



Bahrain

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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The Constitution states that Islam is the official religion and that Shari'a (Islamic law) is a principal source for legislation. 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 this right.

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. 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 occasional reports of incidents between the Government and elements of the Shi'a majority population, who were often critical of the dominant position of Sunnis in the country. Problems continued to exist, stemming primarily from the Government's perceived unequal treatment of Shi'a in the country.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues 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 1,050,000, according to a January 2008 government statement. The citizen 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 an estimated 70 percent of the 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.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution states that Islam is the official religion of the country and also provides for freedom of religion; however, there were limits on this right. Anti-Islamic writings are prohibited. The Government allows religion-based, political nongovernmental organizations to register as political "societies," which operate somewhat like parties with the legal authority to conduct political activities. Parliamentary and municipal elections were held in 2006 and all political societies participated, including the largest Shi'a political society, which had boycotted the previous parliamentary elections in 2002. Of eligible voters, 73 percent participated in the elections.

The Government does not designate religion or sect on national identity documents. Upon the birth of a child, parents applying for a birth certificate are asked to provide the child's religion, but not the child's sect. The government-issued birth certificate does not include this information.

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

Every religious group must obtain a license from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to 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 that are registered with the Ministry of Social Development operated freely and were allowed to offer their facilities to other Christian congregations that did not have their own places of worship. Four Sikh temples and several Hindu temples are allowed to function freely. 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, and the Government pressed two of these congregations to register in response to community complaints about parking.

The High Council for Islamic Affairs reviews and approves all clerical appointments within both the Sunni and Shi'a communities and maintains program oversight on all citizens studying religion abroad.

The Ministry of Interior reported that it had recruited Shi'a into nonmilitary security agencies during the reporting period.

In April 2007 officials in the Ministry of Education announced that the Ministry, in conjunction with the MOJIA, was developing a new religious education curriculum to be taught in all public schools. According to the Undersecretary of Islamic Affairs, the new curriculum was expected to focus on practices in Islam and jurisprudence and would contain content opposing radicalism and extremism. The Undersecretary for Islamic Affairs reportedly stressed to the Ministry of Education that the new curriculum should be inclusive of the convictions of all branches of Islam. Parliament has not yet approved the new curriculum, and it was not implemented by the end of the reporting period.

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

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 (Islamic law), tribal law, and other civil codes and regulations. The number of Shi'a Shari'a judges was slightly higher than the number of their Sunni counterparts. Although the Constitution provides for women's political rights, Shari'a governs personal status.

A person's rights, especially in personal status law, can vary according to Shi'a or Sunni interpretations of Islamic law, 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 obliged 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. In 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.

In divorce cases the courts routinely grant 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.

There are 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 monitors travel to Iran and scrutinizes carefully those who choose to pursue religious study there.

The law does not prohibit conversion from one religion to another.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contribute to the generally free practice of religion; 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 who practiced their faith privately do so without interference from the Government and were permitted to maintain their own places of worship and display the symbols of their religion, including crosses and statues of deities and saints.

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 waqfs (religious endowments), and the religious courts, which represented both the Ja'afari (Shi'a) and Maliki (Sunni) schools of Islamic jurisprudence. 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.

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.

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.

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 21 Sunni mosques and 5 Sunni grand mosques, but only 5 Shi'a mosques and no Shi'a grand mosques. The Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs 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 has rented an existing building for the offices of the Shi'a Charity Fund.

Members of the Baha'i community reported that although they have not sought official recognition from the Government in many years, the Government did not interfere in their worship or gatherings. The community organized a cultural conference in October 2007 to teach about their faith. Under the law, the Government did not recognize Baha'i wedding ceremonies but recognized civil marriages abroad. The Government authorized the publication and public discussion of a book by a Bahraini on the Baha'i in the country.

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. In November 2007 the Ministry of Information implemented a new policy authorizing publication of several previously banned books that covered sensitive topics. The Ministry of Information removed blocks from many Internet sites considered antigovernment or anti-Islamic, although some sites remained difficult to access.

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 does from Sunni mosques.

Although there were exceptions, the Sunni Muslim minority enjoyed a favored status. Sunnis often received

preference for employment in sensitive government positions, in the managerial ranks of the civil service, and in the military. Shi'a citizens did not hold significant posts in the defense and internal security forces, although they were found in the enlisted ranks. In recent years the Ministry of Interior has made efforts to reform hiring practices and has increased the hiring of Shi'a citizens. In 2004 the Ministry of the Interior established a community policing program to place Shi'a men and women officers on the streets in Shi'a neighborhoods; at the end of the reporting period there were 436 officers in this program.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In April 2008 the King selected the only Jewish member of the upper parliamentary house, the Shura Council, as the new ambassador to the United States. That member, along with one Christian member, had been among those appointed to the upper house by the King in December 2006. Members chose the Christian member to be the second deputy speaker for the Shura Council. She is also one of the country's four representatives to the Arab Parliament. One Christian municipal council candidate stood for election, but he was defeated.

In April 2007 the Bahrain Businesswomen Society initiated a public awareness campaign on family law by sponsoring a panel discussion, the first public event on the topic in several months. The issue was not raised in any significant way during the November/December 2006 elections, despite an awareness campaign by the Supreme Council for Women in the fall of 2005 and seminars by civil society groups, which highlighted the need for a family law. This was followed by public debate and rallies both in favor of and against such a law.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Regional Sunni-Shi'a tensions had an impact on intra-Muslim relations. In general the Sunni Muslim minority enjoyed a 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. Some members of the Christian community reported receiving anonymous threats.

There were occasional reports of incidents between the Government and elements of the Shi'a majority population, who were often critical of the dominant position of Sunnis in the country. Problems continued to exist, stemming primarily from the Government's perceived unequal treatment of Shi'a in the country.

The Islamic Enlightenment Society, a Shi'a group, held its annual conference in March 2008 with the announced aim of diffusing tension between Muslim sects. The society invited national Sunni and Shi'a scholars to participate. The keynote speaker was Bahraini independent Salafi (Sunni) religious scholar Sheikh Salah Al-Jowder. 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Sada Cumber, visited Bahrain on April 27, 2008, in part to further this discussion.

U.S. government officials continued to meet regularly with representatives of human rights nongovernmental organizations 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.

With U.S. government funding, Arab Civitas continued to help the Ministry of Education develop a civic education program for public schools that includes lessons on human rights and tolerance. In January 2008, 56 local teachers participated in a 2-day training session on how to integrate Arab Civitas into their lesson plans.

To foster better relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the United States again sponsored the Ramadan visit of a prominent American imam; in 2007 it was the Chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf. He met with clerics, government officials, and members of the public. He also delivered lectures and gave interviews to the local media promoting tolerance and moderation.

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