

# BAHRAIN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion and sharia to be a principal source for legislation. It provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions provided these do not infringe on the “fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine.” The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and mandates imprisonment for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.” In May parliament passed new legislation prohibiting clerics from being members of political societies or participating in political activities while serving at a religious institution. While some commentators stated the legislation was designed to ensure the separation of religion from state affairs, some Shia activists stated it was meant to target their political organizations. There were scores of attacks on police during the year, some of which were accompanied by social media messages using Shia religious terminology to justify attacks on the authorities, including one attack in which a policeman was killed. The government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians. It convicted a Shia cleric on charges of giving an unauthorized sermon, and revoked the citizenship of Sheikh Isa Qassim, whom the media characterized as the country’s leading Shia cleric, on the grounds he had allegedly sought to form an organization supporting foreign religious leaders. After Qassim’s supporters staged a sit-in demonstration around his home, police sealed off access to the neighborhood where Qassim lived, detained over 70 individuals in connection with the sit-in, and judges sentenced two Shia clerics to prison terms for participating in the sit-in. The police continued to restrict entry and exit into the predominately Shia neighborhood through the end of the year. In December an appeals court agreed with an earlier appeals court and resented Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary General of the Shia opposition political society Wifaq, to nine years after he continued to appeal his 2014 conviction and four-year sentence on charges of inciting hatred and promoting disobedience to the law. As of year’s end, Salman had not refiled a final appeal to the Court of Cassation, but planned to do so in 2017. In June the authorities obtained a court order to shut down the Shia Wifaq, accusing it of creating “an environment for terrorism, extremism, and violence.” International human rights organizations published reports stating Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and ill-treatment by prison guards because of their religious affiliation. Shia community representatives complained about what they said was ongoing

discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system. Public officials continued to allege some Shia opposition members were supporters of terrorism. The government permitted Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen. Registered non-Muslim communities reported the government seldom interfered with their religious observances.

Although there were reports of conversion by some Muslims to other religions, those who did remained unwilling to speak publicly about their conversion. Representatives of the Shia community reported the continued higher unemployment rate and lower socioeconomic status of Shia were exacerbated by continued discrimination against Shia in the private as well as the public sectors and added to tensions between the Shia and Sunni communities. Both anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared on social media, including allegations that prominent Shia leaders supported terrorism or engaged in what was termed “treasonous behavior.” Representatives of non-Muslim religious groups reported there continued to be general acceptance of their presence and activities, although there were reports some employers denied migrant workers the opportunity to observe their religious beliefs.

The Secretary of State, the U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. government officials, and U.S. embassy officers met with government officials to urge them to implement fully the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) recommendations on the reconstruction of places of worship; to end discrimination against Shia in government employment and education; to pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities; and to allow prisoners to practice their religions. In this connection, U.S. officials urged the government to observe the religious freedom provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). U.S. officials also continued to advocate for the government to pursue political reforms, which would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. Embassy officers met regularly with religious leaders of all faiths and representatives of NGOs to discuss freedom of worship.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 1.4 million (July 2016 estimate). Of the total population, citizens number 585,000, according to 2015 estimates, the latest available. According to U.S. estimates, Muslims make up 70 percent of the total population; Christians 14.5 percent, Hindus 9.8 percent, Buddhists 2.5 percent

and Jews 0.6 percent. Local sources estimate 99 percent of citizens are Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Bahais, and Jews constitute the remaining 1 percent.

The government does not publish statistics regarding the sectarian breakdown between Shia and Sunni Muslims; most estimates state Shia constitute a majority (55 to 60 percent) of the country's citizen population. According to Jewish community members, there are approximately 36-40 Jewish citizens, from six families, in the country.

Most of the foreign residents, who make up approximately half of the total population, are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and other Arab countries. Over half of the foreigners are non-Muslim, including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), Bahais, and Sikhs.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, Islam is the official religion and the state safeguards the country's Islamic heritage. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, the freedom to perform religious rites, and the freedom to hold religious parades and religious gatherings, "in accordance with the customs observed in the country." The constitution guarantees the freedom to form associations as long as these do not infringe on the official religion or public order, and it prohibits discrimination based on religion or creed. There is no legal statute implementing the latter provision.

The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions provided these do not infringe on the "fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine," do not prejudice the unity of the people, or arouse discord or sectarianism.

The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and broadcast media programs and mandates imprisonment for no less than six months for "exposing the state's official religion to offense and criticism."

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to operate. Sunni religious groups register with the ministry through the Sunni Waqf, while Shia religious groups register through the Shia Waqf (the Waqfs are endowment boards, which supervise and fund the work of mosques and

prayer halls). Non-Muslim groups also register with the MOJIA. In order to register, a group must submit an official letter requesting registration; copies of minutes from the founders' committee meeting; a detailed list of founders, including names, ages, nationalities, occupations, and addresses; and other information such as the group's bylaws and bank account information. Religious groups also may need approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MOLSD), the Ministry of Information Affairs, or the Ministry of Interior (MOI), depending on the nature of the group's intended activities. If any religious group organizes functions outside of its designated physical space without approval, it may be subject to government prosecution and a fine. The law prohibits activities falling outside of an organization's charter. The penal code does not specifically address the activities of unregistered religious groups, but provides for the closing of any unlicensed branch of an international organization plus imprisonment of up to six months and fines of up to 50 Bahraini dinars (BD) (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch.

Nineteen non-Muslim religious groups are registered with the MOJIA, including the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church, St. Christopher's Anglican Church, the National Evangelical Church, the Awali International Church, Good Shepherd Four Square Church, the Church of South India, The Mar Thoma Church, the New Apostolic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Brethern Assembly, the Malayalee Christian Congregation, St. Peter's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, the Malnakara Orthodox Church, and St. Mary's Indian Orthodox Cathedral. Non-Christian registered groups include a Hindu temple and Bahai, Buddhist, and Jewish communities.

The penal code calls for punishment of not more than one year imprisonment or a fine of no more than BD100 (\$270) for offending one of the recognized religious groups or their practices, or for openly defaming a religious figure considered sacred to members of a particular group.

The law stipulates fines or imprisonment for insulting an institution, announcing false or malicious news, spreading rumors, attending conferences abroad without authorization, encouraging others to show contempt for a different group of people, illegally gathering, and advocating for a change of government, among other offenses. The Office of the Ombudsman addresses the rights of prisoners, including the right to practice their religion.

The MOJIA operates both the Sunni Waqf and the Jafaari (Shia) Waqf. Its Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs oversees the work of both boards, which are partially funded by the state and partially funded by tithes, income from property rentals, and other private sources. The Sunni Waqf and the Shia Waqf issue licenses to clerics and preachers allowing them to preach, as well as to religious sites allowing them to operate. They also review and approve clerical appointments for religious sites under their purview and pay for salaries, supplies, and building expenses for the religious sites. They also collect rental payments and sign leases on real estate owned by the groups they supervise.

The king has sole legal authority to allocate public land, including for religious purposes, although he may delegate this authority to government officials, including the prime minister. By law, construction of places of worship requires approvals from the appropriate national and municipal authorities. Government entities involved in allocating building permits include the MOJIA for non-Muslim religious sites, either the Sunni Waqf or the Shia Waqf under the MOJIA for Muslim sites, the Survey and Restoration Directorate, and the Survey Department.

The law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the educational system. The government funds public schools from grades 1-12; Islamic studies are mandatory for all Muslim students, and are optional for non-Muslims. Many students attend private schools, which must be registered with the government and, with a few exceptions (e.g., a foreign-funded and operated school), are also required to provide Islamic religious education for Muslim students. Private schools wishing to provide non-Islamic religious education to non-Muslims, in addition to the required Islamic religious education for Muslim students, must receive permission from the Ministry of Education to do so. Outside of school hours, both Muslim and non-Muslim students may learn about religions as their parents decide.

The Maliki school of Sunni jurisprudence forms the basis of the Islamic studies portion of public school curriculum, which does not include the Jaafari traditions of Shia Islam. One public school, the Jaafari Institute, provides religious instruction in Shia Islam; the remainder of its curriculum is consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools. An estimated 1,200 students attend the Jaafari Institute from elementary level through high school.

For adult religious education, the University of Bahrain offers separate degree programs in religious studies for Shia and Sunni. There are five registered institutes, publicly funded and overseen by the Sunni Waqf, offering religious

education for Sunnis. There are several dozen *hawzas* (Shia seminaries), some registered and some not registered. Some of the registered hawzas are publicly funded; others by choice are privately funded. Non-Muslim groups are also permitted to offer religious instruction to their adherents.

According to the constitution, sharia forms a principal basis for legislation although civil and criminal matters are governed by a civil code. With regard to family and personal status matters, the constitution states inheritance is a guaranteed right governed by sharia. It also guarantees the duties and status of women according to sharia. The law codifies the Sunni interpretation of sharia with regard to family matters, including inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce, but it is only applicable to Sunnis. There is no codified Jaafari (Shia) personal status law. The Shia population uses a court system in which personal status matters are decided by judges who use their own discretion to interpret Islamic tradition. Mixed Sunni-Shia families may choose which court system will hear their case. The provisions of the law on personal status require a Sunni woman's consent for marriage and permit Sunni women to include conditions in the marriage contract. There is no comparable provision affecting Shia women. Non-Muslims may marry in civil or religious ceremonies, and civil courts make decisions for them on matters such as divorce and child custody.

The government does not designate religious affiliation on national identity documents, including birth certificates. Applications for birth certificates, however, record a child's religion, but not denomination. Hospital admission forms and school registration forms may also request information on an individual's religion.

The constitution says the state shall strive to strengthen ties with Islamic countries. It specifies the succession to the position of king is hereditary, passing from eldest son to eldest son. The royal family is Sunni.

On May 22, parliament passed a new provision of law prohibiting individuals from being members of political societies or becoming involved in political activities while they serve in a clerical role at a religious institution, including on a voluntary basis.

By law, the government regulates and monitors the collection of money by organizations, including religious ones. The law provides for fines of BD500 to 1,000 (\$1300 to \$2700) or imprisonment of at least 6 months for organizations which collect money without permission. On January 3, MOJIA published an

update to the law stating organizations wishing to collect money must first obtain authorization from the MOJIA to do so.

The country is party to the ICCPR with reservations stating it interpreted the covenant's provisions relating to freedom of religion, family rights, and equality between men and women before the law as "not affecting in any way" the prescriptions of sharia.

### **Government Practices**

There were scores of attacks on police during the year, some of which were accompanied by social media messages using Shia religious terminology to justify attacks on the authorities. In one such attack on April 16 in Karbabad, one policeman died. The government continued to question, detain, and arrest clerics, community members, and opposition politicians associated with the country's Shia community. It convicted a Shia cleric on charges of giving an unauthorized sermon and revoked the citizenship of Sheikh Isa Qassim, identified by the media as the leading Shia cleric in the country, on the grounds he had sought to form an organization supporting foreign religious leaders. In June the police closed off access to Qassim's home village following a sit-in around his house by his supporters who protested the revocation of his citizenship. The police detained over 70 individuals in connection with the sit-in, which continued at year's end, and sentenced two Shia clerics to prison terms for alleged involvement in the demonstration. The authorities also brought money laundering charges against Qassim, but he chose not to attend the hearings and the trial continued in absentia at year's end. In December an appeals court agreed with an earlier appeals court and resentenced Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary General of the Shia opposition society Wifaq, to nine years after he continued to appeal his original four-year sentence, handed down in 2014, on charges of inciting hatred and promoting disobedience to the law. As of year's end he had not refiled a final appeal to the Court of Cassation, but planned to do so in 2017. In June the authorities obtained a court order to shut down Wifaq, accusing it of creating "an environment for terrorism, extremism, and violence." International human rights organizations published reports stating Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and mistreatment by prison guards because of their religious affiliation. Shia community representatives complained about what they said was ongoing discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system. Government officials continued to allege some Shia opposition members were supporters of terrorism and engaged in treasonous behavior. The government permitted Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen.

Registered non-Muslim communities reported the government seldom interfered with their religious observances. Because religion and political affiliation were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

There were numerous attacks on security personnel during the year. Some of these were accompanied by social media messages using Shia religious terminology to justify attacks on the authorities. In one such attack on April 16 on police in Karbabad, a police officer was killed and two others were critically injured. The authorities arrested 11 individuals in connection with the attack and referred the case for trial, but as of year's end the trial had not begun. Similar attacks on the police, although not involving any reported fatalities, took place in Karzakan, Sitra, Mayamaar, Marraq, Belad Al Qadeem, Sharkan, Aker, and Nuwaidrat. The perpetrators of these attacks often filmed themselves attacking police using improvised weapons, including in close proximity to bystanders. They sometimes wore religious garb such as burial shrouds. They posted many of these videos on social media. In October one such social media campaign likened the authorities to an old enemy of the religion, Yezid, the one responsible for the killing of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain.

The government monitored sermons and brought charges against clerics who repeatedly spoke on unapproved topics. On April 15, the authorities arrested Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed Al-Mansi for giving an unauthorized sermon. The authorities had previously censured him in 2014 for speaking out against the government's demolition of 30 Shia mosques in 2011. On May 24, Al-Mansi was sentenced to a year in prison for inciting hatred against the regime and insulting the Ministry of Interior.

The government charged some individuals with crimes related to defamation of religion and inciting hatred against another denomination. On October 9, the authorities arrested journalist Faisal Hayyat and charged him with making "defamatory statements against one of the country's main Muslim sects" in conjunction with tweets Hayyat had posted calling for God to curse religious figures revered by Sunni. The lower criminal court found him guilty on November 29 and gave him a three-month prison sentence.

On June 20, the government announced it had revoked the citizenship of Sheikh Isa Qassim, the leading Shia cleric according to the media, and had frozen his bank accounts. The Minister of Interior stated Qassim's citizenship had been revoked because he had sought to form an organization supporting foreign religious and



political leaders, and had promoted a sectarian environment in the country. On the evening his citizenship was revoked, Qassim's supporters began a sit-in demonstration around his house in the village of Diraz, which continued at year's end. Following the start of the sit-in, the authorities set up checkpoints to control access to and egress from the village and surrounding neighborhoods, which they continued to restrict through the end of the year. Although the MOI allowed most local residents to enter the village, it prevented nonresidents, including Shia clerics, from entering to attend or lead prayers at village mosques. A few outside clerics were able to obtain letters of permission from the police to give sermons at small events held during Islamic holiday periods.

In July the authorities indicted Qassim and two of his staff, Mirza Al-Dirazi and Sheikh Hussain Al-Mahrous, on money laundering charges involving large transfers of funds overseas. All three defendants denied the charges. The trial continued at year's end. Qassim's supporters reported his office had collected the money and spent the funds in accordance with Shia customs and obligations, and said the government had targeted Qassim due to his status in the Shia community.

On July 17, the government shut down the Islamic Enlightenment Society, which had been originally registered in 1973 and had operated in its present form since 2001. The society was registered as a charity with the MOLSD, but it was reportedly headed by Qassim, and its members were largely Shia clerics and religious workers such as teachers and chanters.

In October residents of Diraz reported the MOI prohibited guest speakers from entering the village to teach at prayer halls during Ashura celebrations. International NGOs reported the police had summoned over 73 individuals, including 44 clerics, for questioning in relation to the sit-in at Qasim's house. The police held many overnight; some individuals were arrested and remained in custody as of year's end, while Qassim remained at his home.

Several Shia clerics were sentenced to prison terms for participating in the demonstrations in support of Qassim. On August 31, a court sentenced Sayed Majeed al-Mashaal, former leader of the Ulama Islamic Council, to two years in prison based on accusations he had calling on the population to rally outside Qassim's house. On August 18, a court convicted Sheikh Ali Humaidan of "illegal gathering" and sentenced him to one year in prison for his involvement in the sit-in.

On August 14, police summoned Sheikh Maytham al-Salman for questioning and held him overnight, on suspicions he had participated in the sit-in in Diraz. Police reportedly refused four requests by him to have a lawyer present, saying they had no orders to allow a lawyer to be present. They reportedly kept him awake in an interview room for more than a day without allowing him to change his clothes or take a shower and required him to remove his clerical robe and turban, which he said was a measure intended to “insult and intimidate a Shia cleric.” He was released on August 15, and as of year’s end a date had not been set for his trial.

In December an appeals court concurred with an earlier appeals court and resentenced Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary General of the Shia opposition political society, Wifaq, to nine years on charges of inciting hatred and promoting disobedience to the law. Salman had originally been convicted in 2015 and sentenced to four years in prison, which he had appealed. The prosecution also appealed, however, seeking to overturn Salman’s acquittal on the charge of inciting to change the government by force. In May the appeals court overturned the acquittal and increased Salman’s sentence to nine years in prison. In October the Court of Cassation dismissed the Court of Appeal’s verdict on the basis it did not take into consideration new video evidence presented in court at the trial. The court of Cassation returned the case to the Court of Appeal. In December a Court of Appeal with a different panel of judges than the first Court of Appeal also sentenced Salman to nine years. At year’s end Salman had not refiled a final appeal to the Court of Cassation, and he remained in custody at Jaw Prison. He reportedly planned to file an appeal in 2017

On September 15, police questioned Salman in connection with a letter submitted with his name on it to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussein, but as of year’s end, the authorities had not filed any new charges against him.

Several Shia clerics arrested in 2011 remained in prison at year’s end. They had been associated with the political opposition and given sentences ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment on charges related to terrorist activity or inciting hatred.

Former Wifaq MP Hasan Isa remained in prison while his trial on charges of helping to finance a terrorist bomb attack continued. Authorities had arrested Isa in August 2015 following a July 2015 bombing in Sitra, which killed two policemen. Isa denied involvement in the bombing, saying he had not given money to terrorists, but had distributed funds to poor families in his role as a religious leader of his neighborhood.

The government continued to not provide regular statistics on detainees, but according to a report on Jaw Prison published in January by the government-funded Prisoner and Detainee Rights Commission, the courts had sentenced 1021 of the 2468 inmates in the facility for riot-related crimes. Local human rights organizations and activists stated individuals imprisoned for riot-related crimes, including assaulting police officers and possession or use of explosives, were overwhelmingly Shia. International NGOs reported Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and ill-treatment by prison guards because of their religion, which at times led to coerced confessions. Some Shia prisoners at Jaw Prison and at the pretrial Dry Dock facility reported they were not allowed to practice their faith freely. Government officials stated the MOI, which supervised detention facilities, only prohibited practices when they violated prison safety rules, such as waving religious banners, or organizing large-scale gatherings for religious ceremonies.

During the year, the authorities issued at least three individuals limited validity passports and immediately deported them to nearby countries with significant Shia populations, including Sheikh Mohammed Khojasta on February 22, Hussein Khairallah Mahood on February 24, and Masaud Jahromi on March 7. The government had publicly announced it had stripped the citizenship of all three, along with 69 others, in 2015 on the grounds they supported terrorist organizations.

Religious groups trying to register their activities with the appropriate ministry reported at times it was not clear which ministry had jurisdiction over a particular activity and said they had experienced bureaucratic delays trying to complete registration and reregistration processes required by government authorities.

The government reported the same number of 440 licensed Sunni mosques and 80 Sunni community centers as in 2015, while the number of licensed Shia places of worship remained at 609 mosques and 618 *ma'atams* (Shia prayer houses). In new housing developments, observers reported there continued to be a disproportionate number of Sunni mosques, which they said showed continued government favoritism towards Sunni Muslims.

The MOJIA continued to monitor clerics' adherence to a pledge of ethics it had created for those individuals engaged in religious discourse. Preachers who diverged from the pledge were subject to censure or removal by the authorities. The MOJIA also continued to announce how much money an adult should give on a voluntary basis to the poor on religious feast days. According to one report,

during the month of Ashura, police summoned some Shia chanters and preachers and had them sign pledges to avoid discussing politics from the pulpit.

According to media reports, in June some Shia clerics issued a public statement saying they were ceasing holding congregational prayers because of the government's restrictions on the freedom of religious worship for Shia. The statement, titled "Those Barred from Praying," described the situation in the country as "deplorable." After four weeks, however, they resumed holding regular prayers

The government again permitted Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen. As in previous years, the MOI provided security for the processions, but again removed some Ashura flags, banners, and decorations from streets and private property, according to Shia leaders. The government stated MOI personnel had removed the banners because they violated zoning restrictions or because they contained a political message.

The government continued to permit registered non-Muslim communities to maintain identifiable places of worship, hold religious gatherings, and display religious symbols. The MOI continued to provide security for large events held by religious communities, including non-Muslim ones. Security forces stated they continued to monitor religious gatherings and funerals to maintain peace and security.

Adherents of minority religious groups reported they were able to produce religious media and publications and distribute them in bookstores and churches, although the government only permitted publications, which did not criticize Islam.

Construction on a cathedral to serve as headquarters for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia continued to make little progress during the year. Christian community leaders stated there was also little progress in the government's continuing effort to develop options for expanding Christian cemeteries.

Architects engaged on a project to renovate Manama's souk on behalf of the government met with non-Muslim religious leaders for the purpose of ensuring non-Islamic religious sites would not be adversely affected. Work on the project remained in a preliminary stage as of the end of the year.

On October 14 the king announced he would permit a Coptic Orthodox church to be built in Manama.

The government again reported no significant reconstruction work had been done on the three remaining Shia mosques from the 30 it had damaged or destroyed in 2011. Some in the Shia community remained dissatisfied with three of the 27 reconstructed mosques because they had been rebuilt in different locations from where the old ones had been. Shia leaders stated the mosque grounds should have been preserved as they were. There were social media postings critical of the Shia Waqf for not pressing the government harder on these cases, as well as complaints about a mosque in Zinj, which had been destroyed by the government in 2011, but was not listed in the BICI report, and had not been reconstructed. Other social media postings complained about management of the Shia Waqf, such as a report on a Shia wedding hall near the village of Jidhafs, under the control of the Shia Waqf since 2011, which was being rented out to a commercial company for use as a warehouse.

NGOs reported the government showed disparate treatment to Shia versus Sunni and stated this different treatment fueled perceptions among the Shia community of a justice system stacked against them. For example, several times during the year the government reported it had investigated a number of officials from the mostly-Sunni police and military services for breaking the law or violating official procedures, but the government did not name any of individuals, including those who had been convicted of crimes, were in jail, or had been removed from their positions. On the other hand, the Public Prosecution Office, the MOI, and the Bahrain News Agency regularly published names and pictures of Shia who were accused of crimes, and at times published their names before the persons were indicted.

The government-run television station continued to air Friday sermons from large Sunni mosques, but not sermons from Shia mosques.

Shia politicians and community activists continued to make complaints about the government's naturalization and citizenship process, which they said favored Sunni applicants over Shia applicants. They said the government continued to recruit Sunnis from other countries to join the security forces, granted them expedited naturalization, and provided them with public housing while excluding Shia citizens from those forces. According to Shia community activists, this continued recruitment and expedited naturalization of Sunnis represented an ongoing attempt to alter the demographic balance among the country's citizens.

According to Shia leaders, Sunni citizens continued to receive preference for government scholarships, employment as teachers, and employment in government positions, especially in the managerial ranks of the civil service and the military. They continued to report few Shia citizens served in significant posts in the defense and internal security forces. According to the Shia leaders, senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes continued to favor Sunni candidates. They said educational, social, and municipal services in most Shia neighborhoods remained inferior to those in Sunni communities. The government repeated its statements affirming a policy of nondiscrimination in employment, promotions, and the provision of social and educational services.

Human rights activists reported discrimination against Shia in education continued. They stated the government hired foreign teachers over qualified Bahraini Shia teachers, although other observers, including education specialists and parents, said foreign contract teachers were willing to work longer hours, for less pay, and often had skills not available within the country's pool of teachers. Activists also continued to report the interview panel for university scholarships asked about students' political views and family background if their name or address suggested they might be Shia, and believed the panels used such information to select out Shia. The activists said many top scoring Shia applicants continued to receive scholarship offers in less lucrative or less prestigious fields. There were continued reports of the MOE refusing to recognize the foreign degrees of some students, although the reason the MOE failed to do so could not always be attributed to discrimination as some students may not have consulted with the MOE's list of accredited foreign schools published on the government's internet portal before they enrolled.

Political commentaries about the new provision of the law prohibiting clerics from involvement in political activities, such as an assessment from the Citizens For Bahrain organization, stated the provision was designed to ensure the separation of religion from state affairs, and spoke in broad terms of how this would have a positive effect on both politics and religion in the country. Some Shia commentators stated the new provision of the law was meant to target the better-organized Shia political societies.

The 40-member Shura Council, the appointed house of parliament, continued to include 15 Shia members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while 23 of its members were Sunni. Shia continued to hold five of the 23 cabinet positions, including one of the five deputy prime minister positions.

On June 14, the MOJIA filed a motion against the Shia opposition political society, Wifaq, with the administrative court requesting an emergency order to shut down the group and accusing the society of creating “an environment for terrorism, extremism, and violence.” The judge agreed to the immediate suspension of Wifaq’s activities. Police on the same day sealed Wifaq’s buildings, removed its signs, froze its bank accounts, and blocked its website. Days later the MOJIA announced it was bringing an additional motion to dissolve Wifaq on an expedited basis. On June 28, judges denied Wifaq’s legal team access to records at its headquarters, and additional time to prepare its defense. Wifaq’s lawyers resigned in protest, but the case continued before the court. On July 17, the judges formally ordered Wifaq closed and its assets seized. On September 22, the administrative appeals court denied Wifaq’s appeal and upheld the lower court’s order to shutter the organization. Wifaq appealed to the Court of Cassation, and as of year’s end no date had been set for the trial.

Throughout the year government officials made statements directed at Shia, accusing individuals or segments of the Shia community of specific crimes, alleging they were supporters of terrorism, or threatening future legal action. In a February 21 speech, the minister of the interior stated some Bahraini Shia had been “seduced” by Iran to act against their country based on statements made by Shia religious leaders in Iran about Bahrain, and warned against using religious rituals to “spread chaos.” The minister further called for the government to regulate the days, times, and locations of religious ceremonies, and to monitor their organizers.

Government officials spoke out against the Iranian Shia political concept of Wilayat al-Faqih (which advocates a guardianship of the political system by Shia jurists), while acknowledging not all Shia sought this type of political structure.

NGOs reported the government closely monitored the collection of funds by religious organizations, including charity donations. The NGOs said religious leaders and organizations not authorized to collect money, or whom the government believed handled the money in improper ways, were potentially subject to government legal action.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Non-Muslim religious community leaders reported there continued to be some Muslims who changed their religious affiliation, despite ongoing societal pressure

not to do so, but those who did remained unwilling to speak publicly about their conversion.

NGOs working on civil discourse and interfaith dialogue reported regional Sunni-Shia tensions and historical political divisions continued to affect intra-Muslim relations. Shia representatives stated the continued higher unemployment rate and lower socioeconomic status of Shia, exacerbated by continued discrimination in the private sector against Shia, added to the tensions between the two communities. Because religion and political affiliation were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Representatives of non-Muslim religious groups continued to report they generally were able to operate without threats or intimidation. They were able to hold religious festivals and ceremonies and perform religious rites, such as burials, without interference. They stated there continued to be general acceptance of their presence and activities in the country. NGOs reported, however, some employers denied the right of migrant workers, especially female domestic workers, to practice their religion, display religious symbols, or take leave on religious holidays.

Some social media accounts repeated allegations that prominent Shia leaders supported terrorism or had engaged in what was termed “treasonous behavior.” Comments continued to refer to the Shia political opposition as “Iranian subordinates,” “coup plotters,” and “Safavids” (referring to a 1500 Persian dynasty which forcibly converted Sunnis to Shi’ism). Other social media posts accused prominent Sunnis of being “terrorists,” “baby killers,” and “takfiri” (Muslims who kill other Muslims who don’t follow the same belief structure).

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The Secretary of State, the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the Ambassador and embassy officers met with government officials to urge them to implement fully the BICI’s recommendations on the reconstruction of places of worship; to respect freedom of expression for clerics; to ensure Shia had equal access to employment and services; to pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities; and to further empower the human rights ombudsman to engage with the government in support of the right of prisoners to practice their religions. In this connection, U.S. officials urged the government to observe the religious freedom provisions contained in the ICCPR. U.S. officials both publicly and in private meetings continued to advocate for the government to



pursue political reforms, which would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation.

The Ambassador and embassy officers continued to meet regularly with religious leaders of all faiths, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss their freedom to worship, the welfare of detainees, and the status of the mosque reconstruction projects.