

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED: BAHRAIN

In December 2012, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Manama to assess conditions for freedom of religion or belief, particularly progress by the Bahraini government in implementing relevant recommendations from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), including related to the rebuilding of Shi'i mosques and religious structures the government destroyed in 2011.

The delegation met in Manama with high-level government officials, including the Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs and the Minister of Human Rights. The delegation also met with the Secretary-General of one of the leading Shi'i opposition groups, the Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society; Sunni and Shi'i religious leaders; representatives of human rights organizations; representatives of non-Muslim religious minority communities; other civil society leaders, such as lawyers and media personalities; and ordinary Bahraini citizens. In addition, the delegation met with the U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy staff.

While Bahrain does not meet the criteria to be placed this year on USCIRF's Tier 1 or Tier 2, inadequate implementation of the relevant BICI recommendations over the next year may negatively impact its status. USCIRF remains concerned by the government's ongoing lack of accountability for abuses against the Shi'i community since 2011. USCIRF acknowledges some progress by the Bahraini government in implementing various BICI recommendations related to freedom of religion or belief, but much more needs to be done. USCIRF will continue to monitor closely the religious freedom situation in Bahrain over the next year.

BACKGROUND

Bahrain is a somewhat diverse country and Bahraini citizens have a deep sense of their culture and history going back centuries. With a population of approximately 1.2 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. Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni Muslim monarchy, the Al-Khalifa family. All Bahrainis interviewed during the visit—including governmental and non-governmental interlocutors—described Bahraini society as historically tolerant of all faiths and religiously pluralistic.

UNREST IN 2011 AND THE BICI REPORT

February 14, 2011 marked the beginning of a series of demonstrations by the predominantly Shi'i Muslim majority population in Bahrain. The demonstrators initially called for various political reforms by King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa. However, over time, and after authorities brutally cracked down on the protestors, the demands changed with some demonstrators calling for an end to the monarchy. Particularly in February and March, Bahraini authorities and security forces overwhelmingly targeted the Shi'i Muslim population with mass arrests, detentions, imprisonments, torture, and killings. Sectarian violence between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims increased.

The Bahraini government implemented an emergency State of National Safety by royal decree from March 15 to June 1. During that period, military and civilian security forces carried out extensive security operations and arrested individuals, the vast majority of whom were Shi'i Muslims, including activists and clerics whose activities were both political and religious. In June, the Bahraini government created and funded the Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to write a report on the violence and to offer recommendations to the Bahraini government. The BICI released its final report in November 2011.

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED: BAHRAIN

The BICI report found that nearly 3,000 people were detained during the crackdown, and as many as half faced abuses such as electric shocks and beatings in detention. The report concluded that the government of Bahrain committed systematic and egregious human rights violations by suppressing pro-democracy protests, particularly in February and March 2011. It concluded that a lack of accountability by Bahraini authorities led to a “culture of impunity” and violations of international and Bahraini law. The abuses included excessive use of force against protesters leading to more than 35 deaths and hundreds of injuries, arbitrary arrests and detentions, psychological and physical abuse of detainees that in “many cases” amounted to torture, and a pattern of due process violations and unfair trials. Some security forces also were killed by protestors. Nevertheless, the report found that security forces systematically raided homes in order to arrest individuals. This practice often was accompanied by sectarian insults and verbal abuse. The report also documented the unfair and summary dismissals of thousands of professionals, workers, and students, the vast majority of whom were Shi’i Muslims. The report found no evidence linking the government of Iran to the unrest and no evidence that Gulf area troops, led by Saudi Arabia, committed human rights abuses.

The BICI received information that Bahraini authorities demolished 53 Shi’i religious structures during or in consequence of the crackdown but was only able to visit 30 sites, 28 of which were mosques, one a *matam* (congregation hall), and one a shrine. The BICI recommended that the Bahraini government “consider rebuilding, at its expense, some of the demolished religious structures in accordance with administrative regulations” as soon as possible.

GENERAL FINDINGS FROM USCIRF VISIT

Since the 2011 unrest, sectarian tension and polarization has risen dramatically. Many of USCIRF’s interlocutors, who came from various perspectives, could not envision a positive outcome or possible resolution to the political stalemate between the government and Shi’i opposition. Some asserted that the only way forward was through genuine dialogue without any preconditions, something that remains elusive.

During USCIRF’s visit, there were two competing narratives that dominated. The first narrative reflects the government perspective and those sympathetic to the government: opposition Shi’i activists and protestors are emboldened and supported by the Iranian government and are trying to create chaos and instability in the country by rioting and demonstrating in the streets, including by committing violent acts. The second narrative reflects the predominantly Shi’i majority and opposition movement: the government has committed serious human rights abuses on opposition demonstrators over the past two years, primarily against the Shi’i community and opposition groups, and it is not willing to make genuine political reforms which the Bahraini people have been demanding for years.

Representatives from the various non-Muslim religious minority communities stated that the unrest since 2011 had not adversely impacted their communities, although they all hoped for a resolution soon. 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. The Catholic Church is in the process of building a church on land donated by King Hamad and other communities have public worship facilities.

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED: BAHRAIN

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNREST

The government crackdown on dissent and opposition over the past two years has negatively impacted religious freedom in the country, in that it involved:

- discrimination and physical abuse in 2011 against Shi'i Muslims who participated in demonstrations;
- dismissal of Shi'i students from universities and doctors and government workers from private and public sector jobs because of their involvement in demonstrations;
- ongoing discrimination against Shi'i Muslims in government employment, particularly upper defense and security jobs;
- the destruction of at least 30-35 Shi'i mosques and religious structures in the spring of 2011; and
- increased rhetoric from official media outlets inflaming sectarian tensions and demonizing the Shi'i Muslim population.

Abuses, Accountability, and Discrimination

Some Shi'i Muslims interviewed by the USCIRF delegation alleged physical abuse and torture on the basis of their religious identity and because they had participated in various demonstrations since February 2011. Some examples include physical beatings, electric shock, being forced to stand for many hours at a time, being subject to derogatory religious slurs during interrogation, being forced to eat their own fecal matter, and being doused with urine. To date, only a few lower-level police officers or security officials have been tried, prosecuted, and convicted for abuses, with little or no transparency about these trials and convictions. No high-level government officials have been held accountable for the killing, torturing, imprisoning, and targeting of Shi'i Muslims during the 2011 unrest.

The government asserted that as many as 120 Bahraini security officials and police are being investigated or tried and approximately 18-20 are in jail. Other interlocutors disputed the numbers, saying there may be 20 cases that are going through the court system, although very slowly and without transparency.

Members of the Shi'i 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 vast majority of the more than 4,000 Shi'i workers in the public and private sectors who were dismissed from jobs have been reinstated, although some were either demoted or reassigned to lower-level jobs. In addition, the majority of the Shi'i university students who were expelled from universities have been reinstated.

Destruction of Shi'i Religious Structures and the Status of Reconstruction

The government acknowledged the destruction of Shi'i religious structures only by accepting the BICI report, but has not publicly taken responsibility or apologized. Although it is unclear who in the government ordered the demolition of the structures, it appears to have been carried out by security forces to intimidate and humiliate the Shi'i opposition in response to the demonstrations. The government demolished at least 30-35 Shi'i mosques, *matams* (religious gathering halls), and other religious structures, some of which existed for decades. During USCIRF's visit, government officials claimed that most of the

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED: BAHRAIN

structures were illegal, but they could not answer why so many were destroyed in a short period of time (between March and May 2011).

According to Bahraini officials, only five mosques had fully complied with legal and administrative requirements for acquisition of land and obtaining required permits. The others were in violation of a law requiring all mosques to have at least a building permit and a royal deed. However, according to the BICI report, the Bahraini government did not follow legal provisions requiring notice and an administrative, and possibly judicial, hearing before the demolitions.

Government officials claimed that the reconstruction of at least seven mosques was complete or almost complete, and others were in the process of, or being planned for, reconstruction. The Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs stated that several million dollars had been allotted for reconstruction of mosques. The USCIRF delegation visited four sites where Shi'i mosques were being reconstructed. At three of the locations, construction was nearly complete. At the fourth location, the destroyed mosque was right off a major highway, and the government said it would build the mosque about 200 meters off the highway so that it would not be a safety hazard. Construction had not yet started at the fourth location.

The BICI Follow-Up Unit, a Bahraini government entity, released a report in November 2012 stating that construction at five mosque sites was 70% complete. In addition, the government stated that progress was being made to regularize the status of all unlicensed Shi'i religious structures. The report identified 30 mosques, which were in various stages of being constructed, obtaining permits, or seeking approval. There is no clear timeframe for completion of all 30 mosques.