

BAHRAIN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. There were reports of arbitrary arrest and mistreatment of Shia Muslims involved in both violent attacks and peaceful protests against the government. Individuals were arrested for denigrating religious figures. The government monitored both Sunni and Shia religious activity, occasionally prevented access to certain places of worship, and censored sermons for content that it believed could raise tensions. The government allowed Ashura processions to occur across the country, but removed some Ashura banners. The court dissolved the Shia Islamic Ulema Council after ruling it was an unlicensed organization that engaged in illegal political activity. The Shia population experienced discrimination in access to government employment, educational opportunities, and some other government services, and was underrepresented in government. The country continued to face political unrest and sectarian tensions, with predominantly Shia groups calling for significant political reform. The government made progress in rebuilding mosques that were destroyed in 2011 and permitted religious gatherings and worship by a variety of non-Muslim religious groups.

There were reports of societal discrimination against Shia Muslims, stemming from political, economic, and religious divisions. Anti-Shia commentary appeared in the media and there were instances of vandalism of Shia mosques.

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with religious leaders, representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and political groups to discuss matters of religious freedom. The embassy pressed the government to protect religious sites and religious freedom, move forward on national reconciliation, and continue to reconstruct places of worship.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 1.3 million (July 2014 estimate), with Bahraini citizens making up slightly less than half the population. Citizens are 99 percent Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Bahais, and Jews constitute the remaining 1 percent. According to Jewish community members, there are approximately 36-40 Jewish citizens, or six families, in the country. Foreigners, mostly from South Asia and from other Arab countries, constitute an estimated 51

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percent of the total population. A majority of these immigrants are migrant workers from South Asia and the Philippines. More than half of resident foreigners are non-Muslim, including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), Bahais, and Sikhs.

Muslims make up 75.3 percent of the total population of citizens and noncitizens, and Christians comprise 8.1 percent of the total population. The government does not publish statistics regarding the sectarian breakdown between Shia and Sunni citizens; however, Shia are widely believed to represent a majority of the country's citizen population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites and hold religious parades and meetings in accordance with the customs observed in the country. The constitution states that Islam is the official religion and sharia is a principal source for legislation. The constitution prohibits discrimination regarding the rights and duties of citizens on the basis of religion or creed; however, there are no further laws to prevent discrimination, nor procedures to file a grievance.

The constitution does not explicitly impose restrictions on non-Muslims' right to choose, change, or practice their religion of choice, including the study, discussion, and promulgation of those beliefs. The penal code proscribes punishment of not more than one year's imprisonment or a fine of not more than 100 Bahraini dinars (\$265) for publicly defaming "one of the official religious groups, or their religious practices." It prescribes the same penalty for openly defaming a religious figure, although longer sentences than one year have been handed down.

Every Muslim religious group must obtain a license from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to operate. If any religious group organizes functions outside of its physical space without being licensed, it can be prosecuted based on the law. In practice, this has not occurred. Non-Muslim religious groups must register with the Ministry of Social Development (MOSD) to operate. In order to register, groups must submit an official letter requesting registration; copies of minutes from the founders' committee meeting; a detailed list of founders' names,

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ages, nationalities, occupations, and addresses; and other information. Religious groups also may need approval from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the Information Authority, or the Ministry of Interior (MOI), depending on the nature of the group's intended activities. Altogether 19 non-Muslim religious groups are registered with the MOSD, including Christian churches and a Hindu temple.

The civil and criminal legal systems consist of a complex mix of courts based on diverse legal sources, including both the Jaafari (Shia) and Maliki (Sunni) schools of Islamic jurisprudence, tribal law, and other civil codes and regulations.

Sharia governs personal status, and a person's rights can vary according to Shia or Sunni interpretation, as determined by the individual's faith or by the courts. The country's personal status law, based on a Sunni interpretation of sharia, regulates family matters such as inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce. The law is only applicable to the Sunni population, as Shia clerics and lawmakers have successfully opposed legislation that would have applied this personal status law to the Jaafari courts. The personal status law provides some protections for women, such as requiring consent for marriage and permitting women to include conditions in the marriage contract.

Construction of places of worship requires approvals from national and municipal entities. Government entities that direct the allocation of building permits are the MOJIA, the Islamic Affairs Waqf (endowment) Board, the country's five municipalities, the Survey and Restoration Directorate, and the Survey Department. The king has sole legal authority to allocate public land, although he can and generally does delegate this authority to government officials, including the prime minister.

The press and publications law prohibits anti-Islamic programming or publications in the media and mandates imprisonment for "exposing the state's official religion for offense and criticism." The law states that "any publication that prejudices the ruling system of the country and its official religion can be banned from publication by a ministerial order." Minority religious groups may produce and distribute religious media and publications provided they do not criticize Islam. The law does not further prohibit, restrict, or punish the importation, possession, or distribution of religious literature, clothing, or symbols.

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Islamic studies are mandatory for all Muslim public school students and are optional for non-Muslim students. The Maliki school of Sunni jurisprudence forms the basis of the Islamic studies portion of public school curriculum, which does not include the Jaafari traditions of Shia Islam. A separate committee of Shia teachers and clerics, along with members of the curriculum directorate, is responsible for the Islamic studies curriculum for the Jaafari Institute, which provides a standard nonreligious curriculum consistent with public schools while the Islamic studies portion of the curriculum follows Jaafari traditions of Shia Islam. The committee reviews and updates the curriculum on a regular basis. An estimated 1,200 students attend the institute from elementary level through high school, and receive a diploma on graduation. For adult religious education, there are five registered Jaafari *hawzas* (religious schools), some of which opt to receive funding available from government sources, and five registered Sunni religious schools.

The government does not designate religion or group on national identity documents. Birth certificate applications record a child's religion, but not denomination. The birth certificate itself does not include the child's religion.

Government Practices

The government continued to monitor religious activities and rhetoric, intervening in activities it deemed as "political" rather than "legitimate" religious activities. Police arrested Shia citizens engaged in both violent attacks against police and peaceful protests. There were reports of arbitrary arrest, excessive use of force, and mistreatment. The country experienced ongoing unrest related to Shia dissatisfaction over their unequal treatment compared to Sunnis. Because religion and political affiliation are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

After having his Bahraini citizenship stripped in November 2012, Shia cleric Shaikh Hussain Najati departed the country in April. On April 23, the MOI announced it deported Najati because he did not report his religious organization's activities to the government. Opposition groups stated he left the country because of extensive harassment by the MOI.

Several prominent Shia clerics arrested in 2011 and associated with the political opposition protest movement remained in prison at year's end.

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The government reported it continued to exert a limited level of control over religious practices when it perceived religious authorities as encouraging violence and sectarian hatred, including monitoring both Sunni and Shia Muslims and censoring sermons. The MOJIA threatened clerics with suspension if they did not renounce violence. In August the MOJIA suspended three clerics (two Shia and one Sunni) for violating the regulations prohibiting violent rhetoric. The MOI and public prosecutor summoned Shia clerics to question them regarding what they had said in sermons or speeches. For example, in November the MOI summoned a leading cleric in the dissolved Ulema Council, Sheikh Fadhel al Zaki, to question him about a sermon he gave which the government said incited hatred against the regime; he was released a short time later.

According to press reports, authorities arrested five individuals January 5 for attempting to pray at the site of the Al Barbaghi Shia mosque, which was demolished in 2011. On February 22, security forces summoned for questioning approximately 20 worshippers who had prayed at the same site.

Security forces employed tear gas at the Imam Sadiq Shia mosque during protests on February 14. The government stated that, while police were dispersing protesters during a violent demonstration, one of the canisters of tear gas went through the window of the mosque. Media reported February 25 the MOI announced its intent to investigate an incident after video circulating on social media showed police firing tear gas into a *matam* (Shia religious cultural center) in Saar village where dozens of people were attending a funeral.

The government arrested individuals on charges related to blasphemy and defamation of religion. On February 28, the government announced that four people had been arrested on charges of defaming religious figures, based on images and phrases they had published on social media. Their social media accounts were suspended and the suspects were referred to the public prosecutor. In December the High Criminal Court announced that a verdict would be issued in January 2015. In October opposition news outlets reported the government had embarked on a campaign of arrests against activists using Twitter, accusing them either of defamation and slander or insulting figures of Islam.

The government permitted Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura, on the tenth day of the Islamic holy month of Muharram, and Arbaeen forty days later. The government, however, summoned prominent clerics before Ashura processions to tell them they should avoid politicizing the religious

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commemoration. Some religious chanters and clerics were reportedly summoned to their local police stations for questioning about their sermons, religious beliefs, and personal views. Shia activists reported MOI personnel removed some Ashura flags, banners, and decorations from streets and private property. The government said the banners were removed for unspecified violations.

The High Administrative Court issued a judgment January 29 ordering the dissolution of the Islamic Ulema Council (IUC), the main assembly of Shia clerics in the country, and a liquidation of its assets, stating the IUC was unlicensed and “used religion as a cover” for political activity, thus finding in favor of the government which filed the suit in 2013. The IUC chairman was summoned to appear at the Criminal Investigative Directorate in May and questioned regarding participation in a rally calling for the release of imprisoned clergy, but no charges were filed against him. In June the High Administrative Court of Appeals upheld the January 29 judgment, and in July the MOJIA announced that it would take steps to dissolve the IUC in accordance with the court ruling. On November 17, the Court of Cassation, the highest court, ruled against the IUC’s request for a suspension of the June verdict, on the grounds that the verdict had already been carried out. At year’s end, the IUC’s case to overturn the June decision had not yet been heard by the Court of Cassation.

The government did not usually interfere with what it considered “legitimate” religious observances and permitted non-Muslim communities that had registered with the government to maintain places of worship and display religious symbols. Security forces stated they monitored religious gatherings and funerals to maintain peace and security.

Shia and Sunni citizens maintained equal rights before the law. Although prevailing evidence indicates Shia constitute over 50 percent of citizens, Sunnis continued to dominate political life. Of the 40 members of the Shura Council, the upper house of parliament appointed in December, 17 were Shia, one Jewish, and one Christian. Six of the 23 cabinet ministers, also appointed in December, were Shia, including one of the five deputy prime ministers.

The government continued to carry out the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to rebuild 30 Shia mosques that were damaged or destroyed during the 2011 unrest. The head of the Jaafari Endowment reported that 23 had been reconstructed by year’s end, and that of the seven remaining, four were under construction and three were under study. Observers

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reported that by year's end, 12 mosques had been completely reconstructed and reopened, including seven rebuilt by the communities where they were located. Another 15 were under construction; of these 15, 12 appeared from the outside to be nearly complete. This work proceeded on the basis of legal and administrative preparation completed in 2013. During 2013, the government had transferred construction management to the Jaafari Endowment Administration, secured and registered land titles, allocated a budget, and completed construction on three mosques, while another seven had been rebuilt independently. The government announced in November 2013 that construction on the 22 remaining mosques would be complete by the end of 2014. In June the government changed the locks on one of the mosques rebuilt in 2013 on the morning of a community-organized reopening event, stating it was protecting worshippers and the building itself from harm during unofficial celebrations. The government restored access to the mosque a short time later. In December the government tore down community-led reconstruction of one of the remaining mosques, reportedly because of safety and code concerns, and immediately began its own reconstruction effort on the site.

The government-run television station did not broadcast Friday sermons from Shia mosques, while broadcasts from Sunni mosques appeared regularly on the channel.

Public officials sometimes alleged Shia opposition members were supporters of terrorism. In October Minister of Media Affairs Sameera Rajab accused Shia cleric Isa Qassim of supporting terrorists. Then-parliamentarian Jassim Al-Saeedi gave a sermon in October in which he implored God to destroy the Shia.

The government continued working with a tripartite committee consisting of a representative from the Ministry of Labor, the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU) to address dismissals and reinstatements of Shia workers dismissed in the wake of the 2011 unrest. In March the committee's members signed an agreement to resolve outstanding worker reinstatement cases. Because of this agreement, the complaint filed with the International Labor Organization was dropped. As of year's end, GFBTU reported that roughly half of the 165 cases identified and agreed upon in the March agreement had been resolved.

Sunni citizens often received preference for employment in sensitive government positions, the managerial ranks of the civil service and the military, and for government scholarships. Shia asserted they were unable to obtain government positions, especially in the security services, because of their religious affiliation.

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Few Shia citizens held significant posts in the defense and internal security forces. Shia politicians and activists stated the government and certain business elites discriminated against Shia citizens in employment and promotions. Senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes reportedly favored Sunni candidates. Educational, social, and municipal services in most Shia neighborhoods were generally viewed as inferior to those in Sunni communities. The government stated it had a policy of non-discrimination in employment, promotions, and the provision of social and educational services.

Shia politicians and activists stated the government's naturalization and citizenship processes favored Sunni applicants over Shia applicants. According to the law, Arab applicants with 15 years residence and non-Arab applicants with 25 years residence are eligible to apply for citizenship, and the king also has the authority to grant and revoke citizenship. There were reports the citizenship law was not applied uniformly. Political societies and human rights groups said the government allowed foreign Sunni employees of the security services who had lived in the country for fewer than 15 years to apply for citizenship. Shia and Sunni communities reported that these naturalized citizens received government-provided housing more quickly than non-naturalized citizens, whose names remained on waiting lists for houses.

The government made some progress in carrying out BICI recommendations to increase recruiting of Shia in police positions. Representatives of the Shia community estimated the MOI has employed approximately 400 Shia in community police and school guard positions, but reported that Shia were not represented in such institutions as the riot police. Government officials reported some Shia recruits faced intimidation from their communities, which dissuaded other Shia from pursuing jobs in the security sector.

The government funded, monitored, and exercised control over official Muslim religious institutions, including Shia and Sunni mosques; religious community centers; Shia and Sunni religious endowments; and the religious courts, representing both the Shia- and Sunni-affiliated schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs reviewed and approved clerical appointments within both the Sunni and Shia communities.

In May a royal edict established the Anti-Hate and Sectarianism Committee, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Jawad bin Salem Al Arayyedh, and whose members include the ministers of interior, education, social development and

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justice, Islamic affairs, and endowments. The stated purpose of the committee was to develop policy and programs to address hate discourse from religious platforms, mass media and communication, education, or political and social groups, to enhance the values of tolerance, reconciliation, and coexistence, and consolidate unity among members of society.

The government reported there were 635 licensed Sunni mosques and 80 Sunni community centers, while the number of licensed Shia places of worship included 758 mosques and 610 *matams*. All licensed places of worship were funded by the state. In newer residential developments such as Hamad Town and Isa Town, often containing mixed Shia and Sunni populations, observers reported there tended to be a disproportionate number of Sunni mosques.

In May the Catholic Church held a ceremony marking the start of construction on a new cathedral for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, which the government had invited to relocate its headquarters to the country. The cathedral will serve as the seat of the bishop who ministers to Catholics in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Representatives of the Shia community reported discrimination against Shia in a variety of sectors. Because religion and political affiliation are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Regional Sunni-Shia tensions and historical political divisions continued to affect intra-Muslim relations. Tensions between Shia and Sunni Muslims stemmed from social and economic, in addition to religious, factors, according to a range of in-country reports. Shia Muslims were believed to have a higher unemployment rate and lower socio-economic status than Sunni Muslims.

Societal pressure reinforced the constitution's implication that Muslims were forbidden to change their religion.

Local newspapers detailed vandalism at Shia mosques. In April vandals shattered the windows and damaged furniture in the 1000-year-old Saa'sa'a Bin Sohan Mosque. On October 4, unknown individuals attacked Al Imam Al Hadi's Mosque, breaking the windows. The government launched an investigation, but its status was unknown at year's end.

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Anti-Shia commentary appeared in pro-government broadcasts and publications and on social media. In July columnist Tareq al Aamer was dismissed from his position at the local daily *Al-Bilad* after including anti-Shia rhetoric in his column.

Representatives of various non-Muslim religious groups reported that people outside their respective religious groups were generally accepting of their presence and activities in the country, and that they generally operated without threats or intimidation. Some citizens however, expressed concern about the plans to build the Catholic cathedral.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with religious leaders, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss matters of religious freedom, especially to inquire about the status of the mosque reconstruction projects and the welfare of detainees. Embassy and visiting U.S. officials regularly raised concerns about national reconciliation and religious freedom with a range of government officials, including the ministers of justice, interior, and social development; members of parliament; and the Shura Council. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor was expelled in July for meeting with opposition activists without the presence of a government representative; he returned in December, when he discussed national reconciliation, the importance of participation in political processes, and human rights issues with government representatives and political and civil societies. The embassy continued to press the government to protect religious sites and religious freedom, conduct a dialogue with opposition groups, and implement the BICI's recommendations, including reconstruction of places of worship.