

BAHRAIN

In January 2014, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Manama as a follow-up to a 2012 visit to assess conditions for freedom of religion or belief, including the government's implementation of relevant recommendations from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). The delegation met in Manama with a range of high-level government officials, opposition groups, Sunni and Shi'a religious leaders, human rights organizations, non-Muslim religious minority communities, and other civil society leaders. Based on the visit, USCIRF has concluded that while the Bahraini government has made some progress in implementing various BICI recommendations, it must act with greater urgency to redress past abuses and embrace genuine reforms. USCIRF remains concerned by the government's continued lack of accountability for abuses against the Shi'a community since 2011, and will continue to monitor closely developments in Bahrain during the coming year.

Background

Bahrain is a diverse country and Bahraini citizens have a deep sense of their culture and history going back centuries. With a population of approximately 1.3 million, approximately half are Bahraini citizens and half are expatriate workers, primarily from South Asian countries. Almost half of the expatriate workers are non-Muslim (approximately 250,000-300,000). The religious demography of Bahraini citizens is estimated at 60-65% Shi'a and 30-35% Sunni, with approximately 1-2% non-Muslims, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and Baha'is. Compared to other countries in the region, Bahrain is among the most tolerant of non-Muslim religious minority communities. The government officially recognizes several Christian denominations, a tiny Jewish community, Hindus, Sikhs, and a Baha'i community. Most Bahrainis also acknowledge that their society has been historically tolerant of all faiths and religiously pluralistic.

Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni Muslim monarchy, the Al-Khalifa family.

Accountability for Past Abuses

During USCIRF's 2014 visit, the Bahraini government repeatedly expressed a commitment to making demonstrable progress on reforms, including expediting the rebuilding of Shi'a mosques and religious structures destroyed in 2011. Nevertheless, the government

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still has not adequately held security officials accountable for the 2011 abuses and subsequent violations, which included harassing, imprisoning, torturing, and killing predominantly Shi'a demonstrators. Bahraini courts have tried, prosecuted, and convicted only a few lower-level police officers, with little or no transparency about the trials, convictions, and length of prison terms. To date, no high-level officials have been held accountable. The Bahraini government's December 2013 BICI Follow-Up Report stated that Bahraini courts have investigated all 35 deaths of Shi'a protestors during demonstrations in 2011 and, as a result of investigations, 39 cases were sent to court with 13 security officials convicted and 15 acquitted. Some 25 cases are still being heard.

Ongoing Abuses and Discrimination

In 2013, Shi'a Muslims continued to be detained and arrested arbitrarily, including during Ashura commemorations in November. Incendiary, sectarian rhetoric continued in the government and pro-government media,

new media laws that would curb anti-Shi'a incitement have not been passed, and little has been done to ensure the Shi'a community greater media access.

Members of the Shi'a community still cannot serve in the active military, only in administrative positions, and there are no Shi'a in the upper levels of the Bahrain government security apparatus, including the military and police. The December 2013 BICI Follow-Up Report

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indicated the government had hired 577 Sunni and Shi'a personnel for entry-level security positions over the past year. Reflecting an effort to address the lack of Shi'a in security posts, the majority of those hired were Shi'a. Bahraini officials stated that new officers will perform police work in all security-related government agencies and will have the authority and function of "security officers."

Rebuilding of Shi'a Mosques and Religious Structures

The Bahraini government has allocated \$8 million for rebuilding Shi'a mosques and religious structures, twice the amount it pledged in 2012. It also has moved its deadline from 2018 to the end of 2014 to complete the construction of the 30 destroyed structures identified in the BICI report. During its visit, the USCIRF delegation visited several sites where Shi'a religious structures were at various stages of reconstruction. However, despite the government's claims that it had rebuilt 10 of these structures, the delegation found that the Shi'a community itself had paid for and built six of the 10. Officials acknowledged this to be accurate but claimed that the six were illegal and that the government had secured legal permits for them. Some government officials also indicated a willingness to reimburse the Shi'a community for its expenses.

In addition, in a few cases disputes continue over where to rebuild the mosque or structure. Bahraini officials committed to an ongoing dialogue with the Shi'a

community to resolve these cases, although some representatives from the Shi'a community did not believe the government was fully committed to the negotiations.

Recommendations

USCIRF urges the U.S. government to continue to press the Bahraini government to implement fully the BICI recommendations, including those related to freedom of religion and belief and accountability for past abuses against the Shi'a community. In addition, USCIRF encourages the Bahraini government to reimburse the Shi'a community for expending its own funds to rebuild six mosques and religious structures that were demolished in 2011. USCIRF also urges the U.S. government to continue to press the Bahraini government and members of the opposition and civil society to resume a genuine dialogue and reconciliation process, which is vital to achieving progress on religious freedom and related human rights.