

Bahrain

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. The Government continued to subject both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims to some governmental control and monitoring, 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.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, Shi'a Muslims, who constitute the majority of the population, often resented minority Sunni Muslim rule.

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 its population is approximately 725,000. The citizen population is 98 percent Muslim; Jews and Christians constitute the remaining 2 percent. Muslim citizens belong to the Shi'a and Sunni branches of Islam, with Shi'a constituting an estimated 70 percent of the indigenous population.

Foreigners, mostly from South Asia and other Arab countries, constitute an estimated 38 percent of the total population. Approximately half of resident foreigners are non-Muslim, including Christians, Hindus, Bahá'ís, Buddhists, and Sikhs.

The American Mission Hospital, which is affiliated with the National Evangelical Church, has operated in the country for more than a century. The church adjacent to the hospital held weekly multilingual services and served as a meeting place for several denominations.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution states that Islam is the official religion and also provides for freedom of religion; however, there were some limits on this right. The Government continues to register new religious non-governmental organizations, including some with the legal authority to conduct political activities. In 2002, the king issued a new constitution and held municipal council and National Assembly elections. In the 2002 municipal council elections, candidates associated with religious political groups won forty of the fifty contested seats. In the 2002 legislative election, candidates associated with religious groups won more than half of the Council of Representatives' forty seats. In both elections, candidates from religious political groups conducted their campaigns without any interference from the Government.

There was one Jewish member and one Christian member of the forty-member upper house of Parliament, the Shura Council. All members of the Shura Council were appointed by the king.

The Government continued to subject both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims to some governmental control and monitoring, and there was some government discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in certain fields. Members of other religious groups who practiced their faith privately did so without interference from the Government and were permitted to maintain their own places of worship and display the symbols of their religion.

Every religious group must obtain a license from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to operate. Depending on circumstances, a religious group may need approval from the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Education. Christian congregations, which were registered with the Ministry of Social Development, operated freely and allowed other Christian congregations to use their facilities. One synagogue, four Sikh temples, and several official and unofficial Hindu temples are located in Manama, the capital, and its suburbs. In 2003, the Orthodox community celebrated the consecration of the new and expanded St. Mary's Church, which was built on land donated by other Christian groups.

In the past, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs had repeatedly denied a Baha'i community's request for a license to operate. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs stated that the Baha'i faith is an offshoot of Islam. According to its official interpretation of Islam, the Government regards the core beliefs of Baha'is to be blasphemous and consequently illegal, and therefore the ministry refuses to recognize the religion, but it allows the community to

gather and worship freely. The Baha'i community has not sought official recognition in many years.

Unregistered Christian congregations existed, and there was no attempt by the Government to force them to register. Holding a religious meeting without a permit is illegal; however, there were no reports of religious groups being denied a permit to gather.

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.

Islamic studies were a part of each year's curriculum in government schools and mandatory for all public school students. The decades-old curriculum is based on the Maliki school of Sunni theology. The Shi'a community has lobbied for inclusion of the Ja'afari (Shi'a) traditions in the curriculum for years, but this proposal has been rejected. In 2002 a public school for boys called the Ja'afari Institute, which covers the entire public school curriculum, opened offering religion classes in Ja'afari traditions for the first time. The school does not teach Sunni Maliki traditions. The school began in 2002 with students in the first grade only and has expanded its enrollment each year because its first-year contingent of students has proceeded to the next grade. The Ministry of Education has agreed in principle to the opening of a Ja'afari Institute for girls, but at the end of the period covered by this report, plans had not been finalized about the school's opening.

Shi'a were 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 was only one Islamic studies head teacher who was 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 were 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. This committee continues to develop the next year's curriculum as the oldest group of students at the Ja'afari Institute ages and proceeds to the next academic year.

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 Sunni Shari'a judges.

The country observes the Muslim feasts of Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Islamic New Year as national holidays. The Shi'a religious celebration of Ashura is a two-day national holiday. The Shi'a stage large public processions and other related activities during the holiday, and the Government does not restrict the religious elements of these events. The Ministry of Information provides media coverage of Ashura events.

Leaders representing many religious groups visited the country and met with government and civic leaders. These included the bishops of the Ethiopian and Syrian Orthodox churches and the general secretary of the Reformed Church in America.

Members of the Awali Community Church visited Christian prison inmates during the reporting period to provide items of clothing and Christian literature. In March 2005, members of the Sacred Heart Church were granted permission to visit Christian prison inmates and distribute religious materials to them.

In April 2005, the Islamic Awareness Center opened with the goal of promoting understanding of Islam and building bridges with other religious groups. The Islamic Enlightenment Society organized a conference in May 2005 aimed at diffusing tension between Muslim sects.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government funds, monitors, and closely controls all official religious institutions. These include Shi'a and Sunni mosques, Shi'a ma'tams (religious community centers), Shi'a and Sunni waqfs (charitable foundations), 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.

Towns that were developed and expanded in the past ten years, such as Hamad Town and Isa Town, had mixed Sunni and Shi'a populations. In these new areas, there were a greater number of Sunni than Shi'a mosques. In June 2004, King Hamad approved the construction of a large Shi'a mosque on a site in Hamad Town that had been the subject of a dispute between the two branches of Islam.

The Government prohibits anti-Islamic writings. Bibles and other Christian publications are displayed and sold openly in local bookstores that also sold Islamic and other religious literature. 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, in the past few years the Ministry of Information 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 anti-government or anti-Islamic. The software used was unreliable and often inhibits access to uncontroversial sites as well.

Following Ashura in February 2006, the Islamic Enlightenment Society displayed banners and billboards in several places in the country after receiving permission from the Ministry of Municipalities and Agriculture. The banners and billboards contained a 2003 sermon quote from Shi'a cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim implying that the country is divided into two camps, that of Imam Hussain and that of the Umayyad ruler Yazid, whose army killed Hussain and his followers in the seventh century. Senior Government officials, Sunni members of parliament, and columnists were quick to condemn this message as being sectarian and a misuse of freedom of expression. Representatives of the Islamic Enlightenment Society called a press conference to explain the message of the quote was for all Muslims to choose between right (Hussain) and wrong (Yazid), and that there was no sectarian meaning intended. The ministry subsequently asked the society to remove all banners, and the society complied with the request.

In 2005, the Shi'a Islamic bloc in the Council of Representatives (COR) proposed that the country's public schools teach the four main Sunni schools of thought and the Shi'a Ja'afari school of thought. The proposal was rejected by the Services Committee and by the COR. This proposal was raised again in February 2006, but was similarly rejected.

In March 2006, a University of Bahrain student was found to have distributed booklets and cassettes containing content that was insulting to

Shi'ism and promoting sectarianism. University officials confiscated the materials and reportedly were to discuss the consequences of the student's actions. The results of these discussions were not made public.

In March 2005, residents of Muharraq submitted a petition to the Ministry of Information requesting that the government-run TV station make live broadcasts of Friday sermons from Shi'a mosques, and not just from Sunni mosques. According to the petitioners, a similar request sent to the ministry in 2004 did not receive a response, and there was no response to the 2005 request.

In 2004, the Ministry of Information banned Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ"; according to the ministry, this decision was based on Islamic Shari'a prohibitions regarding the depiction of the Prophet Isa (Jesus).

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 were asked to provide the child's religion (not sect), but the government-issued birth certificate did not include this information.

Although there were notable exceptions, the Sunni Muslim minority enjoys a favored status. Sunnis often received preference for employment in sensitive government positions and in the managerial ranks of the civil service. Shi'a citizens did not hold significant posts in the defense and internal security forces, although they were allowed to be employed in the enlisted ranks. In September 2004, the Interior Ministry established a community police program to place 500 Shi'a men and women on the streets in Shi'a neighborhoods.

During the reporting period, the public Ja'afari Institute in Juffair, which opened in 2002, served students in grades one through four. The school is the first in which the Islamic Studies curriculum is designed to provide primary and secondary students with a foundation in the Ja'afari Shi'a school of Islam. The school teaches all subjects in the public school curriculum, but does not teach the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. The prime minister officiated at the official opening in June 2005.

Since 1950, a registered Christian church with more than 1,000 members has sought a parcel of land from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs on which to build its own church and hold religious services. The ministry has not responded to its formal applications. The National Evangelical Church allowed this church to use its facilities for services. However, the facility could only accommodate half of the church's congregation at any one time.

Since 1985, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has verbally denied Shi'a applications and petitions to establish a mosque and ma'tam in Riffa to serve that community's Shi'a population. Riffa is home to the Sunni ruling family. In 2004, the Ministry of the Royal Court formally denied the application, citing that land in Riffa cannot be allocated for commercial enterprises since it is reserved for the ruling family.

In 2003, the Ministry of Interior lifted its ban on policewomen wearing headscarves (hijab). Also in 2003, by royal decree, the king allowed women to drive while fully veiled (niqab). In July 2004, the Ministry of Defense lifted its ban on growing beards, a common practice among many Muslims. All military personnel who had been released for growing beards were reinstated. For workers in government offices there are no prohibitions against men growing long beards or women being fully veiled, however, in reality there are few women government workers who wore a full veil (niqab).

Although the 2002 constitution provides for women's political rights, Shari'a governs the personal legal rights of women. 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, including marriage, have been made. 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 non-citizen woman automatically loses custody of her children if she divorces their citizen father.

The Supreme Council for Women launched a public awareness campaign in the fall of 2005 highlighting the need for a family law or personal status law. This was followed by public debate and rallies both in favor and against such a law. Civil society groups also held seminars and workshops throughout the fall and winter advocating such legislation. The Government introduced draft legislation in March 2006 containing separate sections for Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, one section according to the Shi'a Ja'afari tradition, and the other section according to the Sunni Maliki tradition. There was widespread resistance to the legislation from the Shi'a community in the absence of constitutional guarantees that the legislation would not be changed in the future without the input and approval of Shi'a clerics. Discussions were ongoing throughout the reporting period.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Although there are exceptions, 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. To remedy social inequalities, the Government has built numerous subsidized housing complexes, which are open to all citizens on the basis of financial need.

The law does not prohibit conversion from one religion to another. 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 2004, unknown assailants vandalized the Zainab mosque. The assailants destroyed all water faucets, fans, electrical switches, lamps, microphones, clocks, and audiotapes. The director of the Ja'afari Awqaf sought police assistance to investigate the crime. Those responsible for the damage were not found.

In 2003, unknown assailants vandalized the Sa'sa'a Mosque. The director of the Government-funded agency responsible for managing Government-held Shi'a properties (Ja'afari Awqaf) did not seek police assistance or an investigation.

There were no acts of physical violence or harassment of Jews or vandalism of Jewish community institutions, such as schools, cemeteries, or the synagogue. The Government has not enacted any laws protecting the right of Jews to religious freedom; however, it has not interfered with their freedom to practice. The Government makes no effort specifically to promote antibias and tolerance education. 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.

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 and discuss matters of religious freedom among other human rights-related topics.

With U.S. government funding, Arab Civitas is helping the Ministry of Education develop a civic education program for public schools that includes lessons on human rights and tolerance. In 2003 and 2004, the embassy worked with the Ministry of Education to create and implement a new English language curriculum that stresses respect for persons of different religious backgrounds.

In October 2005, Georgetown University Muslim chaplain Imam Yehya Hindi visited the country to discuss how Islam is practiced in America and its acceptance in daily life and to promote religious tolerance and understanding.

Source: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71419.htm>

