

BAHRAIN

USCIRF has concluded that the Bahraini government has made demonstrable progress in rebuilding mosques and religious structures it destroyed during unrest in the spring of 2011. Nevertheless, more needs to be done to implement recommendations from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to redress past abuses against Shi'a Muslims and further improve religious freedom conditions. In addition, Shi'a Muslims continued to be detained and arrested arbitrarily throughout the year. In December 2014, a USCIRF staff member traveled to Manama; in addition to visiting almost all of the destroyed religious sites identified in the BICI report, he met with U.S. Embassy personnel, civil society representatives, members of religious communities, human rights groups, and human rights defenders.

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.

community, Hindus, and Sikhs, as well as a small Baha'i community that it recognizes as a social organization. Most Bahrainis acknowledge that their society has been historically tolerant of all faiths and religiously pluralistic to a degree that is notable in the region.

Progress and Concerns Related to Accountability for Past Abuses

Of the more than 4,600 public and private workers dismissed in 2011 as a consequence of the unrest, the vast majority were Shi'a Muslims. According to non-governmental interlocutors, only 80-90 cases remain unresolved. In a February 2014 BICI follow-up report, the Bahraini government stated that only 49 cases remain unresolved. A March 2014 agreement between the Bahraini government and the International Labor Organization (ILO) included a commitment to resolve all remaining cases. Among those that have been resolved, hundreds were not reinstated in their original jobs, but in lower level jobs and some in different private companies. According to interlocutors, the most important element of the ILO agreement is to ensure mechanisms

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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 percent Shi'a and 30-35 percent Sunni, with approximately 1-2 percent 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

that would prevent future discriminatory dismissals and improve transparency in recruiting and hiring.

The government created the Civilian Settlement Office to compensate families of victims who were killed and individuals who were physically harmed in the 2011 unrest, as well as an Office of the Ombudsman in the Ministry of Interior to ensure compliance with standards of policing and to receive reports of misconduct. However, the government still has not adequately

held high-level security officials accountable for serious abuses, which included targeting, imprisoning, torturing, and killing predominantly Shi'a demonstrators. Bahraini courts have tried, prosecuted, and convicted

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only a few lower-level police officers, with little or no transparency about the trials, convictions, and length of prison terms. The government has stated that there are ongoing investigations of commanding officers related to the 2011 abuses, but has not disclosed details.

Ongoing Abuses and Discrimination

In 2014, Shi'a Muslims continued to be detained and arrested arbitrarily. In December 2014, Shi'a cleric and prominent opposition leader Ali Salman was arrested and charged with several security-related crimes that could carry prison terms ranging from three years to life. Human rights defenders have said the charges are baseless, and UN experts have criticized them as violations of the freedoms of expression, association, and religion. At the end of the reporting period, Salman remains in detention. In April 2014, the government forced Shi'a cleric Hussain Mirza Abdelbaqi Najati to leave the country after revoking his Bahraini citizenship in November 2012. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the authorities expelled Najati on account of "religiously motivated discrimination."

Furthermore, government and pro-government media continued to use inflammatory, sectarian rhetoric. New media laws that would curb anti-Shi'a incitement, as recommended in the BICI report, have not been passed. According to interlocutors, 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.

Progress in Rebuilding Shi'a Mosques and Religious Structures

While the Bahraini government did not meet its end-of-2014 deadline, it made significant progress in rebuilding the destroyed structures over the past year. In early 2014, the government increased to approximately \$8 million the amount to rebuild Shi'a mosques and religious structures, nearly twice what it pledged in 2012. It also moved the deadline from 2018 to the end of 2014 to complete the construction of the 30 destroyed structures identified in the BICI report. As of December 2014, 14 mosques had been rebuilt, eight by the government and six by the Shi'a community, and 13 others were approximately 80-90 percent complete. The government helped secure legal permits for the six structures built by the Shi'a community, however, despite indicating a willingness in the past, officials have not committed to reimbursing the community.

There has been no progress on three of the 30 sites due to ongoing procedural and legal hurdles. Of the 27 completed or nearly complete, one mosque – the Mohammad Al Barbaghi mosque, which is religiously and historically significant to the Shi'a community – is nearly completed, but was rebuilt some 200 meters from its original site. The government says this was for security reasons, since the original mosque site is next to a major highway, but some members of the Shi'a community continue to insist that the mosque can only be built on the original location. In the past, Bahraini officials have committed to an ongoing dialogue with the Shi'a community to resolve the remaining disputed cases, although representatives from the Shi'a community do not believe the government is fully committed to the negotiations.

Recommendations

USCIRF urges the United States 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 continues to encourage 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.