



Bahrain

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Article 22 of 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 these rights.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period; however, the Government continued to exert a level of control over Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Outcries against government discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in certain fields continued. Members of other religious groups who practiced their faith privately did so without interference from the Government.

There were no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, there were some reports of Sunni-Shi'a tensions.

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. The 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 comprise the majority of the poor 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. Historically, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims lived in geographically separate villages, however intermingling between the sects has increased. Because of the Shi'a's generally lower socio-economic status, and the lower quality of government schools as compared to private schools, less wealthy Shi'a Muslims have less access to international-quality college- and graduate-level education.

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 observed and enforced these provisions. The Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or creed, including by private actors; however there is no further law to prevent discrimination, nor is there a procedure to file a grievance.

Shari'a 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. Both Shi'a and Sunni women have the right to petition for a divorce. Religious courts grant the request in most cases but are not obligated to. Women of either branch of Islam may own and inherit property and may represent themselves in all public and legal matters. In the absence of a direct male heir, a Shi'a woman may inherit all property. By contrast, in the absence of a direct male heir, a Sunni woman inherits only a portion as governed by Sunni interpretations of Shari'a; the balance is divided among brothers, uncles, and male cousins of the deceased. A Muslim woman may legally marry only a Muslim man. Non-Muslim men often convert in connection with a planned marriage to a Muslim woman.

The Constitution states that Islam is the state religion. The law gives the Government the authority to monitor sermons and prosecute clerics for inciting sectarianism or violence, but the Government did not prosecute any preachers for incitement during the reporting period.

The law prohibits anti-Islamic writings but imposes no other restrictions on religious expression or speech.

The Constitution states that Shari'a 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 Sunni and Shi'a Shari'a, tribal law, and other civil codes and regulations. Shi'a Shari'a judges were slightly more numerous than their Sunni counterparts. The Constitution provides for women's political rights. Shari'a law governs personal status.

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

The Government allows religion-based, political NGOs to register as political "societies," which operate as parties with the legal authority to conduct political activities.

The law allows for religious publications and other religious media. The law does not restrict the distribution of religious media in general, so long as that media is not anti-Islamic. 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.

A senior Shi'a cleric meets, makes public statements, and interacts directly with senior Government officials, but did not register. The Government did not attempt to force the group to register.

Islamic studies are a part of the curricula in government schools and are mandatory for all public school students. The Maliki school of Sunni jurisprudence forms the basis for the decade-old curricula, 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 records the child's religion, it does not record the sect. The actual birth certificate does not include this information.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, the Government placed limits on this right and continued to monitor and exert limited control over Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Members of other religious groups practiced their faith without interference from the Government. These groups maintained their own places of worship and displayed the symbols of their religion, including crosses and statues of deities and saints.

Several Christian congregations remained unregistered. On May 14, 2009, the Ministry of Social Development ordered six congregations, which it had instructed to register in January 2008 following neighbors' complaints about parking, to close down on May 14, 2009, after denying their registration applications. The Ministry denied registration to 10 other congregations that applied for registration.

Members of the Baha'i community reported they have not sought official recognition from the Government; however, the group maintained a functioning cemetery on land donated by the Government, as well as a Baha'i center they established in 1963, and land for a future Baha'i temple.

The Government funded, monitored, and closely controlled all official religious institutions, including Shi'a and Sunni mosques, Shi'a ma'tams (religious community centers), Shi'a and Sunni awqaf (religious endowments), and the religious courts, which represented both the Ja'afari (Shi'a) and Maliki (Sunni) schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs reviewed and approved all 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 marches by Shi'a Muslims during the Islamic months of Ramadan and Muharram, but police closely monitored such events during the reporting period.

The Government did not prohibit, restrict, or punish parents for raising their children in accordance with religious teachings and practices of the parents' choice. The Government did not require individuals to practice or affiliate with any religion. Noncitizens and immigrants faced no governmental difficulties in practicing their faiths.

Local bookstores displayed and sold Bibles and other Christian publications in addition to 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 religious groups were readily available. The Government authorized the publication and public discussion of a book by a Bahraini citizen on the Baha'i community in the country. On January 18, 2009 the Ministry of Culture and Information Affairs ordered the blocking of websites that incited sectarianism, and those that it deemed anti-Islamic or pornographic.

There were no reports that the Government monitored other minority religions. The Government attempted to restrain speeches and materials that fostered intolerance or hatred toward any particular religion or religious figures.

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

The Ministry of Information continued to ignore requests by the government-run TV station to broadcast Friday sermons live from Shi'a mosques, as it did from Sunni mosques.

The Government did not prevent or punish the importation, possession, or distribution of religious literature,

clothing, or symbols.

The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs maintains program oversight on all citizens studying religion abroad. There were no restrictions on the number of citizens permitted to make pilgrimages to Shi'a shrines and holy sites in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The Government monitored travel to Iran and scrutinized carefully those who chose to pursue religious study there.

The Government did not punish links with coreligionists in other countries, although some officials expressed concern about Iran's influence on the Shi'a population. The Government did not require employees to take any kind of religious oath or practice elements of a particular faith, nor did it prevent them from displaying or practicing any elements of their faith.

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. 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 allege they were unable to obtain government positions, especially in the security services, because of their sect. Shi'a were employed in some branches of the police, such as the Community Police and the Traffic Police, and, in at least one instance, were permitted to bear arms.

Curricula 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.

There were 723 Shi'a mosques and 339 Sunni mosques registered with the Government. The Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA), the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, and the Royal Court provided Dinar 11,160,274 (\$29,574,726.10) to fund 27 religious projects for Shi'a and 19 projects for Sunnis across the country. In newer developments, such as Hamad Town and Isa Town, which often have mixed Sunni and Shi'a populations, there tended to be a disproportionate number of Sunni mosques. In Hamad Town, where the population was estimated to be more than 50 percent Shi'a, there were 22 Sunni mosques and five Sunni grand mosques, but only 10 Shi'a mosques and only one Shi'a grand mosque, although a second one is near completion. This represents an increase of one Sunni mosque, five Shi'a mosques, and one Shi'a grand mosque from 2008. MOJIA approved an application for the Shi'a community to establish a ma'tam in Hamad Town; however, the land allocated was far from the rest of the community. As an alternative, Shi'a have converted parts of their homes into ma'tams. The Government provided land and funds to establish the Sunni Hamad Town Charity Fund, but no land was similarly granted to the Shi'a community, which had rented an existing building for the offices of the Shi'a Charity Fund.

Every religious group must obtain a license from the MOJIA operate. A religious group may also need approval from the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Information, and/or the Ministry of Education for some activities, such as opening a school. Christian congregations with current Ministry of Social Development registration operated freely and could offer their facilities to other Christian congregations that did not have their own places of worship. Four Sikh temples, several Hindu temples, and a Hindu crematorium function freely. The Hindu temple dedicated to Krishna has existed in Manama for over 150 years. While the Jewish community's only synagogue has been closed since 1948, the Jewish cemetery is operational. Holding a religious meeting without a permit is illegal; however, there were no reports of the Government denying religious groups a permit to gather during the reporting period. There are several unregistered Christian congregations.

In divorce cases, the courts routinely granted Shi'a and Sunni women custody of children until an age at which custody reverts to the father based on Ja'afari and Maliki Islamic law, respectively. In all circumstances except mental incapacitation, the father, regardless of custody decisions, retains the right to make certain legal decisions for his children, such as guardianship of any property belonging to the child, until the child reaches legal age. A noncitizen woman automatically loses custody of her children if she divorces their citizen father.

On January 13, 2009, the Government proposed a law to standardize personal status rulings for both Sunni and Shi'a courts. In response to Shi'a opposition to the proposed Ja'afari portion, the Government withdrew the combined draft and submitted only the Sunni-Maliki portion. On May 27, 2009, the King ratified the Sunni-Maliki portion of the law.

Civil courts use non-Muslims' faith to determine their personal status in regard to marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On January 4, MOJIA registered a Baha'i marriage as a civil marriage, not as Islamic.

During the reporting period, the Government allowed members of the Awali Community Church to visit Christian prison inmates monthly to provide clothing and Christian literature. Members of other churches also made periodic visits to Christian inmates.

The Ministry of Education worked with MOJIA to develop a new religious education curriculum to cover the five principal schools of Islamic jurisprudence and practices. The new curriculum contains content opposing extremism and, at the end of the reporting period, was pending government approval before being sent to Parliament for legislative approval.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Regional Sunni-Shi'a tensions had an impact on intra-Muslim relations. In general the Sunni Muslim minority enjoyed favored status. The private sector tended to hire Shi'a in lower paid, less skilled jobs. Educational, social, and municipal services in most Shi'a neighborhoods were inferior to those found in Sunni communities.

Converts to Islam from other religious groups were not uncommon, especially in cases of marriage between Muslim men and non-Muslim women. These converts were normally welcomed into the Muslim community. On the other hand, society traditionally does not tolerate converts from Islam to other religious groups. There were reports that families and communities often shunned these individuals and sometimes subjected converts to physical abuse. Some of these converts believed it necessary to leave the country permanently.

On March 7, 2009, Shi'a rioters threw Molotov cocktails at a Pakistani Sunni's truck as he drove past their village. The man died on March 21 from burns suffered in the attack. On April 11, the King granted amnesty to 178 individuals accused of security-related crimes, such as rioting, theft of a police weapon, arson, and assault on a

police vehicle. Nearly all of those included in the pardon were Shi'a. Criminal charges were suspended against 27 Shi'a youth suspected in the March 7 Molotov attack and the April 2008 death of a Pakistani Sunni police officer, but they remained in custody pending an agreement on compensation for the next-of-kin. Problems continued, stemming primarily from the Government's perceived unequal treatment of Shi'a in the country and from street violence advocated by some Shi'a radicals.

The Islamic Enlightenment Society, a Shi'a group, held its annual conference in March 2009 with the announced aim of diffusing tension between Muslim sects. The society invited national Sunni and Shi'a scholars to participate. Bahraini independent Salafi (Sunni) religious scholars Sheikh Salah Al-Jowder and Sheikh Rashid Al Muraikhi, and Shi'a clerics Sheikh Isa Qasim and Abdulla Al Ghoraifi spoke about the importance of sectarian cooperation. Throughout the year, the society invited Sunni and Shi'a scholars from outside the country to participate in seminars and to speak about increased Islamic unity and awareness. Some Sunni scholars accepted these invitations.

The Hindu temple to Krishna allowed Hindus devoted to other deities and Sikhs to use its facilities for their religious rites throughout the year.

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. Regular meetings with human rights activists reaffirmed the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom and other human rights-related matters.

To foster better relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the United States again sponsored the Ramadan visit of a prominent American imam; in 2008 it was Imam Bashar Arafat, President of Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation. He met with clerics, government officials, NGOs, students, and members of the public. He delivered public addresses, moderated roundtable discussions, and gave interviews on interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. Imam Arafat also led prayers at the country's preeminent mosque.