



Bahrain Uprisings and Reforms: An Overview

In February 2011, Bahrain chapter in the Arab Spring saga entered the world stage when more than half the population began to protest structural inequalities, corruption, oppression, and a lack of government representation. In response, the Bahrain government dispatched security forces to quell protests, leading to thousands of arrests, hundreds of injuries, and dozens of deaths. Laborers and union workers were fired from their jobs for joining the peaceful protests, while medical professionals faced politically-motivated charges for discussing the horrific injuries they witnessed when aiding injured protesters. From athletes to lawyers, and students to nurses, the government targeted all who dared express a dissenting voice through targeted media attacks, military trials, home raids, arbitrary detention, and even extrajudicial killing.

Facing growing international pressure, the Government of Bahrain established the [Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry](#) (BICI) in July 2011 to investigate government abuses committed during the protests, and to recommend legal and policy changes to prevent a recurrence of such events. Based on over 9,000 testimonies, the report confirmed the excessive and indiscriminate use of force and torture by Bahraini officials. The report also rejected the government's claims that the protests were sectarian in nature or instigated by or received material support from Iran. Although the Bahrain government [claims](#) that it has fully implemented the majority of the recommendations, [independent assessments](#) have found that less than five of the BICI recommendations have been fully implemented.

Since the release of the BICI report in 2011, human rights violations and the culture of impunity continue unabated in Bahrain. [Protests remain a near daily occurrence](#). Critics of the government continue to face harassment and arrest, and reports of torture, ill-treatment, sexual assault and death in detention persist. Freedoms of association, expression and assembly were further restricted through [legislation passed by the National Assembly](#) in August 2013. The Bahrain government continues to utilize sectarian language when referring to protesters, though the grievances aired by those protesting affect all Bahrainis.

Meanwhile, the Bahrain government continues to [weaponize and indiscriminately use](#) “non-lethal weapons” such as tear gas and birdshot against peaceful protesters, [leading to the death](#) of more than 30 individuals and sparking international complaints about the government's disproportionate crackdowns. In January 2014, a [19-year-old died](#) from injuries sustained from live ammunition during his arrest, bringing the total number of deaths related to the uprising to more than 80.

Although the Government of Bahrain [established an Office of Ombudsman](#) to investigate claims of mistreatment by government officials and security forces, not a single senior official has been held accountable for human rights violations. Indeed, since the Office's establishment, there has been an increase in arbitrary arrests and politically motivated charges including a recommended 5-year jail sentence for ‘insulting the King’, while government officials accused of mistreatment and torture continue to be acquitted at alarming rates.

On November 22 2014, the Government of Bahrain held parliamentary and municipal elections, the first since the beginning of political unrest in 2011. While the government heralded these polls as the culmination of Bahrain's reform efforts, a broad coalition of opposition societies chose to boycott them.

The United States Government is uniquely positioned to influence the trajectory of the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain: both countries share a mutual security interest in maintaining the presence of the [US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain](#). Yet there is strong reason to believe that if the pace of reform in Bahrain remains slow or continues to stagnate, Bahrain could become unstable, leading to greater insecurity in the region. The U.S. Government must

fully support the democratic aspirations of the Bahraini people and apply greater political and economic pressure before conditions deteriorate further.

Policy Recommendations

It is clear that existing policies have neither compelled the Government of Bahrain to honor its stated commitments nor contributed to improving the deteriorating political situation that threatens Bahrain's stability and international security interests in the Gulf region. ADHRB presents the following policy recommendations in order to more effectively promote fundamental human rights and political freedoms in the country and protect national security interests in the Gulf region.

United States Congressional and Executive Branch Recommendations

- Sustained high-level public as well as private calls on the Government of Bahrain to adhere to its human rights commitments and enact meaningful reforms. Such reforms include the release of all political prisoners and accountability for torture and other serious human rights crimes, along with the full implementation of the remaining BICI and UPR recommendations.
- Ensure clear and consistent messaging from all levels of the U.S. Government encouraging the Government of Bahrain to adhere to its human rights commitments, including through accountability for torture and other serious human rights abuses and the release of all political prisoners.
- Ensure full compliance with the intent of the "Leahy Law" to avoid U.S. complicity with human rights violations. As a first step, the U.S. should suspend arms sales and security assistance to the Government of Bahrain until the U.S. Government determines which Bahraini security force units are ineligible for transfers and can verify that U.S.-origin weapons are not enabling human rights abuses in Bahrain.
- Support the establishment of an independent international monitoring mechanism to oversee the implementation of the BICI recommendations and other reforms that the Government of Bahrain has committed to enacting.
- Prioritize human rights and democracy promotion funding for Bahrain, including through the Democracy Fun and the Middle East Partnership Initiative.

United Nations Recommendations

- Publicly call for Bahrain to allow the Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Unusual, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to visit Bahrain and conduct a full investigation into practices in the country that may concern his mandate.
- Facilitate the establishment of a permanent country mission to Bahrain by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, including a full reporting and capacity building mandate.
- Insist that Bahrain honor its commitments to the international community and provide to the Committee on Human Rights the mandatory initial report on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, now seven years overdue.
- Classify Bahrain as a country of concern under Agenda Item 2 at the Human Rights Council.

NGO/Think Tank Recommendations

- Publically call on the international community to enforce relevant legal mechanisms with the Bahrain government.
- Provide supporting evidence and information to the international community regarding the human rights situation in Bahrain.
- Work to support and strengthen civil society organizations in Bahrain through cooperation, technical assistance and capacity building.