



Bahrain — Va-PoReg Country Report

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07/23/1783 Start Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom]: After the Portuguese had controlled Bahrain between 1521 and 1602, Bahrain was ruled by the tribal Khalifa family from 1783 who rejected „claims of suzerainty from Persia and the Ottoman Empire” (Turner 1999). After the invasion of Bahrain on 07/23/1783 Ahmed ibn Muhammad ibn Khalifa became the first Hakim of Bahrain.¹ With British assistance, Bahrain was able to resist Ottoman control and signed a treaty of peace and friendship with Britain in 1861 (Sluglett 2007, Turner 1999). The country’s British-protected status dates from 1861, with the completion of a treaty named „Perpetual Truce of Peace and Friendship”² by which the sheikh agreed to refrain from „the prosecution of war, piracy, or slavery.”³ Thus, Britain assumed responsibility for the defense of Bahrain and for the conduct of its relations with other major powers.⁴ Further treaties were signed in 1882 and 1892, practically transferring responsibility of Bahraini defense and foreign policy to Britain. This meant that the tribal chiefs of Bahrain agreed not to cede or transfer any portion of their territories except to Britain and to manage their relations with other powers through the British government. In return, Britain aimed at containing growing French interests in the region (Sluglett 2007). This period is coded as protectorate because the Bahraini rulers only delegated the conduct of foreign affairs to the British by a consensual treaty, while they maintained internal autonomy. For this time, both LIED and V-Dem’s PCLI classified political liberties as absent. According to our observations, no multiparty legislative and executive elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED.

08/15/1971 Continuation Autocratic Monarchy [as independent country]: On this date Bahrain and Britain agreed on a new treaty of friendship which granted independence to Bahrain and nullified all earlier treaties. Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa became the Emir with the Council of State as a cabinet. In June 1973, a constitution was ratified providing for a National Assembly of 30 members, together with all members of the cabinet who were appointed by the Amir (Turner 1999).⁵ On 12/12/1973 under the 1973 constitution, general elections in Bahrain were held. The National Assembly had thirty members elected by a franchise restricted to male citizens, with an additional 14 ministers of the royally appointed government becoming ex officio members.⁶ Because the right to elect representatives to the lower house of parliament was not inclusive, this brief period is coded as an autocratic autocracy. In 1973 universal suffrage was introduced, although parliament was suspended and dissolved in 1975 for approximately 30 years. Non-Sunni Muslims could not vote.⁷ V-Dem’s EF&FI scores the elections as somewhat free and fair, Their CEI as somewhat clean. In 1971 and 1972, as per Polity5’s classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time. From 1973 onward, the executive faced slight limitations on power. According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held in 1971, from 1972 onward only multiparty legislative elections were held. However, on 12/01/1972 there were only elections for a constituent assembly⁸ The constituent assembly was tasked with drafting and approving a constitution. Hence, the coding by LIED seems to be a coding error. Per FH, Bahrain is classified as not free until 1973 with a score between 11 and 14 and falls under the not free category in our interpretation. In 1974 the country is designated as partly free with a score of 8 and falls under the rather not free category in our interpretation. Per LIED’s political liberties remained absent, while V-Dem’s PCLI outcomes switched to a range that we interpret in the way that political liberties were not really present. The results of the 1973 elections were abrogated by Shaikh Isa in 1975. He

dissolved the national assembly, suspended the constitution and started ruling by decree (Turner 1999).⁹ Bahrain was governed under emergency laws from 1975 to 2002. During this time, „the worst human rights violations and torture were said to have taken place”.¹⁰ In 2002, Bahrain changed its official name to Kingdom of Bahrain and the Emir declared himself King.¹¹ Ever since the Khalifa family acquired power in 1783, they have dominated all state institutions. The parliament in Bahrain was reconvened in 2002 after a long hiatus. This reopening was part of the political reforms initiated by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. From 1975 until 1992, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power. Since 1993, as per Polity5's categorization, the executive experienced minimal limitations on decision-making, placing it in the first intermediate category. According to the FH classification, the country is classified as not free until 1988 with a score between 9 and 10 and falls into the category rather not free in our interpretation. From 1989, the score is between 11 and 14 and is classified as not free. According to our observations, no multiparty legislative and executive elections were held from 1975 onward, which aligns with the observations of LIED. On 02/14/2002, Bahrain was officially declared a kingdom, and the first parliamentary elections since 1975 were held on 10/24/2002, marking the parliament's return to operation. Since 2002 general elections are regularly held but they are not considered to be free and fair. The elections were not competitive per LIED. The V-Dem EF&FI classifies the freedom and fairness of elections as ambiguous and later not present. Their CEI does the same for electoral cleanliness. In 2002, the constitution granted the king authority over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The monarch has the power to appoint and remove the prime minister and cabinet members, who are accountable to him rather than to the legislative.¹² The uncle of king Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, served as the country's sole prime minister from independence from Britain in 1971 until his passing in 2020. Hence, after 2002 Bahrain was a borderline case between a constitutional and an autocratic monarchy. In 2011, a prodemocracy movement was violently repressed by security forces and the authorities have methodically eradicated a wide spectrum of political rights and civil liberties, dismantled political opposition, and suppressed persistent dissent, particularly concentrated among the Shiite population.¹³ Following his death, the crown prince and eldest son of the king, Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, assumed the role of prime minister, which he retained after a cabinet reshuffle subsequent to the parliamentary elections of November 2022.¹⁴ On 11/12/2022 and 11/19/2022 elections for the lower house were held.¹⁵ However, the electoral process lacked competitiveness as major opposition groups were banned from participating. The performance of political societies overall was weak in the 2022 elections, with the majority of seats being won by independent candidates, including Sunni Islamists, due to a law enacted in 2018 that barred individuals from running for office if they were associated with dissolved political societies, had previously boycotted or been expelled from parliament, or had served a prison sentence of six months or longer. The political system features a bicameral structure, with the king appointing the 40-member Consultative Council as the upper house of the National Assembly. The lower house, known as the Council of Representatives, is comprised of 40 elected members serving four-year terms. While formal political parties are prohibited, individuals affiliated with „political societies” have been allowed to participate in elections. The electoral framework is criticized for being unfair, primarily due to the deliberate underrepresentation of Shiites, who make up the majority of the citizen population but have never secured majority representation in parliament. Furthermore, the body responsible for administering elections is not an independent body. It is headed by the justice minister, who is appointed by the crown prince. The political landscape is characterized by a monopoly on political power of the ruling family, with the constitution not allowing for a change in government through elections.¹⁶ Civil liberties and political rights are severely restricted in Bahrain. For instance, courts have been convicting people and sentencing them to death based on trials that clearly weren't fair. These verdicts were mostly based on confessions that were supposedly forced out of people through torture and harsh treatment.¹⁷ As classified by FH for period between 2002 and 2008, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. From 2008 onwards, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. LIED categorizes political liberties as absent for the entire regime period. V-Dem's PCLI concurs with LIED on the absence of political liberties, except for brief periods where

V-Dem's PCLI classifies political liberties as not really present in 1972, 1973, and 2002, and being in an ambiguous state from 2002 to 2010. Between 2002 and 2011, as per Polity5's categorization, the executive experienced minimal limitations on decision-making, placing it in the first intermediate category. Since 2012, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power.

Autocratic Monarchy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Herb 1999, Herb 2003, Herb 2004)

Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bani_Utbah_invasion_of_Bahrain
- ² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bahrain_\(1783%E2%80%931971\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bahrain_(1783%E2%80%931971))
- ³ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bahrain/Cultural-life#ref93660>
- ⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bahrain_\(1783%E2%80%931971\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bahrain_(1783%E2%80%931971))
- ⁵ https://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/mideast/BH/bahrain-constitution-1973/at_download/file
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973_Bahraini_general_election
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1972_Bahraini_Constituent_Assembly_election
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Security_Law_in_Bahrain; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973_Constitution_of_Bahrain
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Security_Law_in_Bahrain
- ¹¹ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/ruling-bahrain-part-i-emir-declares-himself-king>;
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bahrain_2017?lang=en
- ¹² <https://www.constituteproject.org/countries/Asia/Bahrain>
- ¹³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2022>
- ¹⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2023>
- ¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Bahraini_general_election
- ¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2023>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/bahrain>

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