



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Bahrain

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
March 11, 2008

Bahrain is a monarchy with a population of approximately 725,000, approximately 430,000 of whom are citizens, according to official figures. King Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa is the head of state and all branches of government. The king appoints a cabinet of ministers, half of whom are members of the Al-Khalifa royal family. The 2002 constitution reinstated a legislative body with one elected chamber, the Council of Deputies, and one appointed chamber, the Shura Council. All political societies participated in the November and December 2006 parliamentary and municipal elections. Trained local observers did not report significant problems during the elections, although there were allegations that the government manipulated general poll center vote counts in some cases and gerrymandered political districts. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

Citizens did not have the right to change their government. The government restricted civil liberties, including freedoms of press, speech, assembly, association, and some religious practices. Although citizens were not able to form political parties, the law authorized registered political societies to run candidates and participate in other political activities. The judiciary lacked independence, and corruption was a problem. Domestic violence against women and children was common, as was discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity. Trafficking in persons and restrictions on the rights of expatriate workers remained problems. The Shi'a majority population was routinely discriminated against.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed politically motivated killings.

However, on December 17, a 31-year-old man, Ali Jasem, died after participating in a protest where Shi'a activists clashed with security forces. Although the official autopsy reported he died of "acute cardiovascular and respiratory collapse," local human rights observers alleged his death was linked to inhaling tear gas used to disperse demonstrators.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibits such practices; however, there were reports during the year that security forces employed them.

According to a June 1 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, security forces severely beat Ali Saeed Al-Khabbaz and Hassan Yousif Hameed after arresting them on May 21 while breaking up a gathering near the house of political activist Hassan Mushaima. According to HRW, on May 29, Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials informed the two men's families that they were in a military hospital. The hospital declined to give the families any information about their injuries. On May 29, the Arabic daily *Al-Wasat* published photos of the men depicting swelling and bruising on their faces and heads. According to HRW, Hameed sustained a broken jaw. On June 7, both men were released following a meeting between the minister of the interior and Secretary General of Al-Wifaq Islamic Society Shaikh Ali Salman. There was no investigation into the alleged abuses.

Following protests that occurred on December 18 and 20, security forces arrested dozens of protestors and detained them in the Adliyah detention center. According to HRW, some detainees were reportedly tortured and abused in prison by

judicial interrogators that beat and electrocuted them. One detainee, Maytham Badr al-Shaykh, reported that interrogators sexually assaulted and electrocuted him. Officials denied the allegations of abuse.

Human rights activists, including the dissolved Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), continued to demand government accountability for alleged acts of torture committed prior to 2001.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions generally met international standards. Unlike in previous years, the government did not permit any visits by international human rights observers.

In August 2006 the quasi-governmental Supreme Council for Women (SCW) conducted a visit of the country's women's prison in Isa Town. There was no publicly released SCW report on the visit.

In 2005 a Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) team made two visits to Jaw Prison, the country's men's prison. BHRS conducted interviews with staff and 56 inmates. There were reports from some inmates of mistreatment in the detention section where new inmates are first held before being assigned a permanent cell.

Although International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) officials visited the country during the year, they did not request prison visits. Bahrain Red Crescent Society officials reported that ICRC officials had not visited prisons since the release of all political prisoners in 2000.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The MOI is responsible for public security. It controls the Public Security Force and the extensive security service, which are responsible for maintaining internal order. The Bahrain Defense Force is responsible for defending against external threats and also monitors internal security. The security forces were generally effective in maintaining internal order.

A widespread lack of transparency made corruption difficult to assess. The press reported that authorities jailed and/or fined law enforcement officials for misconduct, most often for accepting bribes.

During the year there were no known instances of police officers punished for committing human rights abuses. There is no mechanism in place for investigating security force abuses. In practice the MOI responded to allegations of abuse and public complaints by establishing ad hoc investigation committees. There is no evidence that these committees have ever issued public reports of their findings.

Arrest and Detention

In order to apprehend felony suspects, the police must convince the judge based on evidence to issue an arrest warrant. Police and security forces must transfer suspects to the public prosecutor's office immediately, and generally respect that requirement in practice. Within seven days of arrest, a detainee must appear before a judge in the public prosecutor's office. If the judge decides the suspect is a flight risk or a danger to society, a maximum additional 45 days detention is permitted while the investigation is carried out. This process may continue through subsequent reviews by different judges, but pretrial detention may not exceed six months. Judges may grant bail to a suspect and do so regularly.

The 2006 counterterrorism legislation allows the public prosecution to detain a terrorism suspect for a five-day period. Upon request, the public prosecutor may extend this period based on the needs of the investigation for up to an additional 10 days. At the end of this period, the detainee must be transferred to the public prosecution and questioned within three days. The public prosecutor must then decide to issue a detention order or to release the detainee. The detention order may not exceed 60 days.

Detainees were generally allowed prompt access to visiting family members. Detainee access to attorneys was often restricted in the early stages of detention; attorneys must seek a court order to confer with clients. The state provided counsel to indigent detainees. After conviction attorneys required the prison director's permission to visit a client in jail.

On May 18, the king ordered the public prosecution to drop all charges against Hassan Mushaima, head of the Haq Movement; Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, Director of the dissolved BCHR; and Shaker Abdulhussain, a Shi'a activist. Police arrested the men on February 2, and prosecutors charged them with inciting hatred, encouraging law-breaking, and

publishing false news. The arrest sparked riots in several Shi'a villages.

On September 30, according to the BHRS, police arrested Khalid Nour and Hussain al-Ali for taking an illegal commission and held them for 48 hours before granting access to an attorney. At year's end, the authorities had not announced charges against either Nour or al-Ali, and they remained in detention.

On December 24, according to the Associated Press, Hafez Hafez, a lawyer for some of the detainees who were arrested by police following the December 20 clashes between Shi'a protestors and security forces, reported that the government refused to allow the detainees access to legal counsel or family members.

Amnesty

On February 25, a royal pardon released and dropped all charges against Mohamed al-Sahlawi and Hussein al-Habash. Authorities had charged them with promoting change of the system of the state through illegal means and possessing publications containing false information that "would cause disruption to public security and damage the public interest" in connection with plans to distribute leaflets calling for a boycott of the 2006 elections.

On August 1, the government initiated an amnesty for illegal workers. On December 31, the amnesty was extended until Jan 31, 2008. Under the terms of the amnesty, any expatriate living or working illegally in the country may legalize his or her status without penalty or return to his or her home country without paying fines.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the government did not respect judicial independence in practice. Courts were subject to government pressure regarding verdicts, sentencing, and appeals. There were allegations of corruption in the judicial system. The constitution provides that the king appoint all judges by royal decree. The king also serves as chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council, the body responsible for supervising the work of the courts and the public prosecution.

The legal system is based on a mix of British civil law, common law, Shari'a (Islamic law), and traditional laws. The judiciary is organized into two separate branches: the civil law courts and the Shari'a courts.

The civil law courts, through their criminal and civil branches, adjudicate all civil and commercial cases, criminal cases, and personal status cases involving non-Muslims. The courts of minor cases (the lower courts and the Court of Execution) have one judge with jurisdiction over minor civil, commercial, and misdemeanor cases. The high civil courts have three judges with jurisdiction over larger civil and commercial cases, felonies, and personal status cases involving non-Muslims. The Civil High Court of Appeal has a panel of three judges and hears appeals. Both the civil and criminal court systems have a supreme court of appeal, and a court of cassation, the final appellate court.

The Shari'a courts have jurisdiction over personal status cases involving citizen and noncitizen Muslims. There are two levels: the Senior Shari'a Court and the High Shari'a Court of Appeal. At each level is a Sunni Maliki Shari'a court with jurisdiction over all personal status cases brought by Sunni Muslims and a Ja'afari Shari'a court with jurisdiction over cases brought by Shi'a Muslims. The High Shari'a Court of Appeal is composed of a minimum of two judges. In the event of a disagreement, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) provides a third judge, and the decision is based on a majority vote. There are 11 judges in the Sunni Maliki Shari'a courts and 12 judges in the Shi'a Ja'afari Shari'a courts.

The Constitutional Court rules on the constitutionality of laws and statutes. The court's membership consists of a president and six members, all appointed by the king. These seven judges serve nine-year terms and cannot be removed before their terms expire. The court's determination is final and binding, according to the constitution.

The Bahrain Defense Force maintains a separate court system that only tries military personnel accused of offenses under the Military Code of Justice. The MOI has a similar system for trying police officials. There were no reports of either court considering cases involving civilian, common criminal, or security cases during the year.

Trial Procedures

According to the constitution, defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty. Civil and criminal trial procedures provided for an open trial. Juries are not used. By law, defendants have the right to prompt consultation with an attorney of their choice. The state provided counsel to defendants who could not afford to hire an attorney. Defendants are present during trial proceedings, and they have the right to present witnesses and evidence on their behalf and question witnesses against them. No law governs defendants' access to government-held evidence, and the government often reviewed evidence prior to defendants' access to it. Women's legal rights vary according to Shi'a or Sunni interpretations of Islamic law.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens may bring civil suits before the court seeking cessation of or damages for human rights violations; however, there was impunity for alleged torturers that the government maintained was granted by the 2001 general amnesty.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution provides for personal freedom and freedom from arbitrary interference with privacy, home, and correspondence except under the provisions of the law and under judicial supervision; however, the government continued to infringe on citizens' right to privacy. Telephone calls, e-mail, and personal correspondence remained subject to monitoring. Police informer networks were extensive and sophisticated.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for restricted freedom of speech and of the press, but the government limited the exercise of these rights in practice. Both censorship and self-censorship took place.

The 2006 association law forbids any speech or discussion infringing on public order or morals. In private settings, individuals openly expressed critical opinions regarding domestic political and social issues. There was considerable freedom of expression on the Internet, in letters to the editor, and occasionally on state-run television call-in shows.

The government enforced at its discretion the 2002 suspended press law, which provides for restricted freedom of speech and press. The law provides for prison sentences of at least six months for criticizing Islam or the king or inciting actions that undermine state security. The law allows fines up to \$5,300 (2,000 dinars) for 14 other offenses, including publicizing statements issued by a foreign state or organization before obtaining the consent of the minister of information; publishing any news reports that may adversely affect the value of the national currency; reporting any offense against the head of a state that maintains diplomatic relations with the country; or publishing offensive remarks towards an accredited representative of a foreign country because of acts connected with the person's position.

There was no government-owned print media, but the Ministry of Information exercised considerable control over local privately-owned print media. The government generally did not restrict press coverage of international issues and local issues focusing on opposition politics and economic and commercial issues. However, government censorship took place. Representatives from the Ministry of Information actively monitored and blocked local stories on sensitive matters, especially those related to sectarianism, national security, or criticism of the royal family, the Saudi royal family, and judges.

Journalists also practiced widespread self-censorship. According to some members of the press, government officials contacted editors directly and asked them to stop writing about certain subjects or asked them to not publish a press release or a story. In the runup to the November 2006 parliamentary elections, there were reports that the government paid journalists to represent it favorably. In addition, the Press and Publications Directorate at the Ministry of Information was responsible for reviewing all books and publications that were ready to go to print and issuing printing licenses allowing the authors of these books to publish them.

In October Ghada Jamsheer, a women's rights activist and president of the Bahrain Women's Petition, reported that government officials effectively banned her from appearing in the media, due to her calls for the dissolution of the Supreme Council of Women in April. Media officials and editors-in-chief claim there is no ban on her in the media.

On March 18, the chairman of the Bahrain Journalists' Association and editor-in-chief of *Al-Ayam* newspaper, Isa al-Shaiji, filed a complaint at the public prosecutor's office against Member of Parliament (MP) Mohammed Khalid, alleging that Khalid insulted him and his family during a debate in the Council of Deputies on February 20. In May the Legislative Committee refused to withdraw Khalid's parliamentary immunity, effectively preventing the case from proceeding.

On April 19, authorities convicted in absentia Dr. Salah al-Bandar and sentenced him to four years in prison and a \$265 (100 dinars) fine. In September 2006 authorities deported al-Bandar and accused him of seizing official government documents and stealing private checks, after he distributed a report claiming a group of high-level government officials attempted to manipulate the 2006 election process. At the time, al-Bandar, a British citizen, was an advisor to the president of the Central Informatics Organization, which originally had responsibility for conducting elections. In October 2006 the

High Criminal Court issued an injunction against the publishing of any news, commentary, or other information related to the report or the legal case against al-Bandar, including on the Internet. The gag order remained in effect at year's end.

On August 29, a prosecutor summoned Isa al-Shaiji for questioning regarding a May 10 complaint filed by Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood preacher Wagdy Ghunaim, who alleged that al-Shaiji published articles critical of Ghunaim's views. The prosecutor released al-Shaiji on bond the same day. On November 14, the government withdrew Ghunaim's residency permit. Ghunaim then hired a proxy to continue pursuit of the case in his absence. At year's end, the case was still pending.

The government owned and operated all local radio and television stations and maintained control over the selection of the locally-based Al-Jazeera correspondent. Some public demonstrations were not covered on government-owned television.

Radio and television broadcasts in Arabic and Farsi from countries in the region, including by satellite, were received without interference. Satellite television systems provided unimpeded access to international broadcasts.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted use of the Internet. The government is a major shareholder in the Bahrain Telecommunications Company (Batelco), the country's principal telecommunications company. Batelco prohibited user access to Internet sites considered to be antigovernment or anti-Islamic. E-mail use was reportedly monitored. The government has invoked the press code to justify the questioning of some journalists and bloggers.

The government attempted to block local access to numerous Web sites, including local Web logs and chat sites; human rights Web sites; sites containing information about Arab Christians; and the Wa'ad political society's Web site. Public discussion of blocked Web sites is widespread. Most residents have access to the Internet in the home, workplace, or Internet cafés. The number of Internet users increased by 32.7 per cent in 2006, and at year's end, there were approximately 61,000 Internet subscribers. Most low-wage laborers use Internet cafés. Many users were able to access blocked sites through alternate servers. The government regularly monitored Web sites and blogs maintained by local activists.

In late 2006 the government blocked some Web logs until their authors removed any references to the case of Dr. Salah al-Bandar.

After the November and December 2006 elections, a number of local bloggers were blocked on the Internet for commenting upon election irregularities.

Under the law, Web site administrators face the same libel laws that apply to print journalists, and Web masters are held jointly responsible for all of the content posted on their Web sites or chat rooms.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The constitution provides for academic freedom, although the government limited this freedom in practice. Academics avoided contentious political issues. There was a disproportionately high number of Sunni professors in universities. The university's hiring and admissions policies favored Sunnis and others who were assumed to support the government. The proportion of Shi'a students was estimated to be close to the approximately 70 percent of Shi'a in the general population, although there are proportionately fewer Shi'a professors.

On November 26, press reports indicated that the government began granting licenses for publication of several books pertaining to Islamic history, modern Bahraini history, and democracy for which licenses were previously denied.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for the right of free assembly, but the law restricts the exercise of this right.

The July 2006 amendments to the association law codified restrictions on where and when public gatherings or demonstrations can be held. According to the law, organizers must submit requests for public gatherings or demonstrations to the MOI with at least 72 hours' advance notice. The request must be signed by three law-abiding citizens from the area in which the gathering is to take place. If there is no response to the request, the gathering may proceed. According to the law, the head of public security is required to notify the organizers of any public gathering about any changes to the request (such as location, time, or route) at least 48 hours prior to the event. Organizers of an unauthorized gathering may be held responsible for any damage to public or private property, in addition to prison

sentences ranging from three to six months.

The law prohibits any public gatherings or demonstrations near hospitals, airports, commercial centers, or facilities designated to be security-related by the MOI. Public gatherings and demonstrations are not permitted after 11:00 p.m. or before 7:00 a.m. without written permission from the head of public security or his deputy. The law states that funeral processions may not be turned into political rallies and security officials may be present at any public gathering.

Government security forces intervened in some demonstrations during the year.

On May 19, police used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up a seminar in support of political activists Hassan Mushaima and Abdulhadi al-Khawaja. A number of MPs and Sunni and Shi'a clerics were in attendance. Chairman of the Wa'ad Society Ebrahim Sharif reportedly suffered minor injuries.

On May 21, police broke up a gathering near the house of political activist Hassan Mushaima and arrested Ali Saeed al-Khabbaz and Hassan Yousif Hameed. According to a June 1 HRW report, police beat Al-Khabbaz and Hameed while in custody. On June 7, both men were released.

On December 17, security forces used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse Shi'a activists protesting alleged abuses by security forces during the 1980s and 1990s. Demonstrators threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at the security forces. Ali Jassem, 31-year-old Shi'a activist, died directly after the protests. While the official autopsy reported that the man died of "acute cardiovascular and respiratory collapse," local human rights observers alleged that he died as a result of inhaling the tear gas police used to disperse demonstrators.

On December 18 and 20, street clashes between Shi'a protestors and security forces also occurred. On December 20, according to press reports, approximately 500 protestors rallied over the December 17 death of Ali Jassem. The police reported that some attacked and severely beat a policeman and stole his service weapon. Protestors set a police vehicle on fire. Security forces responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. According to Reuters, during and following the clashes security forces arrested dozens of protestors, including opposition political activists. At year's end, fifteen individuals faced charges of arson, attempted murder of a police officer, and theft of a weapon.

The MOI reportedly told the owners of some venues to close their premises to prevent meetings from occurring, primarily at mosques and "ma'tams," or Shi'a community centers. The number of times this happened was unknown.

The government limited and controlled political gatherings. The law regulates election campaigns and prohibits "election meetings" at worship centers, universities, schools, government buildings, and public institutions. July 2006 amendments to this law lowered the voting age to 20 years of age and provided for a 10 year loss of the right to vote or stand as a candidate for any person sentenced to more than six months in prison for any crime. The electoral restriction was not enforced in the November and December 2006 elections, as the names of citizens sentenced for more than six months appeared on the voter registration lists.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for the right of freedom of association; however, the government limited this right in practice. Although the government does not allow the formation of political parties, it authorized registered political societies to run candidates and participate in other political activities.

Organized groups in the country are either civil society groups registered by the Ministry of Social Development, political societies registered by the MOJ, or labor unions registered with the Ministry of Labor (MOL). Each of these is subject to registration requirements. Based on the proposed by-laws a new group submits, the government decides whether its proposed activities are social or political in nature. The law prohibits any activity by an unlicensed society and any political activity by a licensed civil society. The law provides the Ministry of Social Development the right to reject the registration of any society if its services are deemed unnecessary, are already provided by another society, are contrary to state security, or are aimed at reviving a previously dissolved society.

The law requires all political societies to have bylaws signed by the founders in order to register or maintain registration. The society's principles, goals, and programs must not run counter to either the principles of Shari'a law or the national interest as interpreted by the judiciary. The law requires that societies must not be based on sectarian, geographic, or class identity and have no military or paramilitary wing. When submitting an application for registration, the political society must submit three copies of the bylaws signed by all members, a list of all members and copies of their residency cards, a financial statement identifying the society's sources of funding and bank information, and the name of who will act as the society's proxy. Upon receipt of an application, the MOJ has 45 days to request in writing any necessary clarifications and/or statements and a total of 60 days to approve or deny a political society's registration request. Approvals must be published in the official gazette; denials must be accompanied by written statements that detail reasons for the denial.

The law requires that any civil society organization submit two copies of the bylaw of the association signed by all founding members; two copies of the minutes of meetings of the founding committee stating names of founding members, their professions, their place of residence, and containing their signatures; and a registration fee. The law also requires that all members be 18 years of age or older. The applications are required to be examined by the Ministry of Social Development within 30 days. If after 60 days the ministry has not announced the registration of a society, the application is considered rejected. The society may file a complaint, which the ministry has 60 days to review. If after 30 days the ministry has not responded, the association may refer the application to the High Civil Court, which may annul the decision or refuse the complaint.

The Ministry of Social Development has not allowed the National Committee for the Unemployed to register as a civil society group because of the political nature of its activities.

The Bahrain Youth Human Rights Society (BYHRS) also remained unsuccessful in legally registering as a civil society organization. The society first applied for registration in 2005. According to supporters of the group, authorities told them that the society failed to meet one of the requirements of the 1989 associations act because some of its members were under 18 years of age. Members of the society also speculate that government officials are enforcing the 1989 law to the letter because of ties between BYHRS and the now-dissolved BCHR.

On November 27, the president of the BYHRS, Mohammed Al-Moskati, appeared before a lower criminal court judge to answer charges of "operating an unregistered association" under the terms of the 1989 associations act. Al-Moskati asserted that the act was inconsistent with Bahrain's international commitments as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The judge adjourned the trial until January 2008, and Al-Moskati was not taken into custody. The BYHRS remained active at year's end.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution states that Islam is the official religion and that Shari'a (Islamic law) is a principal source for legislation. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of worship, and the freedom to perform religious rites and hold religious parades and meetings, in accordance with the customs observed in the country; however, the government placed some limitations on the exercise of this right. Members of other religious groups who practice their faith privately do so without interference from the government.

All other religious groups must obtain a permit from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to operate and hold religious meetings. Depending on a group's activities, it may also need approvals from the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Information, and/or the Ministry of Education.

The government continued to exert a level of control and to monitor both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and there continued to be government discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in certain fields. Historically there is evidence of discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in recruitment for the country's military and domestic security services. During the year the Ministry of Defense did not recruit Shi'a for military service. During the year the MOI made increasing efforts to recruit additional Shi'a into nonmilitary security agencies.

The Muslim population is approximately 70 percent Shi'a and 30 percent Sunni. Non-Muslims account for approximately 1 percent of the population. There are numerous Christian churches of different denominations, four Sikh temples, and several official and unofficial Hindu temples located in Manama and its suburbs. The only Jewish synagogue has been voluntarily closed since 1948.

The government funds, monitors, and closely controls all official religious institutions, including Shi'a and Sunni mosques, Shi'a ma'tams (religious community centers), Shi'a and Sunni waqfs (religious endowments), and the religious courts.

During the year there were reports of clashes between the government and elements of the Shi'a majority population, who were often critical of the Sunni-dominated government. Problems continued to exist during the year, stemming primarily from the government's perceived unequal treatment of Shi'a in the country. Many of these incidents involved Shi'a protestors burning tires or throwing Molotov cocktails at security forces. There were reports that the security forces used rubber bullets and tear gas to break up some of these demonstrations, which Shi'a protestors and other local human rights observers alleged led to the death of a 31-year-old man after a December 17 protest.

The government may appropriate or withhold funding to reward or punish particular individuals or places of worship, although reports of this were not common. There were no reported closures of mosques or ma'tams during the year; however, in newer towns such as Hamad Town and Isa Town, which often have mixed Sunni and Shi'a populations, there tended to be a higher number of Sunni mosques. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has not approved applications for the Shi'a community to establish ma'tams in Hamad Town. As an alternative, individuals in the Shi'a community have converted parts of their homes into ma'tams.

Sunni and Shi'a waqfs made funding decisions for new mosque construction. Although both Sunni and Shi'a waqfs were reportedly well-endowed and able to fund mosque construction, new mosques were dependent upon government approval of land allocation. The government's approval of land allocation for mosques was not transparent and reportedly not proportionate to the Shi'a community's relative population in the country.

There were reports that at year's end the government had not made a decision on a 2005 request by one Christian church to form a second parish and obtain a resident visa for the proposed permanent priest.

The government rarely interfered with what it considered to be legitimate religious observances. During the year the government permitted public religious events, most notably the large annual Shi'a holiday of Ashura, but police closely monitored and limited these gatherings. The MOI's policy of providing full media coverage of Ashura events continued this year. There were no restrictions on the number of citizens permitted to make pilgrimages to Shi'a shrines and to holy sites in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The government monitored travel to Iran and scrutinized carefully those who chose to pursue religious study there.

Christian congregations and churches were registered with the government and operated freely. The majority of those who attended Christian churches were expatriates. Events at churches occurred frequently and were advertised regularly in the English press, including the hosting of guest speakers from many countries.

The law forbids election speeches in worship centers, but sermons often touched upon political themes. Proselytizing by non-Muslims is illegal and the government prohibited anti-Islamic writings; however, Bibles and other Christian publications are displayed and sold openly in local bookstores that also sold Islamic and other religious literature. Churches also sold Christian materials, including books, music, and messages from Christian leaders, openly and without restriction. Religious tracts of all branches of Islam, cassettes of sermons delivered by Muslim preachers from other countries, and publications of other religions were readily available. Christian pastors were permitted to provide literature to Christian inmates and to prison libraries.

The MOJIA has repeatedly denied a Baha'i congregation a license to function, although the group has not sought official recognition in many years. The Baha'i community continued to gather and worship freely without government interference. While the MOJIA views Baha'ism as blasphemous and an inauthentic offshoot of Islam, some other government ministries included Baha'i as a religion choice in "drop-down" computer menus for citizens applying for certain government documents.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Discrimination against the majority Shi'a population remained a problem. Sunnis received preference for employment in sensitive government positions and in the managerial ranks of the civil service. The royal family is Sunni, and the defense and internal security forces were predominantly Sunni. Although Shi'a citizens held posts in these forces, with few exceptions, positions were not high-ranking. In the private sector, Shi'a tended to be employed in lower paid, less skilled jobs. Educational, social, and municipal services in most Shi'a neighborhoods were inferior to those found in Sunni communities.

In private conversations and in Internet forums, Shi'a consistently complained of discrimination, especially in public sector jobs, positions at the university, and security-related positions. Although the percentage of Shi'a students was close to the approximately 70 percent of Shi'a population in the country, only about 40 percent of university faculty was Shi'a. Shi'a composed a high percentage of the country's unemployed.

The Jewish community had approximately 36 members. Travel to Israel is officially prohibited for all Bahraini citizens, although some are able to travel there. One Jewish citizen served in the Shura Council. Some anti-Semitic political commentary and editorial cartoons appeared, usually linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These articles and depictions occurred without government response. Although the one synagogue is not open due to the small size of the Jewish community in the country, Jews practiced their faith privately without interference from the government.

The government has not enacted specific laws to combat discrimination.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2007 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution provides for freedom of movement, except as modified by law and judicial decisions. Citizens were free to move within the country and change their place of residence or work.

The law provides that the government may reject applications to obtain or renew passports for reasonable cause, but the applicant has the right to appeal such decisions before the High Civil Court. There is no definition in the statute of the

phrase "reasonable cause." In practice authorities rely on determinations of national security when adjudicating passport applications.

The constitution permits the government to revoke citizenship only in the cases of treason and other such cases "according to the law." The government has not revoked the citizenship of any person under the 2002 constitution.

Opposition groups claimed that the naturalization process was politically driven to manipulate demographics for voting purposes and to keep Shi'a out of the police and defense forces, which are allegedly dominated by naturalized Sunnis. Although naturalization requirements are clearly defined in law, adjudication of naturalization applications was neither transparent nor impartial. The government reportedly was more lenient with naturalization requests from expatriates in the security forces. Shi'a and non-Arab applicants reportedly experienced longer delays in the processing of their cases. The government occasionally granted citizenship to Sunni residents from neighboring countries. The government stated that some of the Saudis who had received citizenship were the grandchildren of Bahraini citizens who had immigrated to Saudi Arabia. According to the country's nationality law, these persons have a legal right to citizenship. No official statistics regarding naturalization cases were available.

The constitution prohibits forced exile, and there were no reports of forced exile or return from exile during the year.

There is no official requirement for women and children to have their husband's/father's permission to travel abroad, and there were no reports of women or children facing restrictions on travel.

Protection of Refugees

The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status to persons who meet the definition in the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, and the government has not established a system for providing protection or status to refugees. In practice the government provided protection against refoulement, the return of persons to a country where there is reason to believe that they feared persecution. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and asylum seekers.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Citizens do not have the right to change their government or their political system; however, the constitution provides for a democratically elected Council of Deputies, the lower house of parliament. The king appoints the prime minister, who then proposes cabinet ministers who are appointed by the king. Members of the royal family held all strategic cabinet ministry positions and approximately half of all ministerial slots.

The bicameral National Assembly consists of the 40-member popularly elected Council of Deputies and the 40-member appointed Shura (Consultative) Council. The Office of Legal Affairs drafts the text of laws, not the Council of Deputies or the Shura Council. This office had been part of the prime minister's cabinet until July 2006, when it was made a quasi-independent body linked to the MOJIA. The king may veto laws passed by the National Assembly, which in turn may override a veto by a two-thirds majority vote. If the legislature overrides a veto, the king must promulgate the law within one month. No veto has been exercised, and no law has been enacted that was proposed by a member of the legislature since the constitution was adopted.

The king may dissolve the Council of Deputies at his discretion, and he retains the power to amend the constitution and to propose, ratify, and promulgate laws. Either council may question government ministers, and the Council of Deputies may pass a two-thirds majority vote of no confidence requiring a minister's resignation. The Council of Deputies may also introduce a resolution indicating it cannot cooperate with the prime minister. Both the elected and the appointed chambers of the National Assembly would then have the option to pass the resolution by a two-thirds majority that would require the king to either dismiss the prime minister or dissolve the Council of Deputies. The situation of a no-confidence vote has never arisen.

Elections and Political Participation

Bahrain held parliamentary and municipal council elections in two rounds in November and December 2006. Voter participation in the first round was 73 percent of all registered voters. In second round runoff races, 69 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. Although a small group of eligible voters boycotted the elections, all political societies, including the four that boycotted the 2002 elections, participated in the elections.

Although no international observers participated, the government permitted nine local civil society groups, including the BHRWS and the Bahrain Society for Public Freedoms, access to poll stations to observe voting. Bahrain Transparency Society and the BHRS joined efforts to form the Election Monitoring Joint Committee (EMJC) and trained over 200 local observers. The government asked a foreign political party training and election observation organization to leave the

country during the campaign process and elections.

In its final report issued on February 10, EMJC reported that there were no reports of widespread attempts to influence the outcome of the elections. Official polling station observers did not report significant problems during the voting process, although there were allegations that general poll center vote counts were manipulated in some cases against opposition candidates in close races.

In the first round of elections, officials in the 40 district polling stations announced results to observers and candidate representatives immediately following ballot counting. However, votes from the 10 general polling stations were taken to central facilities and folded in with those of other general stations before vote counts were made public. After the first round, EMJC presented this lapse in transparency to the High Commission for Elections. Election administrators corrected this problem in the runoff elections and announced all vote counts prior to moving ballot boxes.

EMJC reported other violations, the most serious being that candidates did not cease campaign activities 24 hours prior to the polls as required by law. Campaign volunteers continued to pass out fliers and lobby voters in the vicinity of polling stations on election day. In addition observers reported many campaign posters and billboards moved closer to polling stations than allowed by law just prior to the election. Most other violations were minor and procedural.

The government drew the unified electoral districts for both the municipal council and the legislative elections to protect Sunni interests by creating several districts with small populations likely to elect a Sunni candidate. In contrast districts where a Shi'a candidate was likely to win were drawn to include large numbers of voters, a formula that diluted the voting strength of the Shi'a community. According to voter lists for the elections, divergence in the electoral population per district is significant—the number of eligible voters per elected representative can vary by as much as a factor of 13.

The election law prohibited speeches at most public locations and limited the areas where campaign material could be placed.

The government did not allow the formation of political parties, but 15 political societies, which received some government funding and operated somewhat like political parties, chose candidates for parliamentary and municipal elections, campaigned for political office, developed political platforms, held internal elections, and hosted political gatherings.

The 2005 Political Societies Law provides political societies legal authority to exist and defines guidelines within which they can operate. Political societies were highly critical of provisions in the law requiring them to notify the MOJIA before contacting political groups abroad. The law also prohibits foreign funding or training, raised the minimum membership age from 18 to 21; and gives the MOJIA the authority to reject an application for registration. Since the government began recognizing political societies in 2002, it has not refused or deferred an application.

Although the law prohibits civil society groups from engaging in political matters, the government permitted such activity at its discretion.

Women have the right to vote and run for public office. On April 24, the government appointed the first female member, Dr. Dhuha al-Zayani, to the Constitutional Court. In the legislative elections 18 women ran, and five ran in the municipal elections. One woman, Latifa al-Qa'oud, was unopposed in her district and became the first female MP. None of the other women candidates were elected. The government did not release percentages of voting by gender.

While Shi'a amounted to approximately 70 percent of resident citizens, and both Shi'a and Sunni citizens have equal rights before the law, Sunnis dominated political life.

In December 2006 the king appointed one Christian and one Jewish member to the new Shura Council. Eighteen Shura Council members were Shi'a Muslims and 17 were Sunni. Six of the 23 cabinet ministers were Shi'a, including a deputy prime minister.

Government Corruption and Transparency

According to the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, government corruption was a problem. The Penal Code provides specific penalties for various forms of official corruption. Significant areas of government activity continued to lack transparency. However, new legislation increased transparency in central bank transactions and activities and increased disclosure responsibilities for the 39 companies listed on the local stock exchange. The annual National Audit Bureau report released on August 26 analyzed the accounts of state-owned entities and was made available to the public. The Council of Deputies called ministers to appear at public sessions to respond to questions from MPs.

On June 27, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce filed a complaint with the public prosecution accusing nine employees of embezzlement. A few days later authorities arrested the individuals. The case remained pending at year's end.

There was no law providing citizens with access to information held by the government. There was no law requiring financial disclosure on the part of government officials.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Restrictions on freedom of association and expression hindered investigation or public criticism of the government's human rights policies. There were approximately 400 NGOs registered in the country, most of which were sports clubs and charitable organizations. NGOs must report to the Ministry of Social Development when their members participate in international NGO events. There were three major human rights NGOs that reported on issues of concern: Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society (BHRWS), and former members of the dissolved Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR). BHRS was independent from the government. BHRWS considered itself independent, although members of its leadership were also members of the royally appointed Shura Council.

In recent years the government has allowed increased interaction between local civil society groups and international human rights organizations. During the year citizen members of Amnesty International (AI), who have not registered as an NGO with the Ministry of Social Development, carried out several activities without interference by the government. AI members coordinated with the Bahrain Society for Public Freedoms to observe the elections and monitor media coverage during the 2006 election campaign.

On June 26, the High Court issued an order enjoining the National Democratic Gathering Society from holding meetings or conducting any other activities for three months. The order resulted from an internal conflict over the administration of the society involving the former secretary general, Abdullah Hashim, and the newly-elected secretary general, Fadhel Abbas. On August 27, the MOJIA approved the results of the society's general assembly meeting held on July 24, in which Fadhel Abbas was elected as the new secretary general. The society resumed its operations at that time.

In 2004 the Ministry of Social Development dissolved the BCHR, an umbrella human rights organization that had been active since 2002. Beginning in 2003 government ministries warned the center against conducting activities that were outside its bylaws such as criticizing the government or specific government officials. The government locked the center's rented office space and froze its bank accounts. The BCHR challenged its closure in court but lost the case and its subsequent appeals. Individual members continued to conduct activities and write reports about issues of concern in the name of the center.

The BHRWS, established in December 2004 and led by a member of the Shura Council, conducted a number of human rights activities.

Although foreign NGOs were prohibited from registering with the government, the government generally did not interfere with their activities, so long as these activities were not perceived as interference in the political system. In previous years, the government has provided written warning to foreign NGOs it believed to be interfering with internal political matters. In at least one previous case, the government declined to renew the residence permit of an NGO chief who had become the focus of controversy, with the result that the NGO's local operation had to close down.

On October 30, a foreign organization previously asked by immigration authorities in 2006 to leave the country returned to conduct activities. On July 12, the organization signed a memorandum of understanding with the Bahrain Institute of Political Development (BIPD), in which the two organizations agreed to work together.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution provides for equality; equal opportunity; and the right to medical care, welfare, education, property, capital, and work for all citizens. However, these rights were protected unevenly, depending on the individual's social status, sect, or gender.

Women

No government policies or laws explicitly addressed violence against women. Spousal abuse of women was widespread, particularly in poorer communities. Since 2005 the Batelco Care Center for Family Violence has offered free medical, psychological, legal, and social assistance to victims of violence, primarily women and children. The center runs a hotline that abused persons can call for assistance. The center recorded 669 cases involving domestic abuse during the year: 407 from women, 178 from children, and the remainder from men.

Violence against women, especially by family members and spouses, is believed to be pervasive. Women rarely sought legal redress for violence, and there was little public attention towards or discussion of the problem. Incidents usually were not brought to the attention of authorities. Rape is illegal, and the press reported cases of men arrested for the crime. The law does not address spousal rape. There was no information on the number of rape and sexual assault cases brought to

the public prosecutor or any resulting convictions.

Reports of foreign women working in domestic positions being beaten or sexually abused by their employers and recruiting agents were common. Numerous cases were reported to local embassies, the press, and the police; however, most victims were too intimidated to sue their employers, although they had the right to do so. Courts reportedly allowed victims who registered complaints to sue for damages or return home. If the victim brings a suit against the employer, the plaintiff cannot leave the country for the duration of the case. Since its inception in 2002, the Migrant Worker Protection Society (MWPS) has supported several victims who have taken their cases to court, but compensation to victims was reportedly very low. During the year MWPS withdrew its court cases, including three rape cases, citing a complete lack of success in the courts.

There is no specific law that prohibits female genital mutilation (FGM). According to the Batelco Care Center for Family Violence Cases, there have never been any cases of FGM.

Prostitution is illegal; however, the press reported arrests of prostitutes and their managers. During the year cases of prostitution were referred to the public prosecution for investigation. Sentences for individuals who "encouraged the practice of prostitution" varied between 10 days and two years in prison. Sentences for those who "managed an establishment for the practice of prostitution" ranged from prison sentences of three months to three years.

Sexual harassment is prohibited but was a widespread problem for women, especially foreigners working as domestics and in other low-level service jobs. The press reported a number of cases of men arrested for sexually harassing women.

Women's legal rights vary according to Shi'a or Sunni interpretations of Islamic law. Shi'a and Sunni women have the right to initiate a divorce; however, religious courts may refuse the request. Women of either sect may own and inherit property and represent themselves in all public and legal matters. In the absence of a direct male heir, Shi'a women may inherit all property. Sunni women without a direct male heir inherit only a portion as governed by Shari'a; the balance is divided among the brothers or male relatives of the deceased. In practice, better-educated families used wills and other legal maneuvers to ameliorate the negative effects of these rules.

In divorce cases, the courts routinely grant mothers custody of daughters under age nine and sons under age seven. Custody usually reverts to the father once the children reach those ages. Regardless of custody decisions, the father retains guardianship, or the right to make all legal decisions for the child, until the child reaches the legal age of 21. A noncitizen woman automatically loses custody of her children if she divorces their citizen father. A Muslim woman legally can marry a non-Muslim man if the man converts to Islam.

By law foreign women who marry citizens are eligible for citizenship after five years of marriage. Foreign men who marry citizens, however, are not entitled to citizenship, and neither are their children. During the year the Bahrain Women's Society (BWS) registered more than 800 families where children (infant to age 21) were born to citizen mothers but do not have citizenship. In September 2006 King Hamad issued a royal decree granting citizenship to at least 372 children of citizen mothers and noncitizen fathers. However, this action did not change the legislation, so any children born in the future under such circumstances would face citizenship difficulties.

Labor laws prohibit discrimination against women; however, discrimination against women is systemic in the country, especially in the workplace. The influence of religious traditionalists sometimes hampered women's rights. According to the Central Bank, women constituted 13 percent of the private sector workforce and 42 percent of the government workforce. The government was a leading employer of women. A 2005 law granted women working in the public sector 42 days maternity leave, not including weekends. Women in the private sector are entitled to 45 days maternity leave, including weekends.

Children

The government generally honored its commitment to children's welfare through enforcement of related civil and criminal laws and an extensive social welfare network. However, children born to citizen mothers and noncitizen fathers are not entitled to citizenship and are not eligible for certain social services.

According to the 2005 Education Act, education is free and compulsory for all children, including noncitizens, ages six to 15. In recent years, authorities did not enforce compulsory education rules. However, the act imposed fines on parents whose children failed to attend school and outlined other measures to encourage school attendance.

The state provided limited medical services for infant and preadolescent citizens. Noncitizen adults and children paid a fee for each visit for care at public health centers. Boys and girls enjoyed equal access to medical care.

According to the BWS, child abuse was common. There has been an increase in public discussion and in press reporting that covers child abuse. The BWS "Be Free" Campaign, which has posted a Web site for victims of child abuse since

2002, reported that during the year it received on average between 300 and 400 emails per month mostly from youth and adults, from inside and outside the country, reporting to have been victims of child abuse. Many calls have originated from older adults, reporting abuse they endured as children.

Child prostitution is illegal and there were no reported cases during the year.

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not specifically prohibit trafficking in persons. Workers from Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Horn of Africa, and the former Soviet Union reported conditions that amounted to trafficking, such as withholding of passports, restrictions on movement, and physical or psychological intimidation to work. Some victims reported being forced into commercial sexual exploitation; however, the most common forms of trafficking in persons involved unskilled construction laborers and domestic workers. There were approximately 70,000 foreign housemaids working in the country, and labor laws did not fully cover domestic workers. According to government statistics, foreigners make up 59 percent of the workforce.

Up to half of low and unskilled expatriate workers were subjected to illegal contract substitution, whereby workers agreed to a contract in their home country but were required to agree to and sign a different contract upon arrival, nearly always for less pay and often for different work. Victims of trafficking experienced nonpayment of salaries; inadequate meals; physical, sexual, and psychological abuse; absence of rest days; and/or extremely long working hours.

The primary traffickers were employment agencies operating in the source countries. These agencies approached workers in their home countries and offered visas at prices in the range of \$3,975 (1,500 dinars), payable after arrival. Upon arrival at the airport, the workers' passports were taken from them, ostensibly to facilitate customs; however, the passports frequently were not returned. Frequently, traffickers, including some from influential families, tricked new workers into paying for fraudulent visas and nonexistent jobs, leaving stranded workers vulnerable to trafficking due to their illegal immigration status in the country and high debt in their home country.

The MOL nearly doubled its number of labor inspectors to approximately 65 to investigate reports of visa abuse.

Prostitution is illegal, but during the year there was evidence that a number of foreign women, particularly Thai women, were forced into commercial sexual exploitation through deception or intimidation. Although many Thai women traveled to the country voluntarily, traffickers reportedly used false job offers and physical force to traffic some of them into commercial sexual exploitation.

In cases of forced prostitution, the government reportedly prosecuted the victim and often the victim's sponsor or employer but did not provide any specific information on cases of forced prostitution it pursued during the year.

The fear of deportation or employer retaliation prevented many foreign workers from making complaints to the authorities. Many foreign workers were unaware of their rights under the law, such as the right to change employers without the consent of the original employer after working two years in a position.

The government can fine employers guilty of forced labor up to \$2,650 (1,000 dinars) and/or sentence them for prison terms not to exceed two years. The rules require sponsors to put up a deposit of \$265 (100 dinars) for each runaway worker. The government published pamphlets on expatriate workers' rights in several languages, provided manuals on these rights to local diplomatic missions, and operated a telephone hotline for victims. The government did not provide direct assistance to victims. During the year there were approximately 500 labor cases involving a total of over 650 expatriate workers sent from the MOL to the Public Prosecution for investigation and prosecution.

Under the sponsorship system, an expatriate worker could not seek employment while a case was in court. Because in past years MWPS has been unsuccessful at resolving cases against sponsors in the courts, MWPS recommended that individuals instead attempt to resolve cases through mediation between their foreign embassies and the sponsors. Most of these mediations resulted in the payment of back payments followed by repatriation.

Workers also sought assistance from their embassies. The Pakistani embassy reported that it successfully resolved 200 cases through mediation between the sponsor and the worker, referred 135 to the MOL, and 40 to lawyers. The Pakistani embassy repatriated over 750 workers.

On June 13, a Sri Lankan housemaid sought assistance from the MWPS after running away from her Bahraini sponsor's allegedly abusive family. The housemaid claimed her sponsor's wife and two elder children abused her on daily basis. She was allegedly made to work seven days a week and paid a salary of approximately \$132 (50 dinars) a month. The maid's sponsor denied the allegations but after police questioning agreed to end his legal sponsorship, and the housemaid was repatriated with the assistance of MWPS.

In July the Ministry of Labor began investigating a complaint lodged by the MWPS on behalf of a number of housemaids

based on reports that a leading labor recruitment agency was complicit in the abuse of individuals it had recruited. The investigation was ongoing at year's end.

Between July 16 and July 21, working in concert with an international NGO, a government shelter focused on female victims of domestic abuse and trafficking assisted the return of two trafficking victims to their home countries.

In September the MWPS assisted an Indian housemaid who was severely beaten with a cricket bat by her sponsor and suffered a broken leg. She was in the hospital and out of work for more than two months. The Indian embassy filed a complaint against her sponsor for the beating. At year's end the investigation was ongoing, and the housemaid was out of work.

Between January 7 and 18, the government partnered with a foreign organization to train a special, multidisciplinary antitrafficking unit.

Several NGOs provided assistance in the form of housing, basic health care, education, and transportation to trafficking victims with the government's approval, including the MWPS, the Art of Living Foundation, the Indian Community Relief Fund, and the BHRWS.

Persons with Disabilities

The law protects the rights of persons with disabilities and a variety of governmental, quasi-governmental, and religious institutions are mandated to support and protect persons with disabilities.

On June 4, the cabinet approved the formation of the High Committee for Disabled Affairs. The committee, chaired by the social development minister, consisted of representatives from the government and civil sectors.

On May 8, an official at the Ministry of Social Development announced that 4,055 disabled persons each received financial support of \$132.50 (50 dinars) from the ministry's disability funding.

There were no reports of discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, or access to health care. Children with learning disabilities, physical handicaps, speech impediments, and Down syndrome were enrolled in specialized education programs in public schools.

Since 2005 new public buildings in the central municipality must include facilities for persons with disabilities. The law does not mandate access to nonresidential buildings for persons with disabilities.

The government is required by law to provide vocational training for persons with disabilities who wish to work. The law requires any employer of more than 100 persons to hire at least 2 percent of its employees from the government's list of workers with disabilities. However, the government does not monitor compliance. The government placed persons with disabilities in some public sector jobs.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The law grants citizenship to Arab applicants who have resided in the country for 15 years and non-Arab applicants who have resided in the country for 25 years. However, there was a lack of transparency in the naturalization process, and there were reports that the citizenship law was not applied uniformly. For example, there were allegations that the government allowed expatriate Sunni Arabs who had served less than 15 years in the security services to apply for citizenship. There were also reports of Arab Shi'a who had resided in-country for more than 15 years and non-Arab expatriates who had resided more than 25 years who had not been granted citizenship. The MOI has acknowledged the naturalization of 5,000 people between 2003 and 2006. Some Shi'a activists have claimed that considerably more have been naturalized, but there is no evidence to support these claims.

In past years the government offered citizenship to several thousand minority stateless "Bidoon" persons, mostly Shi'a of Persian origin. However, according to Freedom House, Bidoon and citizens who speak Farsi as their first language continued to encounter discrimination in the society and work force.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The law does not criminalize homosexual relationships between consenting adults of at least 21 years of age. Reports of crimes in the media did not regularly specify if a victim of a crime was an alleged homosexual or had HIV/AIDS. While discrimination was not common or apparent, both attributes are socially taboo and not widely covered in the media.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law grants workers, including non citizens, a limited right to form and join unions. Public sector workers may join private trade unions and professional societies, but public sector unions are illegal. Five public sector trade unions were recognized by the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU) but declared illegitimate organizations by the government's Civil Service Bureau. Union membership was 26 percent in the private-sector labor force. The law provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively. Unions can be formed at establishments of any size.

The 2002 trade union law established a union federation, the GFBTU, which all unions were required to join. New legislation in 2006 allowed for the establishment of additional federations. The law also provides protection to workers terminated for their union activities and requires extra compensation for workers who are not paid their salaries on time.

Members of the military are prohibited from joining unions. The law allows union membership for private sector, civil service, and maritime workers. Seven public sector unions have been formed and have registered with the federation, but they are still not recognized by the government. The law prohibits unions from engaging in political activities.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively. Employers and the government are required to treat unions as independent judicial entities.

The law holds the right to strike is a legitimate means for workers to defend their rights and interests; however, this right was restricted. The law requires arbitration before a vote to strike and a two-week notification that a union intends to strike. The law stipulates a simple majority vote of a union's members.

Although government sources report that the arbitration provision will not preempt the right to strike, the text of the law does not clearly specify that a union may proceed to a strike vote if it disagrees with the arbitrator's decision.

In November 2006 the prime minister issued an executive order with language expanding the 2002 Labor Union Law vital sector definition. Under the order, additional sectors in which strikes are not allowed include the oil, gas, and education sectors. Health centers, pharmacies, and bakeries are also specified under the new order.

On July 22, Batelco fired two trade union organizers, including the union's vice-president, for engaging in what it deemed to be a work stoppage that violated the Trade Union Law, which bans industrial action in the telecommunications sector, even though the union did not call for nor attempt a strike. Approximately 500 Batelco employees engaged in a work slowdown to protest the firings and reiterate demands for a pay raise. On July 24, the minister of labor stated that the firings were unjustified and called on Batelco to reinstate the two workers. Batelco had not reinstated the two individuals at year's end.

There are no special laws or exemptions from regular labor laws in export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, but there were reports that such practices occurred, particularly in cases of domestic workers and those working illegally. There were no reports of forced or compulsory child labor.

Foreign workers, who made up 59 percent of the workforce (78 percent of the private sector workforce), in some cases arrived in the country under the sponsorship of an employer and then switched jobs while continuing to pay a fee to their original sponsor. This practice made it difficult to monitor and control the employment conditions of domestic and other workers.

In numerous instances employers withheld salaries from their foreign workers for months and even for years, and refused to grant them the necessary permission to leave the country. The government and the courts generally worked to rectify abuses if they were brought to their attention, but they otherwise focused little attention on the problem. The fear of deportation or employer retaliation prevented many foreign workers from making complaints to the authorities.

Labor laws do not fully cover domestic workers. There were numerous credible reports that domestic workers, especially women, were forced to work 12 to 16 hour days, given little time off, were malnourished, and were subjected to verbal and physical abuse, including sexual molestation and rape. Between 30 to 40 percent of the attempted suicide cases handled by the government's psychiatric hospitals were foreign domestic workers.

According to foreign embassies and NGOs, it was estimated that there were 70,000 foreign domestic workers in the country of predominantly Sri Lankan, Indonesian, Indian, and Filipino origins. During the year, there were several incidents of seriously abused domestic workers reported in the press.

Domestic workers who have no embassy representation in the country were often subjected to the worst types of physical and sexual abuse. With no diplomatic mission to represent them, runaway domestic workers had few places to turn for support.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law protects children from exploitation in the workplace and prohibits forced and compulsory child labor. The government enforced this prohibition effectively.

The minimum age for employment is 16 years of age. Rare exceptions can be made for juveniles between the ages of 14 and 16 who have an urgent need to assist in providing financial support for their families. These exceptions are made on a case-by-case basis, and the minors must obtain official authorization from the MOL to work. Minors may not work in industries deemed hazardous or unhealthy by the Ministry of Health. When employed, minors may work no more than six hours a day and may be present on the employment premises no more than seven hours a day. These regulations do not apply to family-operated businesses in which the only other employees are family members. MOL inspectors enforced child labor laws effectively in the industrial sector; child labor outside that sector was monitored less effectively, but it was not believed to be significant outside family-operated businesses. Even in such businesses, it was not widespread.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no national minimum wage. Unskilled foreign laborers in particular did not earn as much as the guidelines suggested. The law allows employers to consider benefits for foreign workers such as annual trips home, housing, and education bonuses as part of the salary.

The labor law is enforced by the MOL and mandates acceptable conditions of work for all adult workers, except domestic workers, including a maximum of 48 hours per week. Except for Muslims during Ramadan when work should not exceed six hours per day and 36 hours per week, workers are entitled to one day of rest after six consecutive days of work and to annual paid vacations of 21 days after one year of service. The labor law for the private sector permits 12 hours of overtime per week that is to be paid at a rate of 25 percent above the normal wage if conducted during the day and 50 percent if completed at night. Special MOL permission is required for anyone working more than 60 hours per week. The Labor Inspectorate conducts periodic, comprehensive inspections of private sector enterprises, including verification of employee hours and wages.

Work place safety standards are very low. The MOL set occupational safety and health standards and sporadically enforced them by performing workplace inspections. A team of 25 inspectors, in conjunction with ministry officials, had the authority to levy fines and close work sites if employers did not improve conditions by specified deadlines. During the year the press reported several workplace deaths owing to a combination of inadequate safety procedures, worker ignorance of those procedures, and inadequate safety standards for equipment but exact figures were not available. According to a press release, there were 30 workplace deaths at Aluminum Bahrain, the largest manufacturing facility in the country.

The MOL enforced the labor law through both planned and unannounced periodic inspections and routine fines for violators. In 2005, 10 safety and health inspectors covered approximately 34,000 active work places. During the year the ministry increased the number of safety and health inspectors to 25 and the number of active work places increased to approximately 35,000. Trained inspectors visited labor camps to verify if workers' accommodations met required safety and hygiene standards. During the year, inspectors visited 1,307 labor camps, of which 78 failed the inspection because of safety issues such as gas and electricity problems, overcrowding, poor hygiene, and the general state of disrepair. Inspectors cited poor hygiene in warnings issued to 100 camps, as well as part of their rationale for the closure of 21 camps. The inspectors were only authorized to inspect premises that had a commercial registration. Inspectors were not authorized to inspect private homes where most domestic workers reside and work.

When a worker lodges a complaint, the MOL opens an investigation and often takes remedial action. The MOL reportedly received 3,426 complaints during the year, including those from domestic workers. On average there were nine complaints from domestic workers per month. Ministry officials said that they were able to resolve more than half of these cases through mediation in the ministry. The remaining cases were taken up by the Public Prosecution for investigation. The Fourth High Civil Court consists of three labor courts and has jurisdiction over cases involving alleged violations of the labor law. Complaints brought before the MOL that cannot be settled through arbitration must be referred to the court within 15 days.

The law provides for fines and jail sentences for private sector employers who failed to pay wages as required by the law. The law applies equally to employers of citizens and of foreign workers.

Although the practice is illegal, many companies transported expatriate workers in open trucks on benches, and accidents, sometime fatal, resulted. In December 2006 MOL officials announced that a ban on the transport of workers in open trucks would be enforced. Enforcement of the ban has been erratic and many companies continue to transport expatriate laborers in open trucks. Press reports have called for stricter enforcement amidst continued fatalities.

The press reported the deaths of several workers at construction sites during the year. Numerous workers reportedly suffered injuries on the job. On June 24, the cabinet approved an MOL recommendation to ban outdoor work between the hours of noon and 4:00 pm during the months of July and August. According to the MOL, 283 companies employing approximately 8,000 registered workers faced fines of approximately \$132 to 785 (50 to 300 dinars) per worker for allegedly violating the ban during the year. Despite the ban, health officials reported an increase in the number of heatstroke cases from 948 cases in 2006 to 1,087 because of the increase in construction and the above average temperatures during the summer.



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