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Bahrain

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution states that Islam is the official religion and that Islamic law is a principal source for legislation. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion, 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 these rights.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. The government continued to exert a level of control and monitoring over both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) asserted that Shi'a citizens, as a whole, faced discrimination as evidenced by lower socio-economic indicators than the Sunni minority.

Regional Sunni-Shi'a tensions and historical political divisions continued to affect intra-Muslim relations.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 231 square miles and a population of 1.05 million, of whom 51 percent are Bahraini nationals. The Bahraini population is 99 percent Muslim; Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Baha'is constitute the remaining 1 percent. Muslims belong to the Shi'a and Sunni branches of Islam, with Shi'a constituting between 60 and 70 percent of the citizen Muslim population.

Foreigners, mostly from South Asia and from other Arab countries, constitute an estimated 49 percent of the population. Approximately half of resident foreigners are non-Muslim, including Christians (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Sikhs.

Much of the tension between Shi'a and Sunni Bahrainis stems from social and economic factors. Shi'a Muslims compose the majority of the low socio-economic status citizen population, and have a higher unemployment rate than Sunni

Muslims, although many exceptions can be found, especially in several Shi'a merchant and scholarly families, and in older Sunni areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, there were limits on this right.

The constitution imposes no restrictions on the right to choose, change, or practice one's religion of choice, including the study, discussion, and promulgation of those beliefs. The government generally observed these provisions. The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or creed, including by private actors; however, there was no further law to prevent discrimination, nor was there a procedure to file a grievance.

The constitution states that Islam is the state religion, and Islamic law is a principal source for legislation. The civil and criminal legal systems consist of a complex mix of courts based on diverse legal sources, including both the Ja'afari (Shi'a) and Maliki (Sunni) schools of Islamic jurisprudence, tribal law, and other civil codes and regulations.

Shari'a (Islamic law) governs personal status, and a person's rights can vary according to Shi'a or Sunni interpretation, as determined by the individual's faith or by the courts. In May 2009 the government adopted the country's first personal status law which regulates family matters such as inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce. The law was only applicable to the Sunni population as Shi'a clerics and lawmakers opposed legislation that would have applied to the Ja'afari courts. The passage of this law institutionalized protections for women such as requiring consent for marriage and permitting a woman to include conditions in the marriage contract.

No civil laws specifically targeting blasphemy, apostasy, or proselytizing.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Islamic New Year, and Ashura.

The law prohibits anti-Islamic media, but it imposes no other restrictions on religious expression or speech. The law allows production and distribution for religious media and publications. The law does not prohibit, restrict, or punish the importation, possession, or distribution of religious literature, clothing, or symbols. The law does not impose a religious dress code.

Construction of places of worship required approvals from a number of national-level entities, as well as municipal entities. The government's budget for constructing mosques was split evenly between Shi'a and Sunni projects. In newer developments such as Hamad Town and Isa Town, which often have mixed Shi'a and Sunni populations, there tended to be a disproportionate number of Sunni mosques.

Islamic studies were a part of the curriculum in government schools and mandatory for all public school students. The Maliki school of Sunni jurisprudence formed the basis for the 17-year-old curriculum, which does not include the Ja'afari traditions of Shi'a Islam.

The government does not designate religion or sect on national identity documents. While the birth certificate application recorded the child's religion, it did not record the sect. The actual birth certificate does not include the child's religion.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, the government placed limits on this right. The government continued to exert a level of control and to monitor both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Members of other religious groups that practiced their faith privately did so without government interference and were permitted to maintain places of worship and display symbols of their religion.

Every Muslim religious group must obtain a license from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to operate. Non-Muslim religious groups must register with the Ministry of Social Development (MOSD) to operate. Religious groups may also need approvals from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the Information Authority, or the Ministry of Interior, depending on the nature of the group's intended activities. No religious groups submitted registration applications with the MOSD during the reporting period. Altogether, 13 non-Muslim religious groups were registered with the MOSD, including Christian churches and a Hindu temple. In May 2010 several Christian churches reported that the MOSD instructed them to reregister, although the MOSD did not provide a reason for its directive.

The government did not punish links with co-religionists in other countries, although some government officials expressed concern about Iran's influence on the Shi'a population.

Holding a religious meeting without a permit was illegal; however, during the reporting period there were no reports of the government denying religious groups a permit to gather.

There were credible reports that naturalization and citizenship processes often favored Sunni applicants over Shi'a applicants.

The government funded, monitored, and exercised control over official Muslim religious institutions, including Shi'a and Sunni mosques; religious community centers; Shi'a and Sunni religious endowments; and the religious courts, which represent both the Shi'a and Sunni affiliated schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs reviewed and approved clerical appointments within both the Sunni and Shi'a communities. The government rarely interfered with what it considered legitimate religious observances. The government permitted public religious events, most notably the large, annual commemorative march by Shi'a Muslims during the Islamic months of Ramadan and Muharram.

The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs maintained program oversight on all citizens studying religion abroad. The government monitored travel to Iran and scrutinized carefully those who chose to pursue religious study there.

Citizens of Sanad, a predominantly Shi'a town in the eastern part of the country, protested after police forces removed black flags and other religious symbols related to an important Shi'a commemoration ' from the town's streets. The protests were led by senior Shi'a clerics, politicians, and activists.

According to several non-Muslim religious groups, MOSD's restrictions on contact with "foreign" entities caused significant operational difficulties for some churches and other groups. These groups relied on guidance and funding from umbrella organizations based overseas for their operations. The groups reported that the MOSD often did not respond to their requests for permission to interact with their umbrella organizations.

Although there were exceptions, the Sunni Muslim citizen minority enjoyed favored status. Sunni citizens often received preference for employment in sensitive government positions, in the managerial ranks of the civil service, and in the military. Shi'a politicians and activists asserted that the government and certain business elites discriminated against Shi'a citizens in employment and promotions. Senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes often favored Sunni

candidates. Educational, social, and municipal services in most Shi'a neighborhoods were inferior to those in Sunni communities.

Only a few Shi'a citizens held significant posts in the defense and internal security forces, although more were found in the enlisted ranks. The police force reported it did not record or consider religious belief when hiring employees, although Shi'a continued to assert that they were unable to obtain government positions, especially in the security services, because of their religious affiliation. Shi'a were employed in some branches of the police, such as the traffic police and the fledgling community police.

Shi'a were underrepresented in the Ministry of Education in both the leadership and the ranks of head teachers who teach Islamic studies and supervise and mentor other teachers. Although there were many Shi'a Islamic studies teachers, school authorities discouraged them from introducing content about Shi'a traditions and practices and instructed them to follow the curriculum.

Curriculum specialists in the Islamic Studies Department at the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Directorate were all Sunni. The curriculum directorate formed a separate committee of Shi'a teachers and clerics, along with members of the curriculum directorate, to develop the Islamic studies curriculum for the Ja'afari Institute, which is the only publicly funded institution in which teachers can legally discuss Shi'a beliefs and traditions. There were five registered Ja'afari Hawzas (Shi'a religious schools) and five registered Sunni religious schools.

According to a senior MOJIA official, there were 750 Shi'a mosques and 460 Sunni mosques, and the government's budget for constructing mosques is split evenly between Shi'a and Sunni projects. In newer developments such as Hamad Town and Isa Town, which often have mixed Shi'a and Sunni populations, there tended to be a disproportionate number of Sunni mosques.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The MOJIA organized a series of conferences and seminars on interfaith dialogue, inviting clerics and scholars from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Regional Sunni-Shi'a tensions and historical political divisions continued to affect intra-Muslim relations.

Weekly rioting continued in several predominantly Shi'a villages. Shi'a youth routinely burned tires on roads and occasionally attacked police with Molotov cocktails. The rioting stemmed partly from some Shi'a communities' perception of unequal treatment by the government and partly a result of encouragement by some Shi'a radicals.

Some anti-Jewish political commentary and editorial cartoons appeared, usually linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, without government response.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

U.S. government officials continued to meet regularly with representatives of human rights NGOs to discuss matters of religious freedom among other human rights-related topics.

The U.S. government sponsored the visit of a prominent Sunni cleric, Sheikh Salah Al-Jowder, to the United States for a three-week interfaith dialogue program in several cities. Another sponsored visit consisted of a 10-day exchange program including two imams and a staff member from the MOJIA. This visit focused on promotion of religious freedom and protection of civil and religious rights in the United States; interfaith dialogue; and NGOs' role in interfaith dialogue, religious organization work, and social issues, among other topics. The embassy hosted a visiting American imam for a three-day program, during which he led prayers for over 500 worshipers, gave a presentation on interfaith issues to Sunni and Shi'a religious leaders, and spoke to youth on religious tolerance. The embassy's public affairs officer gave a presentation to 50 Bahrain University Model United Nations students about religious understanding and Muslim life in the United States.

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