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Bahrain: General Stifling of freedom of expression on Social Media

Amnesty International today condemned the escalating climate of state intimidation in Bahrain, which aims to quash freedom of expression. A series of recent statements by the highest officials, including the King and the Prime Minister, make clear that criticism of government, especially on social media, will not be tolerated.

General Campaign against Social Media

The past two months have seen heightened state rhetoric threatening to arrest and prosecute those who criticize the government, especially through social media. In the first instance, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, in a speech delivered on 20 May during Ramadan festivities, [stated](#) that he had "directed ... security agencies to put a decisive stop to" the "misuse of social media." Simultaneously, Prime Minister Khalifah bin Salman Al Khalifah "directed the Ministry of Interior to deal harshly with" social-media accounts which encourage "breaking of ranks" from the "solidity of the social fabric." As [reported by Bahrain's official news agency](#), the Prime Minister ordered "intensified monitoring" and "firm deterrent measures" to "guarantee an end to electronic accounts harmful to society's security," which he characterized as "poison and filthy pus" spread by "enemies inside and outside." The King and Prime Minister's message was immediately [echoed](#) by the royally appointed Shura Council's Foreign Affairs Committee. The same day as the King's statement, 20 May, the Ministry of Interior issued a [statement announcing](#) that it was "taking the necessary legal actions against those involved in" social-media accounts which "deface Bahrain's reputation" from "a number of European countries like France and Germany, as well as Australia," along with Bahrain's regional enemies Qatar, Iraq, and Iran. The Ministry statement specifically named Sayed Yusuf al-Muhafdha and Hasan AbdulNabi "al-Sitri," who live in exile in Germany and Australia respectively. Al-Muhafdha fled abroad in 2013 after he was repeatedly arrested solely for exercising his rights to freedom of [peaceful assembly](#), expression, and association – including for his work at the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, which the government shut down in 2004. Al-Muhafdha was granted asylum in Germany. The Ministry's threat of legal action includes individuals "supplying erroneous information from inside the country" or "disseminating distorted messages" from accounts abroad – i.e., anyone who communicates with dissident exiles or who re-Tweets or follows accounts deemed subversive by the state.

The Ministry of Interior's official Twitter account, in a series of Tweets issued in the name of its Cyber Crime Directorate, echoed these threats. On 21 May, the Ministry account [Tweeted](#) that there were "legal procedures" underway against "anyone who propagates the distorted messages" of Adel Marzooq, a former writer for both *al-Wasat* and the government-affiliated newspaper *al-Bilad*, who now lives abroad in the UK. On 30 May, the Ministry of Interior account issued warnings in both [Arabic](#) and [English](#) that: "Those who follow inciting [*sic*] accounts that promote sedition and circulate their posts will be held legally accountable." Around the same time, Bahraini citizens and residents began receiving [text messages](#) in the name of the Cyber Crime Directorate telling recipients to "be warned" that "following biased [social-media] accounts that stir up social discord could subject you to legal liability."

The government's campaign of intimidation earned it an unusual rebuke from Twitter, which [commented](#) on its public policy account: "We agree with civil society that recent government statements in [#Bahrain](#) about critical online posts will, if implemented, pose a significant risk to free expression and journalism." The social-media company added a note in the same thread explaining to users how they could privately follow accounts without being subject to outside monitoring.

On 1 June, the General Directorate of Anti-Corruption & Economic & Electronic Security, the larger Ministry of Interior department housing the Cyber Crime Directorate, [repeated the warning](#) that "recirculating what is published by accounts that incite and stir up social discord, or giving them backing or support through comments supportive of the owners of these accounts and what they publish ... will subject the individual to legal liability," and stressing that this "liability" extended to "followers" of such accounts. On 3 June, the Directorate [reiterated](#) that it would "confront all accounts that spread content violating the law and insulting Bahrain."

This stepped-up rhetoric, aiming to intimidate and dissuade Bahrainis from engaging in open public discussion, has been accompanied by steps to increase punishments attached to the existing legal prohibition on critical discourse. The head of the Council of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense, & National Security, Mohamed Ebrahim Al BuAinain, [announced on 22 May](#) that, "in line with the directives issued to not be lenient with those who misuse the platform of social media," he would introduce a bill to "sharpen the punishment" of such "misuse" under the cybercrimes law. On the same day, [the King approved](#) a revised version of Article 11 of the counterterrorism law, which now applies a harsher punishment of up to five years in prison to "anyone who possesses or acquires ... any means of printing, recording, or publicity, of any sort, used or prepared to be used, even temporarily, to print, record, or broadcast" any "content including" the "propagation, praise, glorification, justification, acclamation, or encouragement of actions comprising terrorist activity." Bahrain's legal definition of terrorism (under Article 1 of Act No. 58 of 2006 on the Protection of Society from Terrorist Acts) includes actions "harm[ing] the national economy" or "damaging national unity."

Though the escalating rhetoric and legal threats have so far been directed primarily against Bahrainis living abroad, Bahrainis still in the country who run Twitter or other social-media accounts which occasionally criticize the government have also recently reported that they have been summoned for interrogation and/or that prosecutions have been opened against them because of Tweets. Former *al-Wasat* writer Jaafar Ali al-Jamri [wrote on his Twitter account](#) that he was been put on trial "in connection with Tweets" after being summoned for interrogation by the Office of Public Prosecution on 5 May. The lawyer Abdulla AbdulRahman Hashim [Tweeted](#) on 15 May that he had been summoned by the Office of Public Prosecution for interrogation about "the opinions I have put forth on Twitter lately about national issues and social concerns."

Conclusion

Amnesty International expresses grave alarm at the government's strident rhetorical campaign against freedom of expression, which has all but vanished in the country due to the state's clampdown in recent years. The aggressive moves to further suppress critical discussion on social media, in a context where people already fear prosecution for speaking candidly about national problems, will only exacerbate the repressive climate that pervades the country. Given the [recent claim](#) by the UK government that Bahrain is undergoing an "unprecedented ... reform programme," and in light of the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office's decision to prioritize "defend[ing] media freedom" (including on social media), it is particularly incumbent on the UK government

to use its leverage with Bahraini authorities to pressure them to end their repression and demand that they respect, protect, and fulfil the right to freedom of expression.
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