

Dissent and Reform in Bahrain: Challenging Government Control of Media

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Introduction

Officially named the Kingdom of Bahrain, Bahrain is the smallest Arab country. An island emirate in the Persian Gulf, Bahrain is located east of Saudi Arabia and west of Qatar. It is a constitutional monarchy headed by King Sheikh Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa. The head of government, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, is the prime minister, and presides over a cabinet of 15 members. Islam is the official religion of the state.

Bahrain has been ruled by the Al Khalifa family since the eighteenth century. The family consists of more than 3,000 members—all of whom have received an allowance since birth—in a population of approximately 700,000 people, 235,000 of whom are non-nationals. Members of the royal family hold numerous positions in the government's administrative and executive branches. Bahrain has a bicameral legislature, with each house comprised of forty members serving four year terms. The lower house, called the Chamber of Deputies, is elected by universal suffrage while the upper house, referred to as the *Shura* Council, is directly appointed by the King. In 2002, Bahrain conducted its inaugural parliamentary elections.

According to the 2001 national census, Muslims constitute 81.2% of the population—70% of whom are Shi'ite Muslims, and 30% of whom are Sunni Muslims. Christians make up 9% of the population, and the remaining 9.8% of society practices other Asian or Middle Eastern faiths. Despite the fact that Shi'ite Muslims represent the Bahraini majority, Sunni Islam is the predominant sect in the government, military, and corporate sectors.

In 1975, Amir Sheikh Issa bin Salman Al Khalifa disbanded parliament after it refused to pass the State Security Law and threatened to introduce legislation mandating greater accountability of the Al Khalifa family. In 1994, demands for restoring the constitution and an elected parliament sparked a wave of rioting by disaffected Shi'ite Muslims. The Kingdom witnessed intermittent violence in the mid-1990s, in which over forty people were killed in clashes between government forces and the majority of the Bahraini citizenry. When Sheikh Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa succeeded his father as head of state in March 1999, he reinstated elections for Bahrain's parliament and municipalities, and released all political prisoners.

Journalism in Bahrain

Breaking the media monopoly is essential to dissent and reform in Bahrain. Despite its size, Bahrain has a relatively long history of publication. Beginning in the 1930s, a number of magazines and journals began to appear weekly, or several days a week.

The first Bahraini newspaper was *al-Bahrain*, founded in 1939.¹ The first daily newspaper, *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, began publication in 1976 at the initiative of the private sector. The first editor-in-chief was Mahmud al-Mirdi, and the majority of its staff was Egyptian, Sudanese, and Bahraini. Today, it is headed by Anwar Abdul Rahman.

In 1989, Tariq al-Mu'ayid, a former Information Minister, founded *Al-Ayam* with the help of financing arranged by the ministry. Its original editor, Nabil al-Humr, is a former Information Ministry employee and current Information Affairs Advisor to the King. *Al-Ayam's* staff is a mix of Information Ministry employees and some journalists who came from *Akhbar al-Khaleej*. The editor-in-chief today is Issa ash-Shayji.

The *Gulf Daily News*, an English daily newspaper, caters to the Kingdom's expatriate population. In contrast to the Arabic dailies, this publication is allowed to probe somewhat deeper into local issues, perhaps because it targets a foreign audience. However, it is still owned by *Dar al-Hilal*, the same company that publishes its sister *Akhbar al-Khaleej*. In all, there are nearly one hundred Bahraini newspapers and journals in circulation.

While the private sector owns most newspapers and publications, the government retains control over publishing policies and the appointment of important officials, such as editors-in-chief and managing editors. Usually, they must be Sunni. With these top level positions already appointed, the newspaper management is responsible for hiring other employees. Still, the government retains the right to dismiss journalists. This domination of the media by Sunnis has led many Shi'ite citizens—the majority of Bahrain's population—to feel marginalized in society, unable to convey their opinions, and incapable of presenting their problems and concerns.

In a policy paper submitted to the third annual conference for the Arab Organization of Press Freedom, which took place in Rabat, Morocco in 2004, the Bahraini journalist Maha as-Salihi wrote, "In an unusual message sent by the Minister of Information to the local press, Nabil al-Humr informed them of the ministry's prohibitions. He said that there are a set of forbidden subjects that should not be mentioned, like describing the constitution as a "gift constitution." Bahrainis often refer to the constitution as such since it was "bestowed" upon them by the King, without their consent. Al-Humr also instructed them that the nation's U.S. naval base should be called a "facility" so as to diminish the perception of its size and importance among ordinary Bahrainis. If editors fail to abide by Humr's dictates, they risk dismissal. Thus, it is the editor's job to censor his journalists and their writings.

Journalism and Politics

Bahrain became fully independent of the British in 1971. Between 1975 and 2000, the Bahraini government sought to suppress opposition forces. Torture was endemic. The government used its national security law to detain opposition members for a renewable period of three years without trial. The State Security Law of 1974—the same law which parliament refused to pass before being disbanded in 1975—remained in place until 2001. During this period, it was used by the government to crush political unrest. The law

¹ See Al-Member website, Association for Progressive Democratic Podium:
<http://www.almenber.com/viewarticle.asp?ID=913>

also contained measures permitting the government to arrest and imprison individuals without trial for a period of up to three years for crimes relating to state security. Other measures relating to the 1974 law—namely, the establishment of State Security Courts—facilitated the practice of arbitrary arrest and torture too. The royally appointed prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa (uncle of the present King), was head of government during this period of alleged malfeasance and continues to serve in this position to the present day.

The situation became especially tense in the mid-1990s. In December 1994, protestors on al-Badee'a Street, in the western area of the capital city of Manama, demonstrated against a marathon whose participants were not "clothed properly." The police suppressed the demonstrators, causing the protest to broaden in scope. It soon spread to all Shi'ite districts in Bahrain. These agitators began asking for political reforms, such as reactivating the constitution and restoring the elected parliament which had been disbanded in August 1975. In the ensuing demonstrations, police killed a number of protestors, and detained several thousand. The main opposition leaders were exiled to Great Britain.

The threat of this law's application was sufficient to enable the Ministries of Information and the Interior to control journalists and, in effect, censor *al-Ayam* and *Akhbar al-Khaleej* to ensure that they remained committed to the general policies of the government. Both papers tended to report the activities of the royal family and government officials on their front pages. This news—imposed on the papers—was replete with photos, and used to come directly from the Minister of Information. The same was true regarding government statements and political arguments that were compiled under the position of "political editor." News concerning political stability came directly from the Ministry of Interior and Bahraini intelligence.

The papers published these without any modification. They were prohibited from commenting negatively—either in news reports, articles or editorials—on states having distinguished relations with Bahrain, namely Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan. Also, the government restricted the newspapers from criticizing or slandering state officials, as well as publishing news about the opposition. Accordingly, there was little difference between the two publications. They were, in effect, the formal institution for government propaganda. It was the worst period that the Bahraini press has ever endured.

During this period, there were no reports of the detention or dismissal of newspaper officials. If such events even transpired, details remained scant because journalists were prevented from establishing any groups, organizations, or unions. The government only agreed to allow a syndicate—the Bahraini Journalists Association—in August 2000, and only then on the condition of including Ministry of Information officials and all media employees, in addition to the editors-in-chief of the newspapers themselves.

The Bahraini Press in the Age of Reform

On March 6, 1999, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa took power from his father. The new ruler adopted a number of reforms to turn the page on the bloody instability of

the 1990s. These included releasing scores of political prisoners, authorizing the return of exiled opposition members, annulling the security law, and preparing a national pact which was confirmed by referendum on February 14-15, 2001.

But the reformist spring did not last long; it soon began to chill. Not long after the voting on the national pact, the government reneged on its promises to the opposition, the most important of which was the establishment of a parliament with regulatory powers as was envisioned in the 1972 constitution. Rather, Sheikh Hamad issued a new constitution on February 14, 2002, one that transformed Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy and allowed for parliamentary and municipal elections. The constitution established a parliament—the National Committee Council or the *al-Majlis al-Watani*—which is half-elected and half-appointed and consists of two committees, the Chamber of Deputies and the *Shura* Council. The new constitution conferred upon the King absolute authorities, among them the ability to dissolve parliament and appoint the judiciary, the latter of which Sheikh Hamad presides over. He can also appoint and dismiss members of the *Shura* Council. Al Khalifa also possesses the right to amend the constitution, suggest and approve law, and announce their issuance.² Consequently, the separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches ceased. The executive authority, represented by the King, practically controls the judiciary and parliament.³ Of course, this reflected negatively on the general political climate in the country, which in turn resulted in the boycott of parliamentary elections by four opposition parties, and a series of demonstrations and peaceful protests.

Still, press freedom expanded somewhat as a result of the reforms; there were four new daily newspapers. *Al-Wasat*, whose editor-in-chief Mansour al-Jamri was one of the former leaders of the oppositionist Bahraini Liberation Movement, opened in 2002. Bahrainis initially believed it to be affiliated with the Shi'ite opposition party, the Islamic Bahrain Freedom Movement, headed by Abdul Amir al-Jamri. However, it is now considered to be close to Sheikh Hamad. The second newspaper, *al-Mithaq*, was established in 2004 under editor-in-chief Muhammad Hasan as-Satri. It is accountable to the Shi'ite bloc that supports the government and is represented by the movement of Sulaiman al-Madani. The third paper, *al-Watan*, was established the following year under the editorship of Muhammad al-Banki. Its sectarian affiliation is Sunni, and it is thus linked closely with the government. The fourth paper, *al-Waqt*, was established in 2006. Its editor-in-chief, Ibrahim Beshmi, is a member of the *Shura* Council. *Al-Waqt* is relatively independent.

Each of these papers is owned by a mix of businessmen and technocrats. That two editors-in-chief were Shi'ite broke a long-established taboo. The press began to tackle issues that it had not touched previously, as papers began criticizing some of the smaller government ministries. They tackled the bankruptcy of social insurance and retirement funds due to corruption and government attempts to naturalize thousands of Syrians, Jordanians, Yemenis, and others in order to tilt the demographic balance in favor of Bahrain's Sunni population. Still, criticism of executive authority remained prohibited, as

² See the new Bahraini constitution issued in 2002 (clauses 33, 35, and 42).

³ See "The Crisis of the Press in Bahrain," a policy paper presented to the Arab Organization for Press Freedom at its annual conference, May 2002. Written by Ali Saleh, a Bahraini journalist.
<http://www.apfw.org/indexarabic.asp?fname=report%5Carabic%5C2004%5Cspa1002.htm>

the press failed to document wider corruption scandals or the embezzlement of public funds.

The relation between the government and the newspaper management essentially stayed the same, in terms of the latter's subordination to the former. Newspapers continue to tow the government line. Red lines imposed on journalists by the state remained the same; that is to say, criticizing the King, a member of the royal family, or neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, remained forbidden. According to the constitution, the King himself is protected by the law.

However, the government sought to further constrain the press. Prior to the parliamentary elections held on October 23, 2002, the Bahraini government issued a new press and publishing law, known as Law No. 47. This law replaced its predecessor passed in 1979. With the help of the new law, the government attempted to strengthen its grip on the Bahraini press, and a majority of the state's press violations can be attributed to it. This law conferred upon the Ministry of Information wide-ranging authority to officially censor all types of media—print, audio, visual, and electronic among them—and subjected journalists to harsh punishments, including imprisonment. Also banned are attacks on the official state religion and criticism of the King or the monarchy.⁴ Some Bahraini lawyers consider this clause as openly facilitating the imprisonment of journalists. Through such a clause, the executive authority can punish media outlets and journalists with whom they disagree.⁵ And they have.

Press freedom reports published by the organization “Reporters without Borders” stated that Bahrain's ranking—measuring international press freedom—decreased acutely between 2002 and 2005. In 2002, Bahrain was ranked 67th internationally, but fell to 117th just a year later. By 2004, Bahrain slid even further to 143rd. In 2005, there was only slight improvement, as Bahrain crept up to the 123rd spot.⁶

In their 2005 report concerning freedoms in the Arab world, The General Union for Arab Journalists stated that Bahrain witnessed a number of interrogation cases involving numerous journalism employees and state security services. Some of these employees stood trial or were subjected to investigations. Examples include the case of Rahdi al-Mussawi. On September 24, 2002, Bahraini police investigated al-Mussawi, the editor-in-chief of the National Democratic Labor Union's periodical *ad-Democrati* (*The Democrat*), after the police received a tip from within the Ministry of Information's

⁴ The press law literally states in Article 68 that “...without having committed any harsher crime, he who publishes what is prohibited by the following will face a minimum punishment of six months imprisonment: (1) Exposing the official state religion or its pillars to negative criticism; (2) Exposing the king to negative criticism or holding him responsible for government actions; (3) Inciting the commission of any type of crime – killing, stealing, arson – that undermines the security of the state; (4) Inciting regime change. In the case of repeating one of these crimes within three years, the punishment will be imprisonment for a period of no less than five years. Article 75 of Law No. 47 includes other punitive measures which can still be implemented regardless of this five year imprisonment. This article outlines these provisions, which include closing the newspaper for a period of six months to a year, with the possibility of revoking its operating license.

⁵ Refer to the article “Imprisonment of a Journalist: The Legislator Confirmed the Press Freedom and ‘Punishments’ Intensified the Grip” by lawyer and parliamentarian Fareed Ghazi, *al-Wasat*, April 28, 2006: <http://www.alwasatnews.com/view.asp?tID=95324>

⁶ See the annual international freedom reports published by “Reporters without Borders”: http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=554

Tourism Administration accusing Mussawi of publishing a defamatory article, even though the article in question had mentioned neither the accuser's name nor position.

On May 26, 2003, the police also investigated *Akhbar al-Khaleej's* editor-in-chief Anwar Abdul Rahman after his paper published an article detailing a female activist's sit-in in front of the Justice Ministry, where she lost custody of her children. Abdul Rahman paid a \$2,650 fine, but protested that they had done nothing wrong. "As a newspaper, we did nothing but cover the sit-in and report the opinions of the people," he explained. Police also harassed *al-Wasat* staff.

Summary dismissal of journalists or their blackballing from public events also became more frequent. In December 2002, the government prohibited *Akhbar al-Khaleej* journalist Ali al-Salah from writing for two weeks after he published an article entitled "Siege of Fear," which Bahraini authorities considered an attack on its policies toward religious extremists in the kingdom. In February 2004, *al-Ayam* terminated the employment of Ahmed al-Bousta because of his participation in a "constitutional conference" which was conducted by four political opposition groups. A third example took place two months later, when al-Humr issued a decree prohibiting *al-Wasat* journalist Abdullah al-Abbasi from writing because he had published an article mocking the lack of government accountability. He compared the situations in East Asia, where he argued government officials are indeed accountable, to that of Bahrain. Yet another example occurred in 2005, when *al-Wasat* fired the female chief of its investigative bureau, Fatima al-Hajri, without providing cause. Journalists have protested the law, and despite government promises to amend it, a new draft law has yet to be passed.

Bahrain Enters the Internet Era

As soon as the internet became available in Bahrain in the mid-1990s, the Shi'ite population—long disenchanted with the Sunni tone of the media—began establishing websites. For example, some Bahraini Shi'ites formed the Electronic Manama Newspaper, although the government soon closed it. Bahrain Online is another example. The website Bahrain Online (www.bahrainonline.org) opened in 1998. Today, it is one of the most active and influential websites in Bahrain, with a membership of at least 32,000. The website includes a variety of subcategories for discussion, such as national, political, cultural, and sports related clubs. It also includes an area for English-speakers.

In addition, online chat-room groups became popular. One of the most prominent Yahoo chat-rooms is AWAL Group, established in March 2001 to serve an educated elite but absent sectarian overtones. Today, its members number 2,569. Another chat-room group named *Lena Haq* ("We have a Right") was established in December 2005, to express the opinions of Bahraini liberals and reformers. Its members total 100. A third chat-room group is *ad-Deer* which provides an outlet to discuss Arabic, Islamic, and international issues. It was established in 2002, and has 506 members.

Each Shi'ite village and area maintains its own website online.⁷ However, these village sites differ from those established by clubs, political groups, and religious figures.⁸ The Shi'ite websites tend to focus on two issues—politics and religion. They publish the opinions and positions of ordinary citizens with respect to daily political happenings. Also, they convey real-time news, provide space to exchange different opinions, and express opposition to government policies. Sometimes, there exist cases where harsh language is used against official figures, including the head of the government and his supporters. Other websites focus on commemorating Shi'ite religious occasions, like *Ashura*, or discussing Shi'ite history.

It was not long before some websites began to feature seminars and lectures conducted directly by the opposition leadership. Opposition leaders reacted against state negligence and media distortion. Such clubs also publish political statements and announce seminars, public events, and mass rallies. Also, they report on public responses to government statements and they cover issues related to detainees in Bahraini prisons and the unemployed. They even publish the articles and commentary of those journalists prevented from writing in the official press. Accordingly, these websites form a parallel structure to both state-run and semi-government media.

Most of the managers and employees who work for these websites are young Bahrainis in their twenties or thirties. Most use aliases out of fear of government reprisal. They participated and lived through the demonstrations of the 1990s. While these websites are an outlet for Shi'ite opposition, none of the clubs belong to political parties; indeed, they often criticize Shi'ite societies like the Society of the Islamic National Consensus, one of the largest Shi'ite groups.

In a country where Internet users exceed 100,000 (one-seventh of Bahrain's population), it is only natural that the government is apprehensive about its development.⁹ Government concern is compounded by the fact that none of the Bahraini newspapers sell more than 5,000 copies daily.

⁷ Examples include the al-Ma'ameer club, al-Malikiya club, the village of Sanafir club, al-Manar club, Kurzkan club, Ansar al-Hussein club, students of Bahrain club, al-Mahouz club, Jerdab clubs, the village of an-Noowaydrat club, Mahza net club, Sar net club, the village of al-Qadm, Qurat ad-Deer club, people of Demastan club, island of Prophet Saleh club, 'Asshaq al-Jamri club, al-Haura'a clubs, an-Noor clubs, al-Anwar clubs, at-Tufoof/Sar club, Jadhafis club, Cultural Toblee Club, Janan al-Kheld/village of Maqaba club, Shehrkan club, Malath al-Akheer/Karana club, Jenosan club, city of Hamad club, Beni Jumra clubs, al-Etra at-Tahira/al-Akraf net club, Samaheej club, ad-Deeh net club, al-Jafeer club, as-Sanabis net club, an-Na'aem club, Bahrainiyat club, Saded club, al-Hajir clubs, al-Waliya le-Ahl al-Bayt club, al-Hamla clubs, al-Ansar le-M'etam bin Zubr club, Cultural Safwa net, Husseiniyat al-Qasab clubs/ash-Shaq al-Hussein club, al-Jarudiya club, Iskan Aali clubs, etc.

⁸ There are no less than nine websites for senior Shi'ite figures like the sites of Sheikh Ahmed bin Khalef Al 'Asfoor, Sheikh Issa Ahmed Qasim, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, Al Ghrayfi, Abdul Wahhab Hussein, Mahmoud al-Mousawi, Sheikh Abdul Azeem al-Muhtedi al-Bahraini, al-Medani Library for Informaton, as-Said Muhammad al-'Alawi, etc. Also, there are approximately nine websites for Shi'ite religious occasions. They are: M'atam (a religious Shi'ite occasion) al-Imam ar-Ridha in al-Malikiya, M'atam al-Hajj Abbas in 'Erad, M'atam ad-Dara in Bilad al-Qadeem, M'atam Ahali ad-Deeya al-Kabeer, M'atam bin Khamees in as-Sanabis, M'atam bin Saloom in Manama, M'atam Kurbabad in Kurbabad, M'atam of as-Sagha in al-Mahraq, al-Husseiniya al-Ithnay'ashariya in Beni Jamra.

⁹ Bahrain News Agency, May 4, 2004: <http://bna.bh/?ID=26963>.

The Bahraini government has increasingly sought to curtail this new media. In 2005, Bahraini security forces arrested Bahrain Online's general administrator Ali Abdul Imam, a 28-year-old electronics engineer from the village of al-Bilad al-Qadim, for allegedly inciting hatred against the regime. Abdul Imam admitted his administrative responsibility for the website, but insisted on the right of freedom of expression and information-sharing that is enshrined in the Bahraini constitution and law. After 15 days, he was released. Subsequently, Bahrain Online reported that the Ministry of Information, headed by the Minister of Information and State Minister of Foreign Affairs Muhammad Abdul Ghaffar, brought a lawsuit against it, accusing the website of broadcasting statements, photos, and information which included propaganda and incitement.¹⁰

The government has also moved to exert greater control over telecommunications, enabling them to rein in clubs by shutting down objectionable websites. In 2002, Bahrain acknowledged its censorship of the Internet, to the extent that it prevented access to and closed certain websites that did not receive the approval of the Bahraini government. Al-Humr, explained, "We welcome any criticism, but we will not accept statements that inflame sectarian strife."¹¹

In 2001, the Bahraini government blocked seven websites: Bahrain Online, Bahrain Forums, the Electronic Newspaper of Manama, and the websites of the Bahraini Freedom Movement, Abdul Wahhab, and the AWAL Group. In March 2002, a senior Information Ministry official told Bahraini newspapers that these websites used modern communication channels to air material that violated social mores and Islamic principals.

On April 7, 2004, the government again shut down the Bahrain Online website. When the website administrators from the Batelco Company inquired about the monitoring, the government responded by stating that the company had received a demand from the Interior Ministry to carry out a judicial order closing the website.

On May 3, 2006, International Press Day, the Bahraini Youth Society for Human Rights issued a statement, declaring, "The organization is concerned about the recent campaign to close some Internet websites that usually criticize the political system in Bahrain." The Society said that the Batelco Telecommunications Company, the only company providing Internet service in Bahrain, was blocking sites. Sites affected, according to the Bahraini Youth Society for Human Rights, included the National House Club, Bahrain Online, the National Committee for Torture Victims and Bahrain Martyrs, Bahrain Forums, and the *ad-Draz* Cultural Club.

In reality, the monitoring of Internet websites for political reasons related to the freedom of expression is not limited to just Bahraini websites, but also extends to non-Bahraini Arabic websites. On April 29, 2006, the Bahrain Forums website published a statement by the Arab Organization for Defending Freedom of the Press and Expression. In it, the organization stated that Bahraini authorities tended to screen the "Civil

¹⁰ An-Neba' Information Network, March 1, 2005.

¹¹ BBC Network, March 27, 2002: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/newsid_1895000/1895748.stm;
BBC Network, May 5, 2002:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/middle_east_news/newsid_1969000/1969668.stm

Dialogue” website, a popular and secular site launched from Denmark.¹² Bahraini sources said that the National Islamic Platform (Muslim Brotherhood) eventually provoked the government into closing the website because they considered the site to be a liberal assault on Islam. Bahraini authorities have also begun to monitor the “Transparency of the Middle East” website. In addition, the government hired Nasr al-Majali as a media consultant specializing in “fighting Shi’ite thought.”¹³ Accordingly, websites and forums seek to stay one step ahead of the censors by frequently shifting their addresses and disseminating news to their members via e-mail.

Conclusions

The Al Khalifa family still adopts an air of superiority toward their Shi’ite citizenry. The government has been—and remains—devoted to a policy of sectarian discrimination for more than two centuries. Sunni dominance over the media is one of the manifestations of this policy. If it is true that democracy does not exist without democrats, then it also true that it is impossible to achieve political reform without a free press. Despite the many laudable reform initiatives undertaken by the Bahraini government, government control over the media remains the chief impediment to dissent and reform.

State efforts to control the media are reflected in the broader sense by the state’s unwillingness to fully sanction the separation of powers. The press could be a check on the abuse of power, but state censorship prevents journalists from doing so. Reform of the press in Bahrain will only commence once the government ceases its control of the media, officially recognizes the latter’s freedom in publishing and exchanging news and commentary about foreign and domestic events, and annuls portions of Press Law No. 47.

The widespread visibility of Internet forums and websites, given prominence by Bahrain’s Shi’ite majority, indicates the presence of a fissure in the country’s media policy. The government is clearly nurturing this split by continuing to marginalize the Shi’ite population, as it excludes them from the political and media decision-making process.

In order to continue operating in Bahrain, websites, blogs, and Internet forums do not need foreign monetary and technical assistance, although these sites are established by individual efforts and small groups. Rather, they are in need of moral and political support from governments supporting reform and the freedom of press. This can be achieved by exerting pressure on the government to curb their influence on the Internet, while demanding that it respect the freedom of expression.

In this respect, the assistance that a country like the United States—an ally of the Bahraini government—can provide should be used to influence the Al Khalifa regime to guarantee the respect of international standards regarding press freedoms and human rights. There is an assumption among many Bahraini citizens that the American silence

¹² The “Civil Dialogue” website: An independent daily electronic newspaper which publishes opinions and dialogue about important subjects related to the political left, secularism, democracy, human rights, civilization, and promoting women’s rights to create a secular, civil, and human society that guarantees the basic, social, economic, and political rights of man.

<http://www.rezgar.com>

¹³ Bahrain Forums, April 29, 2006:

<http://www.montadayat.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=11367>

concerning government behavior toward local media, especially the electronic media, indicates nothing but implicit support for these actions.

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