

Bahrain: halt repressive amendments to the press law

We, the undersigned human rights organizations, call on Bahrain's Shura Council to reject the government's [proposed amendments](#) to the Law on Press, Printing, and Publishing (Decree-Law No. 47 of 2002). On May 8, 2025, the House of Representatives [approved](#) the draft amendments and referred them to the Shura Council for review and adoption. Although these amendments purport to regulate online media and publications, they in fact risk further repression of the press and freedom of expression in Bahrain.

No jail for journalists? A misleading reform

The government has repeatedly [boasted](#) that abolishing the imprisonment of journalists and replacing it with fines of up to 50,000 Bahraini Dinars (approximately \$133,000 USD) is one of the key reforms. However, upon closer reading of the amendment, this claim is misleading. Far from being protected, journalists can still be prosecuted under Bahrain's arsenal of repressive laws that criminalize online speech and activities, such as the Penal Code or Anti-Terrorism Law, which have been routinely used to prosecute and imprison Bahraini [journalists](#) and [activists](#). Maintaining a dual legal regime, imposing fines under Decree-Law No. 47 of 2002 while preserving prison sentences under other legislation, allows authorities to arbitrarily apply one or the other based on the political profile of the individual exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Mandatory licensing as a tool for online censorship

Another major concern is the proposed imposition of mandatory licensing requirements for new online media and 'media related' activities from the Ministry of Information. Existing media would need to comply with the new licensing requirements. According to newly introduced definitions under **Article 3**, "electronic media" includes any activity that provides news, information, or programs to the general audience or subscribers on the internet or through other digital means. Such broad definitions could have a chilling effect across a wide range of online activities, including media, social media content creators, and bloggers. The proposed changes would not only require Bahraini online news outlets and other digital platforms deemed "media related" to require authorization from the Ministry of Information, but also foreign media that wish to operate online in the country, which is already [heavily restricted](#) in the country. The broad scope of the draft amendments amounts to online

censorship by the Bahraini authorities, further eroding press freedom and freedom of expression in the country.

While the draft amendments stipulate under **Article 67** that no media outlet in Bahrain will be subject to prior censorship, the licensing requirement does open the door for the Bahraini authorities to censor media voices and restrict access to information through delaying, withholding, or denying licenses necessary for media websites to operate. This power can easily be abused to influence editorial lines by prohibiting or compelling the publication of certain types of content and narratives, posing a serious threat to media independence and diversity in Bahrain.

Such provisions are inconsistent with international freedom of expression standards. In their 2018 Joint Declaration, the four special rapporteurs on freedom of expression [emphasized](#) states' obligations to respect media independence, particularly editorial independence, by refraining from indirect forms of censorship and ensuring the autonomy of regulatory bodies overseeing the media.

Any genuine reform must begin with a thorough revision of Bahrain's legal framework by amending all provisions related to content-based offenses to bring them into full compliance with international freedom of expression standards. We therefore urge the Shura Council to reject the draft amendments in their current form and ensure any amendments to the law are aligned with international human rights standards and Bahrain's human rights obligations.

We further call on Bahraini authorities to embrace a participatory approach by consulting with journalists, media owners and workers, human rights experts, and civil society organizations to enact meaningful reforms that uphold human rights standards.

Signatories:

- Access Now
- Bahrain Press Association
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- Digital Action
- Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
- Muwatin Media Network
- Red Line for Gulf
- Salam for Democracy and Human Rights (SALAM DHR)
- SMEX