

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Bahrain

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>-7</td> <td>-8</td> <td>-1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>7</td> <td>8</td> <td>+1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td colspan="3">35</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td colspan="3">No</td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	-7	-8	-1	Democ:	0	0	0	Autoc:	7	8	+1	Durable:	35			Tentative:	No			
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Durable:	35																								
Tentative:	No																								
SCODE	BAH	CCODE	692	Date of Report	1 August 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
3	1	1	2	4	2																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date		25 August 1975		Begin Date																					
				26 August 1975																					
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution		1973																							
Executive(s)		King Hamad ibn isa al-Khalifa; hereditary monarch since 6 March 1999																							
Legislature		Bicameral: Chamber of Deputies or Council of Representatives (40 seats; directly elected; most recent elections, 23 October and 30 October 2010) al Wifaq (Shia): 18 Other: 5 Non-partisans: 17 Shura Council (40 seats; appointed by the King)																							
Judiciary		High Civil Appeals Court																							

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Ascription (1)

Until February 2002 the constitution of this tiny Persian Gulf state confirmed Bahrain as a hereditary monarchy. However, as part of the restructuring of the country's political institutions, which were approved by national referendum in February 2001, Bahrain has been transformed into a constitutional monarchy. Under the terms of this reorganization, Emir Hamad, who assumed the position of chief executive upon his father's death in 1999, assumed the title of king. Despite this change in title, Sheikh Hamad continues to wield ultimate political power. As a member of the Al-Khalifa family, the family that has ruled Bahrain continuously since the late 18th century, King Hamad rules the country with the assistance of a prime

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

minister and cabinet, both of whom he appoints. The country's current prime minister is the King's uncle, who has held the office since 1971.

Executive Constraints: Slight Limitations (2)

The Al-Khalifa royal family dominates all facets of Bahrain's society and government. While ultimate political authority rests with the king, the present chief executive shares significant executive powers with his designated prime minister. In 1975 the government suspended some provisions of the 1973 Constitution, including those articles relating to the elected National Assembly. Following claims by the Prime Minister that the National Assembly was impeding the work of government, the Emir dissolved the parliament and has ruled by decree ever since. However, in 1992 the Emir established an appointed 30-member Consultative Council (expanded to forty members in 1996) which, starting in 2000, included non-Muslims and women members.

The trend toward political liberalization in Bahrain has gained significant momentum since the ascension of Sheikh Hamad to the post of chief executive in 1999. Following a December 2000 speech in which the new Emir promised the restoration of a democratically-elected parliament, voters went to the polls in February 2001 to cast their ballots on the government's political reform initiative. 98.4% of the voters voted "yes" in the referendum to re-establish an elected National Assembly by 2004. However, in a surprising move, the king decided to push up the time frame for the country's first parliamentary elections in twenty-seven years to 24 October 2002, which occurred successfully and on schedule. A second election was held in late 2006, and included many groups that had boycotted the 2002 election.

This new government structure provides for a bicameral legislature, with each house consisting of 40 members. While the Shura, or Consultative Council, continues to be appointed by the king, the people will elect members of the House of Representatives. Unlike most bicameral structures the Shura (upper house) has the ability to veto legislation proposed by the lower house. While it is clear that the king will continue to hold ultimate power in this new system, nevertheless, the House of Representatives will have the power to propose legislation, question ministers, launch investigations and even remove some officials from office. The courts continue to be subject to executive pressure; although the king's recent creation of a Supreme Judicial Council may increase separation between administrative and judicial institutions.

Political Participation: Restricted Competition (2)

While the regime generally respects human rights, press freedoms and the rights to political assembly and organization have traditionally been restricted in Bahrain. Political tensions exist between the country's Shi'a and Sunni Muslim communities. While the Shi'a community constitutes over two-thirds of the indigenous population, historically Sunnis have been the dominant actors in the country's political, economic and military affairs. The Sunni minority lives primarily in the south of the island while the Shi'a communities are found primarily in the north. The social hegemony of the Sunni community stems primarily from their association with the ruling Al-Khalifa family, who are Sunni adherents. Shi'a activists have fomented unrest sporadically since late 1994, demanding the return of an elected National Assembly and an end to religious discrimination. This unrest produced significant violence and prompted the government's 1995 decision to crack down on political dissent through the imposition of the State Security Law and the establishment of State Security Courts.

While political rights continue to be limited in Bahrain, progress towards liberalization has been substantial in recent years. In 2001 the government pardoned more than 900 political prisoners and exiles in addition to abolishing the State Security Law and State Security Courts prior to the constitutional referendum that opened the door for the return to parliamentary governance. Many exiles returned to Bahrain in preparation for the October 2002 National Assembly elections. While these elections, the first held in over 30 years, did not fundamentally alter the political landscape in this country, they did lay the groundwork for the formation of a constitutional system of governance. This constitutional system, however, continues to exclude a large percentage of the population in the country. Bahrain has a population of 1 million; however, 50% of the population are expatriate workers with no voting rights.

The 2002 elections recorded a 50% turnout despite calls by some Shi'a leaders to boycott the polls. The Islamic National Accord Association (INAA), the main political group representing the majority Shi'a population, objected to the fact that the parliament's second chamber, which is appointed by the king, continued to wield as much power as the newly elected national assembly due to its veto power. In May 2004 five opposition activists were arrested for circulating a petition that would enhance the power wielded by the elected assembly. Despite these issues, a second round of elections were held on 25 November and 2

December 2006 with a much higher turnout rate of 72%. In these elections, the Shi'a opposition, as represented by the al-Wifaq grouping, won a majority in the lower house of parliament.

There are no official political parties in Bahrain, but "political associations," centered on religious and political issues, form and actively participate in parliamentary elections. Al-Wifaq, the winner of the 2006 poll, is a Shi'a group that favors the creation of a genuine multi-party democracy, a stronger role for the legislature in government, and an end to discriminatory policies promoted by the Sunni-dominated executive branch against the Shi'a community. Amal is the second largest, and more radical Shi'a association active in the political realm of Bahrain. Al-Asalah is a Sunni association that promotes a Salafi brand of hardline Islam that opposes most of Bahrain's modernization efforts. It seeks to combine royal rule with Islamic law. Al-Minbar is also a Sunni association that seeks the promotion of Islamic law but is more open to certain dimensions of modernization, like the participation of women in government. In 2006 17 women ran for office but only one was elected. While secular political associations do form in Bahrain, they tend to have less political power and support than religious-based political associations. Despite this limited move towards party politics, the government continues to organize the political system so as not to upset traditional Sunni interests and power. Under the new electoral laws promulgated in July 2002, the government has attempted to protect Sunni interests through creative gerrymandering.

Parliamentary elections were held in October 2010. These elections took place against a background of violent Shi'a protests about what they call their second-class status. In response to these protests the government arrested over 250 Shi'a activists. Of those detained, 23 were charged with plotting a coup and were scheduled to stand trial five days after the election. An estimated 67% of the eligible voters participated in the 23 October poll. Amal, the more strident Shi'a political association, called on its supporters to boycott the vote, complaining that parliament was a sham. Al-Wifaq, by contrast, decided to field a slate of candidates. Nine seats required a second-round ballot that was held on 30 October 2010. The result of these two rounds of balloting gave supporters of the country's Sunni-led government a slight majority in the 40-member lower house. Al-Wifaq won 18 seats in the first round but the second round ballot left pro-government Sunni partisans and independents in a majority.

Following the examples of popular protests sweeping other Arab states, protesters converged on Pearl Square in the capital city, Manama, on 16 February 2011. Attempts by government forces to disperse the demonstrators on February 17-18 resulted in several deaths but, on February 19, government forces withdrew and demonstrators continued to occupy Pearl Square. On 14 March 2011 military forces from Saudi Arabia entered Bahrain in support of the Sunni monarchy, demonstrators were forcibly dispersed from Pearl Square, and the Pearl monument, which had become a symbol of opposition to the regime, was demolished by the government on 18 March 2011. While proclaiming its willingness for open dialogue with the opposition and having announced the partial withdrawal (or repositioning) of Saudi forces that began in July 2011, the monarchy continues to prosecute Shia political leaders and persons who lent support to mainly-Shia popular demonstrations in February 2011. A "national dialogue" that began on 2 July 2011 included only 35 representatives of opposition groups, out of 300 total. Although the main-Shia party, the Wefaq, initially accepted its limited participation in the dialogue, leaders of the February 14th Movement remain skeptical of the dialogue and have continued to foster popular dissent; the Wefaq are also under popular pressure not to collaborate with the Sunni monarchy and have threatened to withdraw from the dialogue if results do not occur quickly. Sunni groups charge that the Wefaq is controlled by Iran.