

Bahrain

Bahrain is one of the most connected countries in terms of the Internet in the Middle East and maintains a liberal Internet filtering regime relative to the region. The government prevents its citizens from accessing a small number of Internet sites, which are mostly related to pornography or gays and lesbians. The state also blocks access to a number of Bahraini political Web sites that criticize the government or the ruling family.



Background

The royally decreed political reforms of 2001–2002, which reinstated the legislature and declared protection of personal freedoms, have improved the state of human rights in Bahrain. A small, rich, majority Shiite (estimated to be 70 percent of the population)¹ but Sunni-led state in a dangerous neighborhood, Bahrain attempts to delicately balance its policies to preserve the government's power. It has partnered with the United States in the war on terror and receives assistance accordingly (USD17.3 million requested for military and counterterrorism assistance in FY2007).² In addition, the United States keeps

“important air assets” and its headquarters for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, further exhibiting Bahrain's importance to U.S. interests in the region.³ Despite its reforms and U.S. partnership, Bahrain continues to act and pass laws contrary to its supposed democratization. Decree no. 56 of 2002 grants blanket immunity to government officials suspected of human rights abuses committed before 2001.⁴ Law no. 32 of 2006 requires meeting organizers to send three days' notice of meetings to Public Safety to receive authorization; this law was invoked as justification for the use of rubber bullets and tear-gas by police to break up a meeting of the Movement of Liberties and Democracy on

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political				●	
Social			●		
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools			●		
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency	●				
Consistency			●		

KEY INDICATORS

	worst	best
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2000 international \$)19,079		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....75		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....87		
Human development index (out of 177)39		
Rule of law (out of 208).....62		
Voice and accountability (out of 208).....156		
Digital opportunity index (out of 180).....33		
Internet users (% of population)21.3		

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2004, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

September 22, 2006.⁵ Press law no. 47 of 2002 allows for prosecution of journalists who are found to report against the king or Islam, advocate change in the government, or generally threaten national security.⁶ Not surprisingly, this law has created a culture of self-censorship in the media.⁷ And finally, the Supreme Court in October 2006 banned any mention in the media of a scandal known as “Bandargate,” which involved the royal family and other politicians. Two journalists were threatened anonymously over the phone for writing on the subject.⁸ It appears, as Reporters Without Borders argues, that the democratization trend has “quickly faded before the demands of the country’s Shiite majority for a voice.”⁹

Internet in Bahrain

Bahrain has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in the region. As of 2005, the United Arab Emirates led the Arab world in Internet penetration, followed by Bahrain and Qatar.¹⁰ According to the ITU, there are an estimated 152,700 Internet users out of a population of 738,874,¹¹ and approximately 121,000 Bahrainis own computers.¹² Bahrain is also unique in that Internet telephony is legal, unlike in some other

Gulf Arab states.¹³ Batelco, a state-owned company, functioned as a monopoly (and in practical terms it still does) over Internet access in Bahrain until the Telecommunications Law of 2002, which attempted to inject competition in the Internet service provider (ISP) market.¹⁴ As a result, a number of additional ISPs have sprung up in Bahrain,¹⁵ though none has yet seriously challenged Batelco.¹⁶ Resistance to Batelco’s continued dominance has been increasing, however, as a number of disgruntled consumers have begun to voice their displeasure on the site www.boycottbatelco.com in response to the company’s recent decision to place a monthly usage limit on their ADSL packages and charge more for higher limits.¹⁷

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Bahrain started democratization efforts in 2002 by adopting a new constitution, which reinstated a legislative body with one elected chamber. The constitution mentions the right to free speech and free press,¹⁸ but press law no. 47 of 2002 superseded these protections and was used to prosecute, detain, and expel journalists. Three www.bahrainonline.org moderators were detained

under this law for two weeks in March 2005 after they were charged with defaming the king.¹⁹

Bahrain's Internet is regulated by legal infrastructure governing both access and available content. The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), created by the 2002 Telecommunications Law, is tasked with liberalizing Bahrain's telecommunications market. More specifically, the TRA seeks "to protect the interests of subscribers and users of telecommunications services and maintain effective and fair competition between established and new entrants to the telecommunications market of the Kingdom of Bahrain."²⁰ Two of the major initiatives set forth in the National Telecommunications Plan of 2003, produced by the Minister of Transportation in accordance with the Telecommunications Law of 2002, are the continued introduction of competition into the market through a liberal licensing regime and the eventual divestment of the state's shareholdings in Batelco.²¹ The updated list of licensed entities is available at www.tra.org.bh/en/LicensingCurrent.asp.

However, the Telecommunications Law of 2002 also contains penalties for illicit use of the network, including the transmission of messages that are offensive to public policy or morals.²² A stipulation in the law allows "security organs to have access to the network for fulfilling the requirements of national security."²³ Further, in 2005, the Ministry of Information decreed that all Web sites within Bahrain and all sites external to Bahrain containing content involving Bahraini affairs must register with the government.²⁴ This rule met with widespread resistance and has not been put into practice.²⁵

ONI testing results

ONI ran in-country tests in 2006 on Bahrain's ISP, Batelco, using dialup as well as broadband access points. Batelco was found to institute limited Internet filtering compared with the other Gulf States. The testing found a broad range of topics to be subject to filtering, including pornography;

gay and lesbian discussion; proxy and anonymizing servers; Web sites that attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity; Web sites that are critical of the Bahraini government, parliament, and the ruling family, such as www.bahraintimes.org and www.vob.org; and the Web site www.rezgar.com, which has secular leftist Arabic content. However, the vast majority of sites with content similar to these blocked sites were not blocked, indicating that the filtration regime is not comprehensive.

Unlike most of the Gulf States' ISPs, Batelco is not transparent about its blocking policy; users do not always get a blockpage when they try to access banned Web sites. For some blocked Web sites, users receive error messages such as "The page cannot be displayed."

According to Reporters Without Borders, Bahrain blocked access in October 2006 to several Web sites that were critical of the government. Among these Web sites is the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (www.bahrainrights.org) and the popular blog www.mahmood.tv, which openly criticizes the government and parliament members.²⁶ Both sites were found to be accessible during ONI's testing in November.

In August 2006, Bahrain banned access to Google Earth for three days. Soon after the blocking of Google Earth, cyberactivists circulated via e-mail a PDF file that annotated Google Earth screenshots of Bahrain to highlight what they claimed as the inequity of land distribution in Bahrain.²⁷

Conclusion

Despite the broad range of topics that are filtered, Bahrain allows for relatively unfettered access to the Internet, especially compared with its neighbors. ONI found only very limited filtering of pornography; gay and lesbian material; content related to the conversion of Arab Muslims to Christianity; criticism of the Bahraini government, parliament, and royal family; and secular leftist Arabic content. This extremely light blocking

indicates that this filtration effort is likely symbolic rather than an attempt to completely impair the ability of Bahrainis to access certain types of Internet content. For each blocked site, there are numerous similar sites that are not blocked by the government.

In 2006, however, Bahrain temporarily blocked a Bahraini human rights Web site, a popular blog run by a Bahraini citizen, and Google Earth. Even though the ban on these Web sites and services did not last long, this might indicate an intensification of the state's comparatively liberal, yet not transparent, filtering policy. In addition, given the state's close relationship with Batelco and its comprehensive regulatory structure, the government could quickly introduce new filtration if it wished.

NOTES

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