

# BAHRAIN

	2011	2012
<b>INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS</b>	<b>Not Free</b>	<b>Not Free</b>
<b>Obstacles to Access (0-25)</b>	11	12
<b>Limits on Content (0-35)</b>	22	25
<b>Violations of User Rights (0-40)</b>	29	34
<b>Total (0-100)</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>71</b>

\* 0=most free, 100=least free

**POPULATION:** 1.3 million  
**INTERNET PENETRATION 2011:** 77 percent  
**WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED:** Yes  
**NOTABLE POLITICAL CENSORSHIP:** Yes  
**BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED:** Yes  
**PRESS FREEDOM STATUS:** Not Free

## INTRODUCTION

Bahrain has been connected to the internet since 1995 and currently has one of the highest internet penetration rates in the Middle East. However, as more people have gained access to new technologies, the government has increasingly attempted to curtail their use for obtaining and disseminating politically sensitive information. In 1997, an internet user was arrested for the first time for sending information to an opposition group outside the country,<sup>1</sup> and over the last three years, more internet users have been arrested for online activity.<sup>2</sup>

On February 14, 2011, Bahrainis joined the wave of revolutions sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa, taking to the streets in Manama to call for greater political freedom and protest against the monarchy of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. Similar to the other Arab Spring countries, online activism played a vital role in Bahrain's demonstrations. In response, the National Safety Status (emergency law) was initiated in March 2011 for two and a half months, leading to an intensive punitive campaign against bloggers and internet users (among others) that was characterized by mass arrests, incommunicado detention, torture, military trials, harsh imprisonment sentences, and dismissal from work and study

<sup>1</sup> Initiative For an Open Arab Internet, "Bahrain," *Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet*, December 2006, <http://old.openarab.net/en/node/350>.

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, "Bahrain," *Freedom on the Net 2011*, April 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/BCHR/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Bahrain2011.pdf>.

based on online posts or mobile content. An online activist died in custody under torture in April 2011.<sup>3</sup>

Censorship of online media is implemented under the 2002 Press Law and was extended to mobile telephones in 2010.<sup>4</sup> The use of BlackBerry services to disseminate news is banned. In 2002, the Ministry of Information made its first official attempt to block websites containing content critical of the government, and today over 1,000 websites are blocked, including individual pages on certain social-networking sites.<sup>5</sup> Surveillance of online activity and phone calls is widely practiced, and officers at road security checkpoints actively search mobile content.<sup>6</sup>

## OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

According to the United Nations' e-Government Readiness report of 2010, Bahrain ranks first on the telecommunications infrastructure index in the Middle East,<sup>7</sup> and the number of internet users has risen rapidly, from a penetration rate of 28 percent in 2006 to 77 percent in 2011.<sup>8</sup> In 2011, there were approximately 290,000 internet subscriptions, of which 19 percent were ADSL, 37 percent were wireless, and 44 percent were mobile broadband.<sup>9</sup> Dial-up connections are almost non-existent, and ADSL use has declined with the increased use of wireless internet. Broadband prices have fallen by nearly 40 percent between 2010 and 2011, but it remains significantly more expensive than the average among countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),<sup>10</sup> and restrictions on speeds and download limits still exist. Nevertheless, internet access is widely available at schools, universities, shopping malls and coffee shops, where Bahrainis often gather for work and study.

<sup>3</sup> "Journalists Killed in Bahrain," Committee to Protect Journalists, April 9, 2011, <http://cpi.org/killed/2011/zakariya-rashid-hassan-al-ashiri.php>.

<sup>4</sup> Habib Toumi, "Bahrain imposes blackout on BlackBerry news sharing," *habibtoumi.com* (blog), April 8, 2010, <http://www.habibtoumi.com/2010/04/08/bahrain-imposes-blackout-on-blackberry-news-sharing/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Bahrain: Government orders over 1,000 websites blocked," Index on Censorship, September 25, 2009, <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2009/09/bahrain-government-orders-over-1000-websites-blocked/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Political media in Bahrain: From the murals and publications to the online forums" [in Arabic], *Bahrain Mirror*, January 7, 2012, <http://bhmirror.hopto.org/article.php?id=2712&cid=117>.

<sup>7</sup> The index is a measure of the population's connectivity in fixed telephony, mobile, internet, online, personal computing and television. "Bahrain scores the first position in the telecommunications infrastructure," *AmelInfo.com*, January 14, 2010, <http://www.ameinfo.com/221108.html>.

<sup>8</sup> International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Percentage of individuals using the Internet, fixed (wired) Internet subscriptions, fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions," 2006 & 2011, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

<sup>9</sup> Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), *Telecommunications Market Indicators in the Kingdom of Bahrain* (Manama: TRA, January 2012), slide 35, <http://tra.org.bh/en/pdf/2011TelecommunicationsMarketsIndicators-ForPublic.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), "Broadband Prices fall by up to 40% while Mobile Prices fall by up to 25%," press release, September 14, 2011, [http://www.tra.org.bh/en/pdf/2011PriceBenchmarkingPressRelease\\_en.pdf](http://www.tra.org.bh/en/pdf/2011PriceBenchmarkingPressRelease_en.pdf).

Bahrain has one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in the region, with nearly 1.7 million mobile subscribers and a mobile penetration rate of 128 percent in 2011.<sup>11</sup> The latest generation of mobile phones such as Apple's iPhone is widely available in the country, but they are still very expensive. Although BlackBerry phones are popular among young people and the business community, in April 2010 the authorities banned BlackBerry users from sending news bulletins through text messages, threatening those who violated the ban with legal action.<sup>12</sup>

Following the February 14, 2011 protests, the government intensified censorship and surveillance of advanced Web 2.0 applications and blocked interactive exchanges online, particularly when its political agenda was not supported. Internet connections became very slow, making it difficult to upload media, and some locations were entirely offline. Internet traffic into and out of Bahrain dropped by 20 percent during the protests,<sup>13</sup> which could have been a result of intentional governmental throttling or a side effect of surveillance-related tinkering with the network.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, phone lines were disrupted in many areas amid attacks on protesters on March 15 and 16, 2011.<sup>15</sup>

Access to the video-sharing site YouTube, social-networking site Facebook, and the micro-blogging site Twitter is available, although individual pages on each of those platforms are often blocked. Meanwhile, the most prominent online forum Bahrainonline.org has been blocked since its launch in 1998. The Arabic regional portal and blog-hosting service Al-Bawaba has also been blocked since 2006, and online newspapers have been banned from the use of video and audio reports on their websites since a 2010 order by the Information Affairs Authority (IAA), the government body that replaced the Ministry of Information in 2010 and oversees both traditional and online media outlets in Bahrain.<sup>16</sup> The ban applies to all online newspapers except the state-owned Bna.bh, which publishes video reports taken from state television.

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<sup>11</sup> International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions," 2011, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>. Official statistics vary slightly, which cite a mobile phone penetration rate of 133 percent: TRA, *Telecommunications Market Indicators in the Kingdom of Bahrain*, January 2012, slide 8, <http://tra.org.bh/en/pdf/2011TelecommunicationsMarketsIndicators-ForPublic.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> "Authorities Ban Blackberry Users from Sending News Bulletins," IFEX, April 15, 2010, [http://ifex.org/bahrain/2010/04/15/blackberry\\_ban/](http://ifex.org/bahrain/2010/04/15/blackberry_ban/).

<sup>13</sup> Dan Goodin, "Internet use disrupted in Bahrain as protests turn bloody," *The Register*, February 18, 2011, [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2011/02/18/bahrain\\_internet\\_disruption/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2011/02/18/bahrain_internet_disruption/).

<sup>14</sup> Andrew McLaughlin, "Assessing Egypt's Echoes: How to Check For Yourself What's Happening With the Internet in Another Country," Andrew.McLaughl.in (blog), February 16, 2011, <http://andrew.mclaughl.in/blog/2011/2/16/assessing-egypts-echoes-how-to-check-for-yourself-whats-happ.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Bader Kamal, Twitter post, March 15, 2011, 9:19pm, <http://twitter.com/baderkamal/status/47889717043273728>; and Bader Kamal, Twitter post, March 15, 2011, 8:45pm, <http://twitter.com/baderkamal/status/47881227499356160>.

<sup>16</sup> "Ban on audio programs on daily newspaper Al-Wasat's website," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, September 9, 2010, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3327>.

Since February 2011, most live broadcasting websites<sup>17</sup> that were popular among protesters have been blocked.<sup>18</sup> PalTalk, a chatting service that was used to conduct political seminars with prominent guests and mass online audiences, has been blocked since June 2011,<sup>19</sup> while many blogs critical of government views were also blocked in 2011, particularly those that documented the protests and government crackdown (see “Limits on Content”).

Despite the obstacles to access, Bahrain’s online community has grown rapidly in recent years, especially in social media. By the end of 2011, the number of Bahraini users on Facebook reached 315,000 with a penetration of 45 percent,<sup>20</sup> and there are more than 3,500 local entities (both government and civil society) with a Facebook page.<sup>21</sup> Around 62,000 Bahraini users were active on Twitter as of March 2011.<sup>22</sup> The word “Bahrain” was among the top hashtags used on Twitter in the Arab region,<sup>23</sup> and an Al Jazeera monitoring tool found Bahrain to be the most active on Twitter compared to other countries in the region during the Arab Spring events.<sup>24</sup>

There are 13 internet service providers (ISPs) serving Bahraini users, but the major providers are Batelco, Zain, MENA Telecom, and VIVA. The last two provide the increasingly popular WiMAX technology. According to Bahrain’s Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), some 31 ISP licenses have been granted for internet services, but only 13 providers are in business, and only two of them are licensed to provide wireless internet.<sup>25</sup> Three of the major ISPs—Batelco, Zain, and VIVA—are also the only mobile operators in Bahrain. The largest telecom company and ISP in Bahrain, Batelco, has a majority of its shares owned by the government, while the other ISPs are owned by investors from the private sector, including non-Bahraini investors. There is no centralized

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<sup>17</sup> These sites include bambuser.com, ustream.tv, justin.tv, and other websites that stream directly to Twitter like twitcasting.tv and twitcam.livestream.com. See, “Attacks on media continue across Middle East,” Committee to Protect Journalists, February 16, 2011, <http://cpj.org/2011/02/attacks-on-media-continue-across-middle-east.php>.

<sup>18</sup> “Despotic regimes continue to obstruct coverage of revolutions,” Reporters Without Borders, September 1, 2011, [http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-despotic-regimes-continue-to-01-09-2011\\_40886.html](http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-despotic-regimes-continue-to-01-09-2011_40886.html).

<sup>19</sup> “Crackdown continues in Bahrain, Bloggers go on trial in Emirates,” Reporters Without Borders, June 16, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> “Bahrain Facebook Statistics,” Socialbakers, accessed July 16, 2012, <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/bahrain>.

<sup>21</sup> “To prevent its use in the buildup to the issues related to public affairs, Bahrain is considering the legalization of the use of Facebook similar to Arab countries” [in Arabic], Alwasat News, February 4, 2011, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/3073/news/read/525216/1.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Dubai School of Government, “Mapping Twitter: Twitter Users,” Arab Social Media Report, Issue 2, May 2011, <http://www.dsg.ac/en/ASMR2/twitterusers.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> Dubai School of Government, “Mapping Twitter,” Arab Social Media Report, Issue 2, May 2011, <http://www.dsg.ac/en/ASMR2/maptwitter.aspx>.

<sup>24</sup> Bilal Randeree, “Twitter Dashboard,” Al Jazeera, March 30, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2011/03/20113108250282747.html/>.

<sup>25</sup> TRA, “Market Information: Number of Licenses Issued,” accessed February 1, 2012, <http://www.tra.org.bh/en/marketstatistics.asp>.

backbone to control the internet in Bahrain, but all ISPs are indirectly controlled by the government through orders from the TRA.

There have been no reported instances of ISPs being denied registration permits. However, on March 21, 2011, the TRA revoked all licenses of 2Connect Company<sup>26</sup> (a telecom provider and ISP) without providing a clear reason, though one of the shareholders of the company was a prominent opposition leader who was arrested a few days earlier on March 17.<sup>27</sup> All clients were given seven days to move to another service provider, but some Bahraini banks using 2Connect services for certain transaction platforms had difficulty switching these core systems to other providers on the very short notice.<sup>28</sup> Without much explanation, the TRA withdrew its decision on April 13, 2011 and allowed 2Connect to resume operations.<sup>29</sup>

Mobile phone services and ISPs are regulated by the TRA under the 2002 Telecommunications Law. Although the TRA is an independent organization on paper, its members are appointed by the government, and its chairman reports to the Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs responsible for telecommunications, Sheikh Ahmed bin Attiyatallah al-Khalifa, who is also a member of the ruling family. The TRA has issued several regulations that have not been welcomed by consumers, including measures that violate individual privacy rights (see “Violations on User Rights”).<sup>30</sup>

## LIMITS ON CONTENT

According to some estimates, the IAA has blocked and shut down more than 1,000 websites, including human rights websites, blogs, online forums,<sup>31</sup> and individual pages from social media networks, focusing on sites that are critical of the Bahraini government, parliament, and ruling family. In 2011, YouTube pages containing videos of torture testimonies<sup>32</sup> or police attacks against civilians were blocked,<sup>33</sup> as were other webpages

<sup>26</sup> “ANHRI: Bahrain to revoke licenses of 2Connect internet services company owner arrested over participating in peaceful protests,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, March 27, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3869>.

<sup>27</sup> “ANHRI condemns blocking Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper website,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, May 24, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/4126>.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Sutton, “Bahrain TRA shuts down ISP 2Connect,” ITP.net, March 23, 2011, <http://www.itp.net/584255-bahrain-tra-shuts-down-isp-2connect>.

<sup>29</sup> “2Connect set to resume operations,” Gulf Daily news, April 13, 2011, <http://m2m.tmcnet.com/news/2011/04/13/5441914.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Bew, “‘Big Brother’ Move Rapped,” Gulf Daily News, March 25, 2009, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/Print.aspx?storyid=246587>.

<sup>31</sup> Reporters Without Borders, “Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain,” 2011, accessed July 16, 2012, [http://en.rsf.org/surveillance-bahrain\\_39748.html](http://en.rsf.org/surveillance-bahrain_39748.html).

<sup>32</sup> “Blocking the Documentary ‘Systematic Torture in Bahrain’ on YouTube,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, February 8, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3710>.

chronicling the government's brutal crackdown. The IAA can order the blocking of a website without referring the case to a court. It has instructed all ISPs to "prohibit any means that allow access to sites blocked by the ministry,"<sup>34</sup> and the license of any operator that violates the decree will be revoked.

The filtering of websites in Bahrain is based on keyword density, the manual entry of URLs, and certain website categories, including potential circumvention tools like Google Translate and Google cached pages. The government regularly updates the list of websites to block, which is sent to ISPs.<sup>35</sup> Batelco, Bahrain's main ISP, filters the web using McAfee SmartFilter software and Blue Coat technology. In March 2011, plans were announced to switch to technology from Palo Alto Networks that can block activities within websites, such as video or photo uploading, and make it more difficult for users to circumvent censorship.<sup>36</sup>

Website administrators face the same libel laws that apply to print journalists and are held jointly responsible for all content posted on their sites or chat rooms. Following the March 2011 crackdown, moderators of online forums and administrators of Facebook pages that organized and shared news of the protests were specifically targeted.<sup>37</sup> Many forums were shut down under pressure from security officers,<sup>38</sup> resulting in the loss of a large amount of information on Bahrain's history and heritage that had been documented by online users and made available only through the local forums and websites.<sup>39</sup> Documentation of daily news and events on the forums also became inaccessible, and most of the sites remain closed as of April 2012.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Jillian York, "Bahrain Blocks YouTube Pages and More," Global Voices, February 14, 2011, <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/14/bahrain-blocks-youtube-pages-and-more/>.

<sup>34</sup> Reporters Without Borders, "Authorities Step Up Offensive Against Journalists and Websites," news release, May 14, 2009, [http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=article&id\\_article=33042](http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=33042).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Sonne and Steve Stecklow, "U.S. Products Help Block Mideast Web," Wall Street Journal, March 27, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704438104576219190417124226.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Non exhaustive list of forum moderators who were subject to arrest found at: <https://spreadsheets.google.com/pub?hl=en&hl=en&key=0ApabTTYHrcWDdEk0Q0pWYnlSa3JmbS1RbThtUkZrNkE&output=html>; accessed via: "Bahrain: After destruction of the actual protesting site at "the Pearl," the government shifts to eliminate virtual protests," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, May 17, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/4101>.

<sup>38</sup> Moderator of the AlDair Forum talks about his detention, saying he was forced to show the interrogation officer how to close the website: "Ahmed al-Dairi Moderator of AlDair Forums in the first episode of his testimony: thus eased voice of Zakaria AlAsheeri forever" [in Arabic], Bahrain Mirror, January 4, 2012, <http://bhmirror.no-ip.org/article.php?id=2678&cid=117>.

<sup>39</sup> An example of a local website with information on Bahrain's history and heritage is the internet forum: <http://aldair.net>. It used to have a section called, "Know your village and your country," in which people would detail the history of their village, and provide information that is not taught in schoolbooks, including the origin of the village's name, the history of its economy, the dialect of Arabic spoken there, and its folk traditions.

<sup>40</sup> On this list of closed sites prepared on May 2011, which were tested again on April 2012, only two were working: <https://spreadsheets.google.com/spreadsheet/pub?hl=en&hl=en&key=0ApabTTYHrcWDdEN2bkhXUGh6TUNaNaNEN4Y280Ty11bFE&output=html>.

The authorities use various methods to force removal of unwanted content. For example, in February 2011 a non-Bahraini resident who was active in taking and uploading videos of the crackdown on protesters and whose YouTube videos became viral on the BBC and other news channels, was tracked by security agents who came to his apartment and forced him to delete all the videos on his computer, camcorder, and YouTube channel.<sup>41</sup> In other cases, YouTube administrators removed some videos of the crackdown on the basis of third-party notifications of copyright infringement, even though the videos were shot by civilian journalists. The Facebook and Twitter pages of *Rasad News*, a major source of news about human rights violations in Bahrain, were overtaken by regime agents who began posting anti-protest and pro-regime content after the arrest of one of the page's administrators in June 2011.<sup>42</sup>

Censorship of websites became increasingly prolific in Bahrain in 2011,<sup>43</sup> with the Facebook page that had called for protests on February 14, 2011 the first to be blocked.<sup>44</sup> Mainstream media outlets reporting on Bahrain were also targeted with censorship online. For example, the website of the local independent *Al-Wasat* newspaper was blocked for 24 hours in April 2011 after being accused of spreading falsehoods that distorted the reputation of the kingdom outside of Bahrain.<sup>45</sup> The website of the London-based *Al-Qudus Al-Arabi* newspaper was blocked in May 2011 after its editor criticized Saudi Arabia for sending troops to suppress the peaceful demonstrations in Bahrain.<sup>46</sup> Media outlets such as the Al-Alam TV channel,<sup>47</sup> PressTv,<sup>48</sup> and Lualua TV<sup>49</sup> that reported on the unrest also had their websites blocked during the year. The anti-government news site Bahrainmirror.com, which is published from abroad, was blocked in June 2011.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Tony Mitchell, "Part 2: Return to Pearl Roundabout," Bahrain Uprising (blog), December 8, 2011, <http://tonydmitchell.wordpress.com/2011/12/08/bahrain-uprising-part-2-return-to-pearl-roundabout/>. His YouTube channel is: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ElliottsFather?blend=1&ob=0>.

<sup>42</sup> "Crackdown continues in Bahrain, Bloggers go on trial in Emirates," Reporters Without Borders, June 16, 2011, [http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-crackdown-continues-in-bahrain-16-06-2011\\_40467.html](http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-crackdown-continues-in-bahrain-16-06-2011_40467.html).

<sup>43</sup> "Bahrain: ARTICLE 19's Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review," Article 19, November 22, 2011, <http://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/2861/en/bahrain:-article-19%E2%80%99s-submission-to-the-universal-periodic-review>.

<sup>44</sup> "In Fear of Transmitting the Tunisian and Egyptian Demonstrations to Bahrain: Blocking a Facebook Group that Calls People to go Down the Streets and Demonstrate against the Authority's Policy," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, February 6, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3721>.

<sup>45</sup> "Al-Wasat closed down, its senior journalists forced to resign," Reporters Without Borders, April 3, 2011, <http://en.rsf.org/+al-wasat-closed-down-its-senior+.html>.

<sup>46</sup> "Bahrain: 'Internet' the biggest victim of the war launched by the authorities on the general freedom ANHRI condemns blocking Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper website following its publishing of an editorial article criticizing the Saudi intervention in Bahrain," The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, May 24, 2011, <http://www.anhri.net/en/?p=2544>.

<sup>47</sup> "Channel block site of the world in Bahrain" [in Arabic], Islam Times, March 8, 2011, <http://www.islamtimes.org/vdcfcmtd.w6dcxaikiw.html>.

<sup>48</sup> "Press TV's website blocked in Bahrain," PressTV, March 5, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/168269.html>.

<sup>49</sup> LualuaTV also had its satellite broadcast jammed in Bahrain. Source: Simon Atkinson, "Bahrain TV station struggles as signal blocked," BBC News, November 14, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-15699332>.

<sup>50</sup> "Crackdown continues in Bahrain, Bloggers go on trial in Emirates," Reporters Without Borders, June 16, 2011, [http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-crackdown-continues-in-bahrain-16-06-2011\\_40467.html](http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-crackdown-continues-in-bahrain-16-06-2011_40467.html).

In April 2011, the government of Bahrain censored one of its own websites belonging to the Jaffaria Waqf Directorate ([www.jwd.gov.bh](http://www.jwd.gov.bh)) to prevent public access to documents of registered mosques after the authorities had demolished a number of mosques amid the crackdowns against protestors.<sup>51</sup> The website gave an official block message even when accessed via a proxy or from outside Bahrain,<sup>52</sup> but the site was still accessible through its internet protocol (IP) address. The authorities removed the block when activists published mirrored content on a different site.<sup>53</sup>

The IAA officially blocks websites containing pornography or material that may provoke violence or religious hatred.<sup>54</sup> In practice, however, many websites run by national or international NGOs are inaccessible. For example, the websites of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) have been blocked since 2006. The websites of several political societies—including the Alwafaq Islamic Society, National Democratic Action Society, and Islamic Action Society—were blocked in September 2010 in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections and following the Alwafaq Islamic Society's plans to launch an audio-visual service online. The authorities claimed that the societies' publications, both print and online, were "misleading public opinion."<sup>55</sup> The websites were all unblocked in January 2012,<sup>56</sup> though the website of the opposition Bahrain Justice and Development Movement, which was established abroad and blocked a few weeks after its launch in August 2011, remains blocked as of May 2012.<sup>57</sup>

Blocking decisions and policies are not transparent. The official block page states, "This web site has been blocked for violating regulations and laws of Kingdom of Bahrain," but it does not specify which laws. Webmasters do not receive notifications that their sites have been banned or why they have been banned. Although the law does technically allow affected individuals to appeal a block within 15 days, no such case has yet been adjudicated. For

<sup>51</sup> The authorities claimed that the mosques were not licensed. Source: "Bahrain targets Shia religious sites," Al Jazeera, May 14, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2011/05/2011513112016389348.html>; See also, Rebekah Heacock, "Threats to the OpenNet: May 6, 2011," OpenNet Initiative, May 6, 2011, <http://opennet.net/blog/2011/05/threats-opennet-may-6-2011>.

<sup>52</sup> Example of a site block message posted on the forum: <http://bahrainonline.allowed.org/showthread.php?t=268335>.

<sup>53</sup> The mirror site (<http://jwd.homeip.net>) is not working anymore.

[http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=219273471418496&id=194843270559295](http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=219273471418496&id=194843270559295).

<sup>54</sup> Frederik Richter, "Bahrain Web Crackdown Triggers Calls for Reform," Reuters, February 9, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5183Y320090209>.

<sup>55</sup> "Crackdown against Civil Rights and Free Expression Results in the blockage of the Website of the Largest Political Society," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, September 18, 2010, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3366>; "Bahrain: public freedom in a dark tunnel," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, September 22, 2010, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3416>.

<sup>56</sup> "Director of Press and Publications: Open blocked websites for political societies and the development of media legislation" [in Arabic], Alwasat News, January 2, 2012, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/3404/news/read/619277/1.html>.

<sup>57</sup> "Violence, blocked websites and prosecutions – Anti-media offensive continues," Reporters Without Borders, August 20, 2011, [http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-violence-blocked-websites-and-20-08-2011\\_40811.html](http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-violence-blocked-websites-and-20-08-2011_40811.html).

example, the Democratic National Work Society filed a case in January 2009 to appeal the blocking of its website, but its case has still not been adjudicated as of May 2012.

The use of proxy services, dynamic IP addresses, and virtual private network (VPN) applications allow users in Bahrain to access blocked websites, although many less savvy users are not as successful. In fact, the government regularly blocks access to proxy sites and tools that enable circumvention of online filters and censors, including applications that allow browsing of other websites, such as Google Translate, Google cached pages, and online mobile emulators, requiring users to be consistently creative and adaptable.

The government has also employed social networks for its own purposes. Since February 2011, an “army of trolls” has been active<sup>58</sup> with hundreds of highly organized accounts suddenly emerging on Twitter and working to cajole, harass, and intimidate online activists<sup>59</sup> as well as commentators and journalists who write about the protests,<sup>60</sup> including *New York Times* journalist, Nicholas Kristof (“@nickkristof”).<sup>61</sup> For some, the Bahraini trolling efforts have been effective, at the very least in silencing opposition voices inside Bahrain<sup>62</sup> and abroad,<sup>63</sup> or in reducing their activity. The trolls have also played a vital role in spreading information that is controversial, offensive, or just plain false<sup>64</sup> to distort the image of the protesters, spread hate and conflict, and break confidence in the credibility of information on social networks.<sup>65</sup> They have organized mass email campaigns to defame activists, as seen in May 2011 when the Oslo Freedom Forum’s email account was bombarded with messages defaming activist Maryam al-Khawaja, a speaker at the forum.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “Bahrain’s Troll Army,” Web 3.0 Lab (blog), February 17, 2011, <http://web3lab.blogspot.com/2011/02/bahrains-troll-army.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Dooley, “‘Troll’ Attacks on #Bahrain Tweets Show Depth of Government Attempts to Silence Dissent,” Huffington Post (blog), November 17, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-dooley/troll-attacks-on-bahrain\\_b\\_1099642.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-dooley/troll-attacks-on-bahrain_b_1099642.html).

<sup>60</sup> J. David Goodman, “Twitter Trolls’ Haunt Discussions of Bahrain Online,” The Lede (blog), *New York Times*, October 11, 2011, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/11/twitter-trolls-haunt-discussions-of-bahrain-online/>.

<sup>61</sup> Solana Larsen, “Bahrain: #NickKristof Bullied on Twitter,” Global Voices, February 19, 2011, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/19/bahrain-nickkristof-bullied-on-twitter/>.

<sup>62</sup> iManamaa, Twitter post, May 13, 2011, 7:39am, <http://twitter.com/imanamaa/status/69049206215684097>; Sultan Al-Qassemi, “Pioneer Bloggers in the Gulf Arab States,” Jadaliyya, December 20, 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3643/pioneer-bloggers-in-the-gulf-arab-states>; “Disturbing Drop in Tweeting in Bahrain,” Web 3.0 Lab (blog), March 22, 2011, <http://web3lab.blogspot.com/2011/03/disturbing-drop-in-tweeting-in-bahrain.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Jillian York, “Twitter Trolling as Propaganda Tactic: Bahrain and Syria,” JillianCYork.com (blog), December 10, 2011, <http://jilliancyork.com/2011/10/12/twitter-trolling-as-propaganda-tactic-bahrain-and-syria/>.

<sup>64</sup> Marc Owen Jones, “So Many Trolls but so Few Leaders: The Information War in Bahrain,” MarcOwenJones (blog), March 14, 2011 <http://www.marcowenjones.hostbyet2.com/?p=176>.

<sup>65</sup> David Wheeler, “In the Arab Spring’s Wake, Twitter Trolls and Facebook Spies,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, November 29, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/planet/2011/11/29/in-the-arab-springs-wake-twitter-trolls-and-facebook-spies/>.

<sup>66</sup> Thor Halvorssen, “PR Mercenaries, Their Dictator Masters, and the Human Rights Stain,” Huffingtonpost.com (blog), May 19, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thor-halvorssen/pr-mercenaries-their-dict\\_b\\_863716.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thor-halvorssen/pr-mercenaries-their-dict_b_863716.html).

These troll accounts have a handful of followers (or sometimes none at all) and seem to belong to a well-organized system as they all appear and disappear around same time.

Heavy tweeting activity originating from the vicinity of the Ministry of the Interior in Manama was recorded right before the February 17, 2011 crackdown on protesters.<sup>67</sup> In addition, hoax journalists<sup>68</sup> linked to public relations (PR) agencies working for the government were writing on Twitter and blogs like BahrainViews and Bahrain Independent<sup>69</sup> to spread lies and sectarian propaganda.<sup>70</sup> Multiple Wikipedia entries linked to Bahrain were changed in favor of the government,<sup>71</sup> which may have been linked to another PR agency.<sup>72</sup> At least one agency working for the government was contracted to provide “web optimization & blogging” to Bahrain,<sup>73</sup> while other PR agencies known for online reputation management created fake blogs and websites.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, the government created new units within the IAA in May 2011 to monitor the output of foreign news webpages and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. According to the IAA’s director of publishing, the initiative aims to “further help project the kingdom’s achievements and respond to false information that some channels broadcast.”<sup>75</sup>

Given severe restrictions on freedom of expression, Bahrainis have used the internet to debate sensitive issues and to exchange content that is not available in the traditional media. For example, Bahrain's February 14<sup>th</sup> demonstration first took shape in January 2011 on the popular site Bahrainonline.org that received over 100,000 visits, and then spread to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. The demonstration later turned into a resilient social protest movement titled the “Coalition of February 14 Youth” that continued to rely on online supporters to generate ideas for dissent or particular kinds of activism in various digital forums.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>67</sup> “Continued high tweeting in this part of Bahrain, by why?” Web 3.0 Lab (blog), March 22, 2011, <http://web3lab.blogspot.com/2011/03/continued-high-tweeting-in-this-part-of.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Marc Owen Jones, “Hoax Journalist Liliane Khalil Returns, This Time as Habiba Dalal,” MarcOwenJones, (blog), January 29, 2012, <http://marcowenjones.wordpress.com/2012/01/29/the-return-of-liliane-khalil/>.

<sup>69</sup> Marc Owen Jones, “Busted! Journalist Liliane Khalil Exposed,” MarcOwenJones, (blog), August 2, 2011 <http://www.marcowenjones.hostbyet2.com/?p=364>.

<sup>70</sup> DR Majeed AL Alawi, Twitter post, January 2, 2012, 2:51am, <https://twitter.com/#!/DrMajeedAlalawi/status/153790396231716865>.

<sup>71</sup> Marc Owen Jones, “Truth Messages & the Intelligence Unknown,” MarcOwenJones, (blog), December 7, 2011 <http://www.marcowenjones.hostbyet2.com/?p=401>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> “Trippi & Associates Manipulate Internet Content on Behalf of Bahrain Government,” Bahrain Freedom Index (blog), July 20, 2011, <http://bahrainindex.tumblr.com/post/15188201300/trippi-associates-manipulate-internet-content-on>.

<sup>74</sup> Marcus Baram, “Lobbyists Jump Ship in Wake of Mideast Unrest,” Huffington Post, March 25, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/24/lobbyist-mideast-unrest-departures\\_n\\_840231.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/24/lobbyist-mideast-unrest-departures_n_840231.html); Marc Owen Jones, “Truth Messages & the Intelligence Unknown,” MarcOwenJones, (blog), December 7, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Andy Sambridge, “Bahrain sets up new units to monitor media output,” Arabian Business, May 18, 2011, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/bahrain-sets-up-new-units-monitor-media-output-400867.html?parentID=401071>.

<sup>76</sup> Toby Jones, Ala’a Shehabi, “Bahrain’s revolutionaries,” The Middle East Channel, ForeignPolicy.com (blog), January 2, 2012, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/02/bahrains\\_revolutionaries](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/02/bahrains_revolutionaries).

The role of online activism proved essential during the protests and even more after the March 2011 crackdown as activists used social media to report the events in real-time. By uploading images to YouTube or yFrog and then sharing them on Facebook and Twitter, protesters upstaged government news accounts and drew worldwide attention to their demands.<sup>77</sup> The internet became their only channel for expression and information as the official media censored anti-government views and tried to distort the protest's image, while international mainstream media outlets were either ignoring Bahrain or unable to get access. Google maps were used to document demolished mosques,<sup>78</sup> new blogs emerged to document daily events,<sup>79</sup> and an online crowdsourcing database was created to document arrests.<sup>80</sup>

Since April 2011, numerous e-protests have been organized online whereby users agree on an issue, possible target organization, and time, and subsequently disseminate protest details through Facebook and Twitter.<sup>81</sup> For example, on May 23, 2011, three days before a session on Bahrain in the European Union (EU) Parliament, an e-protest targeted members of the parliament with emails describing the demands of Bahraini protesters and the violations committed by the government against them.<sup>82</sup> In response, the EU Parliament posted a statement on its Facebook page recognizing its support for the e-protest and Bahraini activists.<sup>83</sup> In another example of successful mobilization, Bahraini users along with global supporters sparked a worldwide Twitter trend through the “#Hungry4BH” hashtag to show solidarity with the Bahraini detainees who were on hunger strike in February 2012.<sup>84</sup>

Despite numerous examples of online activism, the government crackdown in March 2011 led many regular internet users to exercise a higher degree of self-censorship, particularly after investigations of online posts were launched at work places and universities and after hundreds of user photos were published on pro-government online forums, Facebook pages,

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<sup>77</sup> Jennifer Preston, “Cellphones Become the World’s Eyes and Ears on Protests,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/world/middleeast/19video.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/world/middleeast/19video.html?_r=2).

<sup>78</sup> “Demolished mosques in Bahrain,” Google Maps, created on April 21, 2011, <http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&t=h&oe=UTF8&hl=en&msa=0&msid=201183833019020787911.0004a17a0fd2cb6e24158>.

<sup>79</sup> For example, the blog: <http://feb14bh.com/>.

<sup>80</sup> For example: <http://bahrainlog.com/>.

<sup>81</sup> Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Bahrain.eProtest>

<sup>82</sup> “Bahrain’s eProtest,” Facebook page, accessed July 16, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?pid=1001983&l=0e171b81ff&id=215921678418062>.

<sup>83</sup> European Parliament, Facebook note, “Parliament’s members condemn death sentences in Bahrain and ask for meeting with Ambassador,” May 3, 2011, 10:45am, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/european-parliament/parliaments-members-condemn-death-sentences-in-bahrain-and-ask-for-meeting-with-/10150171038217852>.

<sup>84</sup> Mona Kareem, “Bahrain: #Hungry4BH Trends Worldwide,” *Global voices*, February 27, 2012 <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/02/27/bahrain-hungry4bh-trends-worldwide/>

and the Twitter feed “@7areghum.”<sup>85</sup> There were also calls on Facebook to reveal the names and workplaces of protesters,<sup>86</sup> prompting many users to change their last names on Facebook to “Lulu”<sup>87</sup> or their real names into unrelated pseudonyms, while others closed their accounts altogether.<sup>88</sup> Users also restricted their Facebook privacy settings, removed photos related to the protest—especially photos of the Pearl Roundabout where the first crackdown took place—and “un-liked” the revolution page which at one time had over 80,000 “likes.”<sup>89</sup> Many websites with photos of protesters began displaying a message stating that the site was temporarily inaccessible as a way to protect protesters from the name and shame campaigns. Today, the majority of users on Twitter and online forums, and even those who leave comments on online editions of newspapers, still use pseudonyms out of fear of being targeted by the authorities.<sup>90</sup>

## VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

Although freedom of expression is enshrined in the Bahraini constitution, the guarantees are qualified by the phrase “under the rules and conditions laid down by law,” many of which essentially negate the guarantees.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the 2002 Press Law promises free access to information but “without prejudice to the requirements of national security and defending the homeland.” Bahraini journalists have argued that these loosely worded clauses allow for arbitrary interpretation.<sup>92</sup> On April 28, 2011, the government acknowledged that it had derogated from several provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) including Article 19, which upholds the right to freedom of expression.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Simeon Kerr, “Manama fights back in cyberspace,” *Financial Times*, May 23, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/7bce94b8-8560-11e0-ac32-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1lLZwkuOF>.

<sup>86</sup> Suzi Dixon, “Facebook ‘used to hunt down Bahrain dissidents,’” *The Telegraph*, August 4, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/8681230/Facebook-used-to-hunt-down-Bahrain-dissidents.html>; “The Revolution Will Be Put on Trial... Via Social Media,” Ta3beer (blog), May 2011, <http://ta3beer.blogspot.com/2011/05/revolution-will-be-put-on-trial-via.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Named after the now-demolished “Pearl Roundabout,” which was the center of the protest.

<sup>88</sup> “Bahrain: After destruction of the actual protesting site at ‘the Pearl,’ the government shifts to eliminate virtual protests,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, May 17, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/4101>.

<sup>89</sup> Simeon Kerr, “Manama fights back in cyberspace,” *Financial Times*, May 23, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/7bce94b8-8560-11e0-ac32-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1lQt8t2ma>

<sup>90</sup> Nancy Messieh, “Online anonymity: A gateway to freedom or abuse?” *The Next Web*, August 14, 2011, <http://thenextweb.com/me/2011/08/14/online-anonymity-a-gateway-to-freedom-or-abuse/>.

<sup>91</sup> Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, available at <http://www.shura.bh/en/InformationCenter/Pages/Documents.aspx>.

<sup>92</sup> “Bahrain,” in *Media Sustainability Index 2008* (Washington, DC: IREX, 2009), [http://irex.org/programs/MSI\\_MENA/2008/MSIMENA\\_bahrain.asp](http://irex.org/programs/MSI_MENA/2008/MSIMENA_bahrain.asp).

<sup>93</sup> Tawfeeq Ahmed Almansoor (Bahraini Permanent Representative to the UN), Letter to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), April 28, 2011, accessed 19 November 2011, <http://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CN/2011/CN.430.2011-Eng.pdf>.

There is no law that guarantees users' privacy. A proposed cybercrimes law that criminalizes unauthorized access to computer systems is under review at the representative house as of January 2012.<sup>94</sup> Although the Bahraini cyberspace is highly monitored, no action has been taken against dozens of pro-regime users who continue to spread online death threats against activists<sup>95</sup> and "defamation and incitement" messages, despite being documented by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry appointed by the king in July 2011.<sup>96</sup>

Online media in Bahrain are governed by the Press and Publications Law of 2002, which stipulates prison sentences of up to five years for publishing material that is offensive to Islam or the king, or that is perceived as undermining state security or the monarchy.<sup>97</sup> In addition, the 2002 Telecommunications Law contains penalties for illicit practices including the transmission of messages that are offensive to public policy or morals.<sup>98</sup> Under the penal code, any user who "deliberately disseminates a false statement" that may be damaging to national security or public order can be imprisoned for up to two years,<sup>99</sup> and the government has used this vague phrase to question and prosecute several bloggers and online users. In September 2011, Chief of Public Security Major-General issued a statement declaring that "the mere fact of posting instigative calls" via "social networking and Internet websites inciting people to break the law" constitutes "a penal crime punishable by the law."<sup>100</sup> In October 2011, the IAA announced that it was reviewing media laws to ensure their ability to provide protection from the "destructive use of social media."<sup>101</sup> The review is still outstanding as of May 2012.<sup>102</sup>

After the crackdown on protesters in March 2011, the government began a mass arrest campaign of online activists and bloggers, starting with those who used their real names while covering the protests. More than 20 online activists were arrested by masked security

<sup>94</sup> "External consultation to discuss draft law on cybercrime," Alwasat News [in Arabic], January 29, 2012, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/3431/news/read/625198/1.html>.

<sup>95</sup> "Bahrain: Death threats against Messrs. Mohammed Al-Maskati, Nabeel Rajab and Yousef Al-Mahafdh," World Organization Against Torture, December 7, 2011, <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/bahrain/2011/12/d21549/>.

<sup>96</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), November 23, 2011, paragraph 1597, <http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> Press and Publications Law of 2002 of the Kingdom of Bahrain (No.47 of 2002). A copy can be found at: <http://mahmood.tv/bahrain/bahrain-politics-2/bahrain-politics/press-law-472002-arabic/>.

<sup>98</sup> Telecommunications Law of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

<sup>99</sup> Bahrain Penal code, 1976, article 168, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/BCHR/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Bahrain-Penal-Code.doc>.

<sup>100</sup> "Public Security/Statement," Bahrain News Agency, September 21, 2011, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/473522>.

<sup>101</sup> "Bahrain plans for a social media law," Bahrain Freedom Index (blog), October 17, 2011, <http://bahrainindex.tumblr.com/post/11616237908/bahrain-plans-for-a-social-media-law>.

<sup>102</sup> "Laws on way to curb misuse of social media," Gulf Daily News, June 13, 2012, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=331984>.

men and held for periods ranging from few days to few months.<sup>103</sup> On Facebook and Twitter, pages appeared that called a group of known influential bloggers “traitors” and accused them of conspiring against the government.<sup>104</sup> Subsequently, Mahmood Al Yousif, known as the “godfather” of Bahraini bloggers, Manaf AlMuhandis “Redbelt,” the founder of the popular “#UniteBahrain” Twitter campaign, and Mohammed Al-Masqati “emoodz” who was active in covering the uprising, were all arrested during midnight house raids on March 30, 2011. Supporters of the detained bloggers received threats on Twitter that they “will have [their] IP address taken and will get arrested.”<sup>105</sup> All three bloggers were released within 24 hours to a week<sup>106</sup> under pressure created by an international media campaign and a statement from the U.S. Department of State.<sup>107</sup> Al-Masqati was released after signing a statement that he would no longer talk or write about Bahrain in any form of media.<sup>108</sup>

Many other arrested bloggers were held incommunicado and blindfolded for weeks without access to family or legal assistance, and some were put on trials that lacked fair trial guarantees<sup>109</sup> at the military court. Two detained bloggers, Abduljalil Alsingace and Ali Abdulemam,<sup>110</sup> who had been pardoned in February 2011 following six months in prison, became targets again three weeks later. Between August 2010 and February 2011, both had been detained, tortured,<sup>111</sup> and put on trial under the Terrorism Law at the criminal court.<sup>112</sup> After their release, their houses were raided again in the early hours of March 17, 2011, but only Alsingace was found and arrested, detained in a military prison, and reportedly tortured.<sup>113</sup> Both were subsequently put on a trial at the military court on charges of being connected to a terrorist organization aiming to overthrow the regime, and on June 22, 2011, Alsingace was sentenced to life in prison while Abdulemam was

<sup>103</sup> List of arrested Bahraini journalists:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/ccc?key=0ApabTTYHrcWDdFZocWpBRlp6ell6RkNWeGh5YXAtUFE#gid=0>, accessed via bahrainrights.org.

<sup>104</sup> Screenshot of Facebook post, “Bahrain against false media’s Photos,” posted on March 24, 2011, <http://wlcenral.org/sites/default/files/imagepicker/1998/@bloggers-targetd-on-facebook.jpg>.

<sup>105</sup> “Bahrain: After destruction of the actual protesting site at ‘the Pearl,’ the government shifts to eliminate virtual protests,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, May 17, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/4101>.

<sup>106</sup> “I’m back!” Mahmood’s Den (blog), April 1, 2011, <http://mahmood.tv/2011/04/01/im-back/>.

<sup>107</sup> “Bahrain releases ‘Blogfather’ after US criticism,” Agence France-Presse, April 1, 2011, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iDMfAxtRb\\_qYjSFj1uRnteiS3XWQ?docId=CNG.1fd1c4853d22c9c6fd2476a783525b0d.d1](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iDMfAxtRb_qYjSFj1uRnteiS3XWQ?docId=CNG.1fd1c4853d22c9c6fd2476a783525b0d.d1).

<sup>108</sup> Nancy Messieh, “Online anonymity: A gateway to freedom or abuse?” The Next Web, August 14, 2011, <http://thenextweb.com/me/2011/08/14/online-anonymity-a-gateway-to-freedom-or-abuse/>.

<sup>109</sup> Mahmoud Bassiouni et al., BICI Report, paragraph 1702.

<sup>110</sup> Alsingace is a blogger, academic, and leading figure in the Haq opposition group who had used his blocked blog ([alsingace.katib.org](http://alsingace.katib.org)) to denounce the deplorable state of civil liberties in Bahrain; while Abdulemam is one of Bahrain’s internet pioneers, a contributor to the international bloggers network Global Voices, and the founder of the popular forum Bahrainonline.org.

<sup>111</sup> Ali Abdulemam describes the way he was tortured (minute 09:37), “People & Power – Bahrain: Fighting for change,” Al Jazeera English, March 9, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzdYiK-Z5Do>.

<sup>112</sup> “Terrorist Network’s First Hearing – Trial Testimonies,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, October 28, 2010, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3540>.

<sup>113</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., BICI Report, Annex B, Case #7.

sentenced (in absentia) to 15 years.<sup>114</sup> Abdulemam's whereabouts are unknown, but he is believed to be living in hiding.

In May 2011, several arrested photographers were charged for "broadcasting fake pictures detrimental to the Kingdom over the internet and Facebook," including the head of the Bahrain Society for Photography, who was detained for two months and tortured in an effort to force him to sign pre-written confessions.<sup>115</sup> Their cases were closed on November 2011 under international pressure by media watchdogs.

Throughout 2011, many online activists were summoned for interrogation for their posts and activities on social-networking sites. For example, 15-year old Eman Al-Aswami was detained at the police station for 11 hours and questioned about her participation on certain Facebook pages.<sup>116</sup> Bahrain's most prominent human rights defender, Nabeel Rajab, was summoned several times for questioning about his Tweets,<sup>117</sup> one time by the military prosecutor.<sup>118</sup> In February 2012, after a brief arrest, he was officially charged with calling for protests on Twitter.<sup>119</sup>

Violence against internet users and activists has become an alarming trend in Bahrain over the past year. In one disconcerting incident, online activist and moderator of the AIDair online forum, Zakariya AlAshiri, was tortured and killed in police custody on April 9, 2011 six days after his arrest. While the authorities alleged at the time that AlAshiri died of illness,<sup>120</sup> the marks on his body showed clear evidence of being subjected to torture. After the publication of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry report, which confirmed

<sup>114</sup> "Detained blogger Abduljalil Al-Singace on hunger strike," Reporters Without Borders, September 6, 2011, [http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-one-blogger-sentenced-to-life-22-06-2011\\_40507.html](http://en.rsf.org/bahrain-one-blogger-sentenced-to-life-22-06-2011_40507.html).

<sup>115</sup> "Bahrain regime continues to target freedom of expression by taking journalists and photographers to trials that criminalize their exercise of that freedom," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, October 14, 2011, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4767>. Another user was sentenced by the criminal court to one year in prison on charges of "publishing of false information" and was acquitted after ten months detention. See, "Between two years jail and 5 years for 13 defendants with illegal assembly," [in Arabic], Alwasat News, October 26, 2011, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/3336/news/read/604401/1.html>.

<sup>116</sup> "Bahrain: After destruction of the actual protesting site at "the Pearl," the government shifts to eliminate virtual protests."

<sup>117</sup> "Summon of Nabeel Rajab for his tweets, Return of military trials and other news from Bahrain," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, August 23, 2011, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4548>.

<sup>118</sup> "Front Line: Bahrain: UPDATE - Violence, harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, May 31-June 1, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/4160>.

<sup>119</sup> Avinash Kalla, "They charged me of indicting protests using Twitter' says Nabeel Rajab," wespeaknews.com, February 15, 2012, <http://www.wespeaknews.com/world/they-charged-me-of-indicting-protests-using-twitter-says-nabeel-rajab-27080.html>.

<sup>120</sup> "Zakariya Rashid Hassan al-Ashiri," Committee to Protect Journalists, April 9, 2011, <http://cpj.org/killed/2011/zakariya-rashid-hassan-al-ashiri.php>.

AlAshiri's death under torture,<sup>121</sup> the government placed five policemen on a show trial, even though they were previously acquitted by a military court.<sup>122</sup>

Many other online activists have given testimonies of being subjected to torture at detention centers. Ahmed AlDairy, another moderator of the AlDair online forum, was beaten on his face and body for several days and forced to stand facing a wall for long hours while handcuffed and blindfolded. He was also put on display during which an interrogator threatened to cut his off his genitals to force him to confess.<sup>123</sup> In December 2011, Twitter user “@Nezrad,” who was arrested for his tweets and detained for 66 days, said he was “shackled, eyes blindfolded, beaten by hoses on butts, kicked and slapped.”<sup>124</sup> Also in December, blogger Zainab AlKhawaja—who was famous for her coverage of protests and human rights abuses on Twitter (“@angryarabiya”)—was arrested at a protest, hit in the face, dragged by the handcuffs on the ground, and further beaten at a detention center. She was released after four days, but her trial was still ongoing as of May 2012 on charges that include incitement against the regime.<sup>125</sup>

In a case of extra-legal detention, in March 2011, a court of appeal ignored the evidence of the wrongful arrest of Hasan Salman Abu Ali, who was detained in 2009 after being monitored without a judicial order.<sup>126</sup> The court instead confirmed the three-year sentence against him for publishing online the names of employees of the national security apparatus.<sup>127</sup> Despite his eligibility for early release in August 2011, he was held in detention until February 13, 2012.<sup>128</sup>

Between April and June 2011, posts from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of dissident students and employees were presented in interrogation meetings held at workplaces and universities as evidence of anti-government activities and used to justify dismissals and expulsions. Some meetings were shown during live trials on national TV.<sup>129</sup> As a result,

<sup>121</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., BICI Report, case no. 24, Paragraph 997.

<sup>122</sup> “Show Trial For The Policemen Accused of Torturing two detainees To Death, including an online journalist,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, January 13, 2012, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4966>.

<sup>123</sup> “Ahmed al-Dairi Moderator of AlDair Forums in the first episode of his testimony: thus eased voice of Zakaria AlAsheeri forever” [in Arabic], Bahrain Mirror, January 4, 2012 <http://bhmirror.no-ip.org/article.php?id=2678&cid=117>.

<sup>124</sup> Mona Kareem, “Bahrain: Twitter User Jailed for 66 Days for Tweeting,” Global Voices, December 5, 2011, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/12/05/bahrain-twitter-user-jailed-for-66-days-for-tweeting/>.

<sup>125</sup> “More information: Zainab AlKhawaja beaten, dragged and arrested - Now Released,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, December 21, 2011, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4906>.

<sup>126</sup> “Case Regarding Publication of Names of National Security Employees Postponed to May” [in Arabic], *Alwasat*, April 19, 2010, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/2782/news/read/404013/1.html>.

<sup>127</sup> “Bahrain: Citizen Sentenced to Three Years in Prison,” Free Hasan Salman, September 18, 2009, <http://freehasan.no-ip.org/?p=310>.

<sup>128</sup> “Court fines three journalists,” Reporters Without Borders, October 10, 2011, <http://en.rsf.org/judicial-nightmare-for-journalists-10-10-2011,41155.html>.

<sup>129</sup> “Bahrain: After destruction of the actual protesting site at ‘the Pearl,’ the government shifts to eliminate virtual protests,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, May 17, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/4101>.

many employees at governmental bodies were fired from their jobs, including the Bahrain Formula 1 staff.<sup>130</sup> Hundreds of students were expelled<sup>131</sup> from state universities or had their scholarships revoked for online posts that were considered “slander and incitement against government.”<sup>132</sup> The political content of emails was also used to dismiss employees of the Arab Shipbuilding and Repair Yard Company (ASRY) in April 2011.<sup>133</sup>

The TRA requires users to obtain licenses to use WiFi and WiMAX connections,<sup>134</sup> and the government does not allow the sale and use of prepaid mobile phone chips without registration. In July 2011, the TRA issued an emergency order against the mobile service provider VIVA to deactivate all their pre-activated mobile prepaid SIM cards until all users registered.<sup>135</sup> Since March 2009, all telecommunications companies are required by the TRA to keep records of customers’ phone calls, emails, and website visits in Bahrain for up to three years; the companies are also obliged to grant security services access to subscriber data.<sup>136</sup> In 2010, those records were used against rights activists such as Abdul Ghani Khanjar, who was tortured for refusing to explain his phone discussions and text messages presented during an interrogation.<sup>137</sup> Khanjar was detained between August 2010 and February 2011 and is today living in hiding with a military sentence of 15 years imprisonment.

During the National Safety Status, citizens were forced to allow security personnel to search mobile phones at checkpoints and give access to email and Facebook accounts in interrogation rooms. The contents of mobile phones and emails were often used as evidence against arrested citizens in court. In one case, an unidentified user was sentenced to three years imprisonment for sending images over email, despite evidence that he had only received the email attachments.<sup>138</sup> In another case, a woman was sentenced to three years for possession of images and text messages on her mobile phone that had called for the fall of

<sup>130</sup> As documented by Nicholas Kristof, blogged at Bahrain Freedom Index, December 11, 2011,

<http://bahrainindex.tumblr.com/post/14867034407/nicholas-kristof-december-11> and

<http://bahrainindex.tumblr.com/post/14867122527/nicholas-kristof-december-11-2011-this-woman>.

<sup>131</sup> Bedlam Beggar, “In Bahrain you can be penalized for an Anti-government Facebook stats (2),” Mideast Youth (blog), June 13, 2011, <http://www.mideastyouth.com/2011/06/13/in-bahrain-you-can-be-penalized-for-an-anti-government-facebook-status-2/>.

<sup>132</sup> “Janahi: We have taken action against those involved in the events of the University and the investigation is ongoing” [in Arabic], Alwasat News, March 23, 2011 <http://www.alwasatnews.com/3125/news/read/534562/1.html>.

<sup>133</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., BICI Report, paragraph 14-10, <http://www.bici.org/bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>

<sup>134</sup> Geoffrey Bew, “Technology Bill Rapped,” Gulf Daily News, July 20, 2006, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=149891>.

<sup>135</sup> Emergency Order No. 3 of 2011, Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), July 10, 2011, <http://www.tra.org.bh/en/pdf/20110710-Viva-EmergencyOrderNo3of2011.pdf>.

<sup>136</sup> Bew, “‘Big Brother’ Move Rapped.”

<sup>137</sup> BBC News, podcast, <http://t.co/bvEGFgd8>; Vernon Silver and Ben Elgin, “Torture in Bahrain Becomes Routine with Help from Nokia Siemens,” Bloomberg News, August 22, 2011.

<sup>138</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., BICI Report, case 59, ANNEX B.

the regime.<sup>139</sup> A military man, Sayed Ahmed Al Alawi, was fired from his job and sentenced in the absence of a lawyer to four years for an SMS joke that he had sent over BlackBerry to his friend about the fall of the regime.<sup>140</sup> Another military man, Hussain Ebrahim, was sentenced to three years imprisonment and fired from work for a phone call that he had made to a human rights activist, informing him that the security forces were about to crackdown on protesters.<sup>141</sup>

The country's cybercafes are also subject to increasing surveillance. Oversight of their operations is coordinated by a commission consisting of members from four ministries, which works to ensure strict compliance with rules that prohibit access for minors and require full visibility of computer terminals.<sup>142</sup>

Cyberattacks against opposition pages and other websites are common in Bahrain and have intensified following the protests. Several online forums, websites, and Facebook pages related to the protesters were hacked in 2011.<sup>143</sup> In April 2011, a group calling itself the Delta Hacking Team tried to hack the website of the local *Gulf Daily News* and managed to attack four other publications belonging to same parent group, Al-Hilal.<sup>144</sup> The local online newspaper Manamavoice.com was forcefully stopped for a few months beginning in May 2011 after several hacking attempts.<sup>145</sup> Many of opposition forums, such as Bahraninet.net and Bhnation.net, have disappeared since their hacking.

Cyberattacks have also been launched against websites belonging to the government and its supporters. For example, in February 2011 the Anonymous hacktivist group announced Operation Bahrain (“#opbahrain”) in solidarity with the dissidents,<sup>146</sup> launching a cyberattack against the government website Bahrain.bh on the anniversary of the Bahrain revolution on February 14, 2012.<sup>147</sup> The group also hacked government websites during the

<sup>139</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., BICI Report, paragraph 1257, a.

<sup>140</sup> “Non-Fiction Turns into Reality in Bahrain (1) – The Joke,” In Praise of Arab Capital of Culture 2012, Manama –Bahrain (blog), <http://manamacoac.blogspot.com/2011/12/non-fiction-turns-into-reality-in.html>; also mentioned in BICI Report, paragraph 1382.

<sup>141</sup> SAIDYOUSIF, Twitter post, February 1, 2012, 7:26am, <https://twitter.com/#!/SAIDYOUSIF/status/164731306612232195>.

<sup>142</sup> Reporters Without Borders, “Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain.”

<sup>143</sup> As documented on YouTube: “Saudi hacker hacks bhrin.com” [in Arabic], YouTube, March 13, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYA2Kk4APP4>; “Saudi hacker hacks shia-albahrain.com” [in Arabic], YouTube, March 22, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGARYAZCdtg>.

<sup>144</sup> “Hacking bid foiled,” Bahrain New Agency, April 7, 2011, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/451978>.

<sup>145</sup> “Bahrain: After destruction of the actual protesting site at ‘the Pearl,’ the government shifts to eliminate virtual protests,” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, May 17, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/4101>.

<sup>146</sup> “Operation Bahrain (#opbahrain) – Anonymous Press Release!” The Hacker News, February 16, 2011, <http://thehackernews.com/2011/02/operation-bahrain-opbahrain-anonymous.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Kukil Bora, “Anonymous hacks Bahrain Gov & US Maker of teargas,” IBTimes.com, February 14, 2012, <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/298107/20120214/anonymous-takes-down-bahrain-government-web-sites.htm>.

Formula 1 race in Bahrain in April 2012. Websites of the Housing Ministry,<sup>148</sup> Health Ministry,<sup>149</sup> and House of Representatives were hacked by unknown groups between March and May 2011, and similar attacks have been launched against the Philippines Embassy in Bahrain. Several pro-government websites were hacked in the second half of the year, including the popular online forum Bahrainforums.org that had been behind the publication of hundreds of protester photos that led to their arrests. It remained closed for several weeks in November 2011.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> “Bahrain blames hack attack on Iran,” UPI.com, May 1, 2011, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2011/05/01/Bahrain-blames-hack-attack-on-Iran/UPI-7635130+306654/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2011/05/01/Bahrain-blames-hack-attack-on-Iran/UPI-7635130+306654/).

<sup>149</sup> Screenshot of hacked Health Ministry webpage: <http://yfrog.com/kirlysj>.

<sup>150</sup> As documented on YouTube: “Bahraini user hacks Bahrainforums.com” [in Arabic], YouTube, December 4, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMr5B\\_qxMHw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMr5B_qxMHw).