators allowed to enter the market, they must "provide all technical resources, including telecommunications equipment, systems, and programs relating to the telecommunications network . . . to allow security organs to have access to the network for fulfilling the requirements of national security" (Internet Filtering in Bahrain, 2005). In practice, the network operators are thus required to submit personal information about the users of their telephone and Internet services. The Internet is filtered to assure that the legal provisions are not breached. Local Internet providers ban particular websites at the request of the governmental regulators. The list of prohibited websites is often updated. On the one hand, sites displaying pornographic or erotic content and proselytizing religions other than Islam to



Arabs have been blocked. But Islamic morality is only one of the factors in determining access, as many websites with political content were closed down or banned for their criticism of the government or alleged sectarian content. As a result, the websites of some opposition political organizations, NGOs, and blogs of various individuals remain blocked. In the past, the list of blocked pages included also proxy websites and some Google applications.

Widespread access to the Internet among Bahrainis had an important impact through the digitalization of the already existing newspaper publications and especially the emergence of alternative media, as will be analyzed in the next section.

Further reforms saw the transformation of governmental bodies that regulate the circulation of the news. In 2010, the Ministry of Culture and Information was split and the Information Affairs Authority (IAA) began regulating the kingdom's press and controlling the state TV and radio services through BRTC. Bahrain News Agency became an extension of IAA broadcasting official accounts of national and international news in Arabic and English. In 2014, IAA was merged as part of the Ministry of Information.

All in all, the effects of the political liberalization reforms were limited. On the one hand, the promises and provisions guaranteeing freedom of expression were set in place. The amendments to the Press Law in 2008 announced even more room for media freedom, but major obstacles to journalism remained (Reporters Without Borders, 2008). On the other hand, the growing conflict surrounding the political developments antagonized the pro- and anti-government groups, leading to an outbreak of popular unrest in February 2011. Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) that assessed the disputed events of 2011, concluded,

It is clear that the media in Bahrain is biased towards the GoB [Government of Bahrain]. Six of the seven daily newspapers are pro-government and the broadcasting service is State-controlled. The continuing failure to provide opposition groups with an adequate voice in the national media risks further polarising the political and ethnic divide in Bahrain.

Consequently, the lack of viable opportunities for self-expression in the official channels contributed to the creation of alternative media online. The latter are controlled with much more difficulty by national governments due to the possibility of using nicknames, external servers, VPN software, and encrypted messaging. Indeed, the introduction of the Internet to Bahrain in the mid-1990s slowly tilted the power to disseminate information in the kingdom from the state to the citizen. The Internet provided Bahraini activists with a new information tool and produced a generation of online activists who began to express their opinions in public forums. Soon, the Internet became a platform to exchange critical views, organize popular mobilization, and spread the news of events that would have been otherwise omitted from the local media channels (Desmukh, 2010). Subsequently, since the 2000s, the rift between the official and unofficial media has been growing.

### Challenges post-2011

Media play an important role in any society, providing credible information but also contributing to the socialization of its members. The Internet has revolutionized the opportunities for individual broadcasting and access to information. What is observed in Bahrain is a dual model of media: one that is official and supports the government, and the other that is grassroots and opposes or at least discusses the official news accounts. It relies most often on the Internet to spread to avoid gatekeepers. Bahraini activists tested the boundaries of free speech in Bahrain in

the early 2000s. Open criticism of government officials and calls for political reforms resulted in a wave of trials of bloggers and journalists well before the Arab Spring began. Trials of activists are based on the provisions of the Bahraini Penal Code. It specifies that punishment of

imprisonment for no more than 2 years and a fine not exceeding BD [Bahraini dinar] 200, or either penalty, shall be imposed upon any person who willfully broadcasts any false or malicious news reports, statements or rumors or spreads adverse publicity, if such conduct results in disturbing public security, terrorizing people or causing damage to the public interest [Article 168],

and the same penalty is dictated for

any person who publishes by any method of publication untrue reports, falsified or forged documents or falsely attributed to other people should they undermine the public peace or cause damage to the country's supreme interest or the State's credit-worthiness [Article 169].

The latter also applies to defaming the country's image abroad, for instance during international conferences. The legal provisions related to media safeguard the integrity of the political system, prevent the spread of voices critical to the government. This function of the official media to support the government is paramount and has only increased since 2011. Nonetheless, *Bahraini Monitor*, an online independent newspaper, was established in 2011 and produces English and Arabic news complementing the opposition-led LuaLua TV.

The Arab Spring exacerbated the crackdown of online and offline activists. Reporters Without Borders, an independent NGO, reported that several Bahraini activists were arrested and prosecuted in the aftermath of the uprising (Reporters Without Borders, 2011). The detained activists included bloggers, citizen journalists, and professional journalists of the opposition newspaper *Al Wasat*. In addition, it was reported that some activists died in custody or in other circumstances that were unaccounted for. Such is the case of Karim Fakhrawi, mentioned previously, who died while being interrogated by the security. Bahraini activists were tried for the alleged attempt to overthrow the regime. Their trials resulted in lengthy sentences, ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment, that in some cases were subsequently changed to house arrest; at times Bahraini citizenship was withdrawn. Moreover, the crackdown led to the detention and deportation of foreign journalists reporting the Arab Spring events and of foreign human rights activists.

After the violent clampdown on the opposition, foreign correspondents were gradually expelled from the country and Bahrain disappeared from the headlines of international newspapers. The authorities tried to preserve the image of the "island of golden smiles," as Bahrain was once known, by cutting out the flow of unfavorable and disapproving information abroad. Foreign journalists were accused of exaggerating the unrest and inciting violence. Foreign journalists have been allowed to return only after BICI was set up by the king as an independent body to assess the events of the Arab Spring in Bahrain. Secondly, the Arab Spring exacerbated the censorship of media. As mentioned, BICI found that media coverage was biased in favor of the regime (2011: 411). Yet new legislative changes limiting free expression were approved in 2013. A new law stated that anyone who in any way defames the king, Bahrain's flag or coat of arms, could be jailed for up to five years and handed a fine of 10,000 Bahraini dinars (26,500 USD). Recent developments affected Bahrain's position in the Press Freedom Index, causing a sharp drop in the freedom of expression rankings.

Despite BICI's recommendations that censorship be relaxed and the opposition allowed greater access to television and radio broadcasts and to print media, the situation has not improved since the Arab Spring. On the contrary, the year 2017 marked a return to the crackdown on activists. The challenge posed to the monarchy was still present, as activism did not stop with the containment of the protests on the Pearl Roundabout (Karolak, 2017). Subsequently, in 2017 *Al Wasat* was ordered to close down, marking the end of the only opposition newspaper on the market. Various political associations, NGOs, and websites faced a similar fate and many activists, among them journalists, were convicted by military courts on terrorism charges (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). In 2019, it was announced that following opposition media and accounts is a criminal offense. The pro-government media remain thus the only channel of information originating officially within the country. While presenting the image of the country as "business as usual," they help preserve the status quo on the political level.

## Conclusion

The case of Bahrain is illustrative of the constraints in which media operate in the MENA region. The colonial past and the subsequent installation of authoritarian regimes had a profound impact on the mediascape. Bahraini media lie at the center of the dispute about the scope of the political liberalization reforms and their role in maintaining the status quo. Bahrain is also illustrative of the Gulf Cooperation Countries where the access to the Internet is widespread. The latter contributes to the proliferation of alternative media that bypass the official gatekeepers. Yet, it is also clear that any real challengers to the regime will be prosecuted. All in all, Bahraini media remain a contested sphere.

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