



## Bahrain

### International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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. 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. Members of other religious groups who practice their faith privately do 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 Sunni-controlled Government's rule. 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 725,000. The citizen population is 99 percent Muslim; Jews and Christians 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 other Arab countries, constitute an estimated 38 percent of the population. Approximately half of resident foreigners are non-Muslim, including Christians (primarily Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), Hindus, Bahá'ís, 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. 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 last parliamentary elections in 2002. Of eligible voters, 73 percent participated in the elections.

Every religious group must obtain a license from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to operate. In December 2006 the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Islamic Affairs merged to form the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs. Depending on circumstances, for example, the opening of a religious school, a religious group may also need approval from the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Information, and/or the Ministry of Education. 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 places of worship.

The Government prohibits anti-Islamic writings.

Four Sikh temples and several Hindu temples are allowed to function freely. The country's only synagogue has not been operational for nearly 60 years.

Holding a religious meeting without a permit is illegal; however, there were no reports of religious groups being denied a permit to gather. Unregistered Christian congregations exist, and there were no reports of the Government attempting to force unregistered congregations to register.

The High Council for Islamic Affairs is charged with the review and approval of all clerical appointments within both the Sunni and Shi'a communities and maintains program oversight for all citizens studying religion abroad.

Historically there is evidence of discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in recruitment for the country's military and domestic security services. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Defense did not recruit Shi'a for military service. The Ministry of Interior made increasing efforts to recruit additional Shi'a into nonmilitary security agencies during the reporting period.

On April 19, 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, beginning the next academic year. According to the Undersecretary of Islamic Affairs, the new curriculum will focus on practices in Islam and jurisprudence and will contain content against 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.

Islamic studies are a part of the curriculum in government schools and mandatory for all public school students. The decades-old curriculum is based on the Maliki school of Sunni theology. Proposals to include the Ja'afari traditions of Shi'a Islam in the curriculum have been rejected.

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.

Specific rights vary according to Shi'a or Sunni interpretations of Islamic law, as determined by the individual's faith, or by the courts in which various contracts originate, including marriage. While both Shi'a and Sunni women have the right to initiate a divorce, religious courts may refuse the request. 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 Shari'a; the balance is divided among brothers, uncles, and male cousins of the deceased. A Muslim woman may legally marry a non-Muslim man only if he first converts to Islam. In such marriages, the children automatically are considered Muslim.

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 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 (not sect), but the government-issued birth certificate does not include this information.

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

The following holy days are considered national holidays: Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Ashura, and the Islamic New Year. Leaders representing many religious groups visited the country and met with government and civic leaders. These included the Metropolitan of the Mar Thoma Church in India, the highest official in the church.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, the Government places limits on this right and continues to exert a level of control and to monitor both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Members of other religious groups who practice their faith privately do so without interference from the Government and are permitted to maintain their own places of worship and display the symbols of their religion, such as crosses and statues of deities and saints.

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, which represent both the Ja'afari (Shi'a) and Maliki (Sunni) schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The Government rarely interferes with what it considers legitimate religious observances. The Government permits 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 monitor such events.

Shi'a are 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, there were two Islamic studies head teachers who were Shi'a, out of more than a dozen. Although there were many Islamic studies teachers who were Shi'a, they were discouraged from introducing content about Shi'a traditions and practices and instructed to follow the curriculum.

Curriculum specialists in the Islamic Studies Department at the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Directorate are 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.

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, converts from Islam to other religious groups were not well tolerated by society. It was reported 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.

In newer towns 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 24 Sunni mosques and 2 Sunni grand mosques, but only 4 Shi'a mosques and no Shi'a grand 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. Land has been given to establish the Sunni Hamad Town Charity Fund, but no land has been similarly granted to the Shi'a community, which has rented an existing building for the offices of the Shi'a Charity Fund.

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

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. However, for several years, the Ministry of Information has prohibited the publishing and sale of several books written by Sunni authors who converted to Shi'ism, as part of an ongoing ban on certain books covering sensitive topics. In addition, a government-controlled proxy server prohibited user access to Internet sites considered to be antigovernment or anti-Islamic.

Multiple requests sent to the Ministry of Information in the last several years for the government-run TV station to make live broadcasts of Friday sermons from Shi'a mosques, and not just from Sunni mosques, have not received responses.

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 police program to place Shi'a men and women on the streets in Shi'a neighborhoods.

In 2005 a Christian church with more than 1,000 members filed an application with the Ministry of Social Development to

form a second parish. The diocese assigned a temporary priest to serve members of the second parish; however, he only stayed 4 months, due to visa restrictions. The new parish applied for a three-year resident visa for a permanent priest. By the close of the reporting period, government officials still had not notified church leaders of a final decision on the request to allow a second parish or to grant a resident visa for a permanent priest. Further requests by church officials for information went unanswered.

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.

#### Anti-Semitism

There were no acts of physical violence or harassment of Jews or vandalism of Jewish community institutions, such as schools, cemeteries, or the one synagogue in the country. Some anti-Semitic political commentary and editorial cartoons appeared, usually linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Jews practiced their faith privately without interference from the Government.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Parliamentary and municipal elections were conducted in November and December 2006. Candidates associated with religion-based political societies won 32 of the 40 seats in the Council of Representatives. During the elections, candidates from religious political groups conducted their campaigns without any interference from the Government.

There was 1 Jewish member and 1 Christian member of the 40-member upper house of Parliament, the Shura Council, whose members were appointed in December 2006 by the King, following elections for the lower house. The Christian member was chosen by her colleagues to be the second deputy speaker for the Shura Council and is also one of the country's four representatives to the Arab Parliament. There was one Christian municipal council candidate in the elections, 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 for 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, members of the Awali Community Church visited Christian prison inmates approximately monthly, to provide clothing and Christian literature. Members of other churches also made periodic visits to Christian prison inmates.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Regional Sunni-Shi'a tensions impacted intrareligious relationships. In general, the Sunni Muslim minority enjoyed a favored status. 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.

The Islamic Enlightenment Society (Shi'a) held its annual conference in April 2007, aimed at diffusing tension between Muslim sects. The society invited national Sunni and Shi'a scholars to participate, but no Sunni scholars agreed to take part. 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; for example, the former head of the Sunni waqf in Jordan visited to speak at a seminar.

#### 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.

U.S. government officials 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 U.S. government 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.

To foster better relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the United States sponsored the Ramadan visit of a prominent American imam, who is the president of the Islamic Affairs Council of Maryland. He met with clerics, U.S. government officials, members of the public, delivered lectures, and gave interviews to the local media promoting tolerance and moderation.

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