

BAHRAIN

Bahrain is one of the Gulf States in which there is an active debate led by journalists, about durable changes to strengthen press freedoms. Press Law 47, passed in 2002 includes 17 categories of offences and provides for sentences ranging from six months to five years imprisonment for criticising the state's official religion, the king and inciting actions that undermine state security: articles 160, 161 and 168, prescribe prison sentences for up to five years for possessing or disseminating thoughts that insult Islam, criticise the Monarchy or could "damage public interest".

In addition, the law allows fines of up to €6,000 for 14 other offences, including publishing information related to any case that is under investigation or being tried, reporting any offence against the head of a state that maintains diplomatic relations with the country or its accredited representatives, etc. Additional restrictions to press freedom came with the anti-terrorism law enacted in August 2006 and a number of online publications, mainly of political content are kept under close monitoring.

Founded in 2000, the Bahrain Journalists' Association represents the broad range of media and is predominantly concerned with protecting press freedom and defending individual journalists from prosecution through legal assistance, public protests and lobbying.

It is active in helping draft the new media law lobbying for over 40 amendments to the original. It has proposed recognition of electronic media in the new law, its statute, rights and obligations. It also monitors the introduction of Bahrain's new labour law, which will enable it to transform to a trade union and defend journalists working as well as professional rights.

A strong campaign spearheaded by BJA to make the deputies amend the law, failed after Islamist MPs in the Lower House insisted on including a clause to imprison journalists who criticise officials or parliamentarians. A new press law draft prepared and endorsed in May 2007 by the more liberal Upper House (Majlis Al-Shura or Consultative Council) is scheduled to be debated by the Council of Representatives.

In latest developments, the Bahraini government has introduced on 4 May 2008, amendments to press law 47/2002, of which the most important eliminate imprisonment sentences for journalists and prior censorship on publications. However, it is still possible to charge and jail journalists on the basis of the penal code and anti-terrorism law.

BJA plans to launch a strong campaign to lobby the Council of Representatives in order to improve further the law and developing it, to meet journalists' demands.

King Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa appears to be supportive of "progressive laws that guarantee the independence of the press and the freedom of honest and responsible expression ." No journalists have been imprisoned since he became the country's leader in 1999.

For further information visit BJA site: <http://www.bja-bh.org/en>