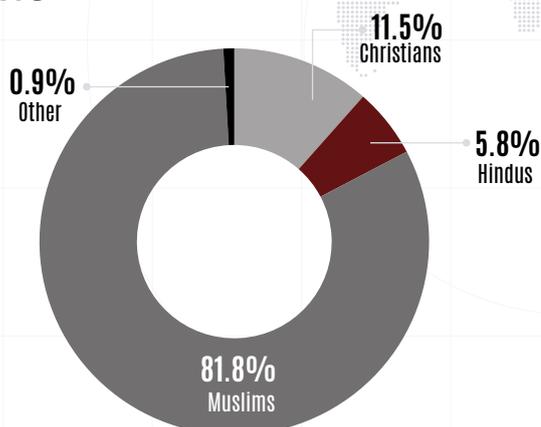




BAHRAIN

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Bahrain is a kingdom located in the Persian Gulf ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa dynasty. Article 2 of its 2002 Constitution states: “The religion of the State is Islam. The Islamic Shari’a is a principal source for legislation.”¹ Article 6 says: “The state safeguards the Arab and Islamic heritage.” However, according to Article 18, “There shall be no discrimination among [citizens] on the basis of sex, origin, language, religion or creed.” Article 22 guarantees that “freedom of conscience is absolute. The state guarantees the inviolability of worship, and the freedom to perform religious rites and hold religious parades and meetings in accordance with the customs observed in the country.”

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not explicitly forbidden by law, but the social and legal consequences of doing so would be huge, according to Church sources who asked not to be named. Converts from Islam would lose any inheritance rights and would be cast out of their family.

Non-Muslim missionary activities among Muslims are not allowed, and personal consequences for missionaries would be severe.

Showing disrespect to recognised religions is punished under the Bahrain Penal Code.² Article 309 imposes fines and prison “upon any person who commits an offence by any method of expression against one of the recognized religions [or] sects, or ridicules the rituals thereof.” Article 310, among other things, reserves the same treatment for “any person who commits in public an insult against a symbol or a person being glorified or considered sacred to members of a particular sect.” Article 311 also imposes a fine or prison on “any person who deliberately causes disturbance to the holding of religious rituals by a recognized sect or to a religion’s ceremony or [. . .] destroys, damages or desecrates a place of worship or a recognized sect or a symbol or other things having a religious inviolability.”

In order to operate in the country, non-Muslim religious groups are required to register with the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (MOLSD). Altogether, 19 non-Muslim religious groups are registered, including Christian Churches and a Hindu temple.³

Bahraini citizens represent about 52 percent of the country’s resident population,⁴ and of these citizens, 99 percent are Muslim. Although there are no official figures for the Shi’a population, it is estimated to be between 55 and 60 percent. There are a small number of Christians, Jews,

Baha'is and Hindus with Bahraini citizenship.⁵ Bahrain is in fact one of the few Gulf countries to have non-Muslim citizens.

Most Bahraini Christians are descendants of immigrants who came between 1930 and 1960⁶ and were eventually granted Bahraini citizenship. Most of them were originally Arab Christians from the Middle East, although a few are from India.⁷ Christians, both local and migrants, make up around 200,000, 80,000 of them Catholic; approximately 80 percent belong to the Latin Rite, while the rest follow the Eastern Rite.⁸

Approximately 19 churches are registered.⁹ American missionaries built the first one in 1905. The National Evangelical Church began offering services a year later.¹⁰ Catholics have two churches: the Sacred Heart Church in Manama (built in 1939) and a smaller house of worship shared with Anglicans in Awali.¹¹

There is a small Jewish community with fewer than 50 members,¹² mostly descendants of families who came from Iraq, Iran and India and settled in the island kingdom in the early 1900s. They have their own synagogue¹³ and cemetery and enjoy a certain social, political and financial status. The Jewish community has a representative in the 40-member Shura or Consultative Council, the appointed upper chamber of Bahrain's bicameral National Assembly. The community was first represented by Ebrahim Daoud Nonoo, and subsequently by his niece, Houda Ezra Nonoo, a businesswoman who was the first non-Muslim woman to head a human rights organisation and the first female Jewish lawmaker in Bahrain. In 2008 she became the first Jewish ambassador to the United States of America from an Arab and predominantly Muslim.¹⁴ The Nonoo family remains very active both in Bahrain and in the United States.¹⁵ Nancy Khadhori is the current Jewish member of the Shura Council.¹⁶

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In June 2018, the construction of Our Lady of Arabia Catholic Church began. Situated some 20 kilometers from Manama on land donated by the King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, it should be completed by the end of 2021. With a capacity of 2,000 people, it will include a residential area for the episcopal curia, a guest house and educational facilities.¹⁷

In September 2019, the London-based Bahrain Press

Association reported a crackdown against Shi'a clerics during Ashura, the annual Shi'a commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussein, their third imam, son of Ali, and grandson of Muhammad. Authorities investigated and detained clerics in connection with their sermons, but subsequently released them without charges.¹⁸

In November 2019, a conference on 'The Role of Education in Promoting the Values of Tolerance in the Kingdom of Bahrain Throughout History' was organised at the King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence.¹⁹ A month later, the 'Arabian International Religious Freedom Roundtable' was held.²⁰ Despite such conferences, some human rights organisations note that Bahrain conducts "systematic discrimination and divisive government policies".²¹ According to the 2020 report by United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF),²² while Bahrain develops this kind of initiative, it engages in "systematic discrimination against some Shi'a Muslims on the basis of their religious identity"²³ in employment, political representation, freedom of expression, military promotion and construction of places of worship.²⁴

In 2019, Bahraini authorities interrogated Shi'a religious leaders about their sermons and restricted Shi'a prisoners' religious practice. In April 2019, 139 Shi'as were found guilty on terrorism charges linked to Iran. As a result, they saw their citizenship revoked.²⁵ According to USCIRF, almost a thousand Bahraini citizens have lost their nationality since the 2011 uprising, mainly Shi'as.²⁶ Following international pressure, the king reinstated the nationality of 551 people in April 2019.²⁷

Although Bahrain is the only Gulf country where Ashura (tenth day of the month of Muharram) is a government holiday, it was not until 2019 that Shi'as were allowed to publicly commemorate it.²⁸ The Bahrain Forum for Human Rights (BFHR) said 54 violations of freedom of religion and belief were registered during the commemoration of Ashura that year.²⁹

In August 2020, a Bahraini woman appeared in a video smashing statues of the Hindu deity Lord Ganesha in a shop in Juffair. She was charged with multiple counts of criminal damage and insulting a religious symbol.³⁰

In September 2020, a court reduced in appeal the sentence of a prominent lawyer, Abdullah al-Shamlawi. In a tweet he had expressed critical views of religious practices related to Ashura. Initially sentenced to eight months in prison for "inciting hatred of a religious sect" and "misusing

a telecommunications device”, he was eventually given a six-month suspended prison sentence.³¹

Like most countries, Bahraini authorities took special measures to counter the outbreak of COVID-19. On 23rd March 2020, houses of worship were closed and prayers suspended, resuming only on 28th August with restrictions.³²

In view of the pandemic, in April 2020, the government delayed the return of more than a thousand Bahraini Shi’a pilgrims from the holy city of Mashhad in Iran rather than quarantine them.³³

By mid-September 2020, COVID-19 cases dramatically increased after Ashura. Although all festivities were forbidden, people still attended family gatherings without respecting social distancing.³⁴

The normalisation deal with Israel in September 2020 was welcomed by the Bahraini Jewish community.³⁵

PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

In general, non-Shi’a religious minorities enjoy a certain degree of freedom of religion and belief.

The same cannot be said about Shi’as. Although improvements have been achieved, governmental and non-governmental rights organisations have deplored a sustained pressure on the Shi’a community. Because religion and political affiliation are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorise many incidents as based solely on religious identity.

Prospects for religious freedom do not indicate any clear improvement for the foreseeable future.

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