

# BAHRAIN

During the past year, there was an increase in the number of interrogations, detentions, and arbitrary arrests of Shi'a Muslims, including clerics, for peaceful protests and criticizing the government's human rights and religious freedom record. While the Bahraini government has made significant progress in rebuilding 30 mosques and religious structures it destroyed during unrest in the spring of 2011, it did not meet its self-imposed deadline to complete the process by the end of 2014. In addition, the government has yet to fully implement recommendations from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to redress past abuses against Shi'a Muslims and further improve religious freedom conditions.

## Background

With a population of approximately 1.3 million, about 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). Bahraini citizens are estimated to be 60-65 percent Shi'a and 30-35 percent Sunni, with approximately one to two 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 at least 19 Christian denominations, a tiny Jewish community, Hindus, and Sikhs. A small Baha'i community is recognized as a social entity. 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

Since the release of the 2011 BICI report, the Bahraini government has created entities to address accountability for abuses, including a Civilian Settlement Office to compensate for deaths and injuries from the 2011 unrest,

as well as an Office of the Ombudsman in the Ministry of Interior to ensure compliance with policing standards and 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 only a few lower-level police officers, with little or no transparency about the trials, convictions, and length of prison terms; several have been acquitted. The government has stated that there are ongoing investigations of commanding officers related to the 2011 abuses, but has not disclosed details.

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## Ongoing Abuses and Discrimination

In October 2015, UN experts found that patterns of cultural, economic, educational, and social discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain persisted in 2015. They found that excessive use of force and abuses targeting Shi'a clerics continued, as did discrimination in the education system, media, public sector employment, and other government social policies, such as housing and welfare programs.

During the reporting period, Shi'a Muslims continued to be interrogated, detained, and arrested, and, in some cases, convicted and sentenced to prison terms. For example, in August and December 2015, Shi'a cleric and interfaith activist Maytham al-Salman was interrogated about his criticism of Bahraini government policies and his advocacy of human rights and religious freedom. He

was charged with “expressing views regarding a case still in court” and “inciting hatred against the regime” and his travel was restricted. At the end of the reporting period, the charges were still pending. In June 2015, Shi’a cleric and prominent opposition leader Ali Salman was sentenced to four years in prison on a range of security-related charges, including inciting regime change and insulting the Ministry of Interior, which UN experts have criticized as violations of the freedoms of expression, association, and religion. Salman originally was arrested and imprisoned in December 2014. At the end of the reporting period, he continues to appeal the sentence and remains in detention.

Furthermore, while government officials often make public statements condemning sectarian hatred, 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 Muslims in the upper levels of the Bahrain government security apparatus, including the military and police.

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## **Progress in Rebuilding Shi’a Mosques and Religious Structures**

Despite a self-imposed end-of-2014 deadline, the Bahraini government has not completed rebuilding destroyed structures. In early 2014, the government increased to approximately US\$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 rebuilding the 30 destroyed structures identified in the BICI report. In October 2015, the government stated publicly that 27 had been completed and were approved for use and that three still required legal and administrative approval. Nevertheless, as of February 2016, other credible sources found

that the government had rebuilt 20 structures – 15 fully in use and five nearly complete but not yet in use – and the Shi’a community itself had rebuilt seven structures. The government has stated that it helped secure legal permits for the structures built by the Shi’a community, but despite indicating willingness in the past, officials have not committed to reimbursing the community.

Of the 27 completed or nearly complete, one mosque – the Mohamad Al Barbaghi mosque, which is religiously and historically significant to the Shi’a community – was rebuilt some 200 meters from its original site. The government has stated 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. Bahraini officials have committed to an ongoing dialogue with the Shi’a community to resolve the remaining disputed cases, although some community representatives do not believe the government is fully committed to the negotiations.

## **Other Developments**

In December 2015, Bahrain’s Shura Council approved amendments to the law governing political societies that ban clerics from delivering sermons and carrying out religious duties while also being members of political societies. In August, the Shura Council debated criminalizing contempt of religion and insults to religious sanctities, as well as hate speech that promotes sectarian discord and undermines national unity. By the end of the reporting period, no further action had been taken. In October, there were numerous reports that authorities removed Ashura banners in some locations where commemorations were taking place; clashes followed, resulting in injuries to dozens of protestors.

## **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 seven mosques and religious structures that were demolished in 2011.