

Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (GIDHR), is a civil non-governmental and non-profit organization aiming to promote the respect for democratic principles, as well as establishing the human rights and social justice principles, and stopping the human rights violations in the Gulf Region in general and in Bahrain in particular.

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Religious Discrimination in Bahrain

Introduction

Article 22 of the Bahraini Constitution states that 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. It also stipulates in Article 18 that there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties on the basis of religion or creed.

In Bahrain, 99% of citizens are Muslims¹, while various non-Muslim communities make up the remaining 1%. The Shia Muslims have represented the majority of the population, making up 60-65% of the religious demography².

The latest UN Special Rapporteurs' joint report in October 2015³ documents patterns of continuous systemic discrimination towards the Shia majority in the Kingdom of Bahrain by the ruling regime since 2011 with measures that undermine the people's rights and freedoms of religion, expression and culture.

The UN experts found that patterns of cultural, economic, educational, and social discrimination against Shia Muslims in Bahrain had persisted⁴. The report 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, Shia citizens continued to be interrogated, detained, and arrested, and, in some cases, convicted and sentenced to prison terms.

Furthermore, while government officials often make public statements condemning sectarian hatred, pro-government media continued to use inflammatory, sectarian rhetoric. On top of that, members of the Shia community are not allowed to serve in the upper levels of the security apparatus, or in the high-ranking positions both in the public and private sectors.

Discrimination against the Shia Population

The Bahraini authorities have increased restrictions on freedom of religion and conscience of Bahraini citizens, especially depriving the majority Shia population of their rights to worship and practice their religious belief. This is a serious violation of Article 18 of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which stipulate that everyone has right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Interference in Religious Practices and Worship

- At least 38 Shia mosques, including the 400-year-old Al-Barbaghy Mosque, have been destroyed, and the government has failed in its commitments to rebuild those mosques until today.⁵
- Shia mosques are being converted to museums or commercial buildings and some have been relocated to remote locations in order to undermine their cultural and religious significance.

Erasure of History and Heritage

- Shia cities and villages are renamed to erase traces of their heritage.
- Shia heritage sites with historic significance are excluded from the government's tourism promotion.
- History of Shia in the country is neglected and distorted in the Bahrain National Museum, and in the official curricula⁶.

Degradation in Media

- The media outlet in Bahrain is almost exclusively dominated by the government. Through the state-run (BTV and BNA) and pro-government private broadcasting services (Al-Ayyam and Al-Ittihad TV), the government has monopolised the media coverage, ensuring the political interests of the Sunni elites.
- Media and state information services has begun actively targeting the Shia community, disseminating false slanderous reports and presenting biased portrayals of their practices and ideology.
- Religious television and radio are rooted solely in the Sunni tradition, directly ignoring majority Shia population.
- Television dramas feature negative portrayals of Shia characters and communities.

Discriminations in Employment

- Although the Shia represent the majority of population, they constitutes only 16% in high-ranking government positions, which is appointed by royal decrees and orders.
- Bahraini Shia citizens have been systematically marginalised from security services of the country, including the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF), National Security Agency (NSA), and police forces, occupying only 2-5% of all security personnel⁷.
- Since 2011, thousands of Shia employees were arbitrarily dismissed or suspended both in public and private sector.

Recommendations

To the Government of Bahrain:

- Halt the deprivation of the Shia majority population in the rights to freedom of religion in worship and practice, and end discrimination in employment and public services against them.
- Stop erasing history and heritage of the Shia population, and degrading and humiliating their community in media.
- Review and make necessary reforms to the educational curriculum to ensure that they are free of hate speech and religious exclusion or discrimination.
- Integrate Shia in the nation's security forces so that they are represented proportionally.
- Ensure the extension of social welfare benefits to low-income Shia families without discrimination.
- Reform provisions contained within the Labor Law, the Civil Service Law, and Legislative Decree No. 41 that instigate undue economic impact against Shia communities.

To the Special Rapporteur

- Encourage the Special Rapporteur on religious freedom and cultural rights to request their rights to access to Bahrain in handling a fact-finding mission.
- Request that the Government of Bahrain issues a standing invitation to all Special Procedures wishing to visit the country.

To Member state

- Government officials should speak out against deprivation of right to freedom of religion in Bahrain and draw an immediate measures to prevent any further deterioration.
- Law enforcement agencies should publicly make commitments to investigate all religious discrimination and persecution in Bahrain.
- Call upon the Bahraini government to undertake to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating religious discrimination in all its forms.
- Intervene for the protection of the Shia citizens in Bahrain, in order for religious leaders, scholars and institutions in Bahrain to be allowed to exercise their rights to freedom of religious expression.

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171732.pdf>¹

<http://www.gulfinstitute.org/wp-content/pdfs/shialifeinsaudiarabia.pdf>²

[https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/31st/public_-_AL_Bahrain_30.10.15_\(6.2015\).pdf](https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/31st/public_-_AL_Bahrain_30.10.15_(6.2015).pdf)³

http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_Monitored_Bahrain.pdf⁴

<http://www.salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Final-Statement.pdf>⁵

<http://www.salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Idtihad-Shiaa-english.pdf>⁶

Ibid.⁷