



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **79.4%**
- Christians : **13.2%**
- Hindus : **6.5%**
- Others : **0.9%**

1,397,000

771 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 2 of the 2002 constitution states: “The religion of the State is Islam. The Islamic Shari’a is a principal source for legislation.”^[1] Article 6 states: “The state safeguards the Arab and Islamic heritage.” However, article 18 states: “There shall be no discrimination among [citizens] on the basis of sex, origin, language, religion or creed.”^[2] 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.”^[3]

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not explicitly forbidden by law. However, social and also legal consequences of doing so would be massive, according to Church representatives who gave interviews on condition they were not to be named. A convert from Islam would lose any rights of inheritance and would be cast out of the family. Non-Muslim missionary activities amongst Muslims are not allowed, and personal consequences for the missionary would be severe.

The Bahraini Penal Code states: “A punishment of imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year or a fine not exceeding BD 100 (about US\$265) shall be inflicted upon any person who deliberately causes disturbance to the holding of religious rituals by a recognised sect or to a religious ceremony or meeting or obstructing such events or preventing the holding thereof with the use of force or threat; any person who destroys, damages or desecrates a place of worship of a recognised sect or a symbol or other things having a religious inviolability.”^[4]

In 2015 there were discussions about a draft law which would criminalise contempt of religion, such as insulting God, defaming religious books or prophets, hate speech and discrimination on grounds of creed or sect.^[5]

In order to operate in the country, non-Muslim religious groups are required to register with the Ministry of Social Development (MOSD). Altogether, 19 non-Muslim religious groups are registered with the MOSD, including Christian

churches and a Hindu temple.^[6]

Bahrain is a kingdom located in the Persian Gulf and ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa dynasty. According to estimates, up to two-thirds of the citizens are Shi'a. The remainder – between 30 and 35 percent – are Sunni. There are a small number of Christian, Jewish, Baha'i and Hindu nationals. Bahrain is thus one of the few Gulf countries to allow non-Muslim citizens. Christians with Bahraini citizenship number around 1,000.^[7] The majority of these Christians were immigrants to Bahrain between 1930 and 1960.^[8] They were eventually granted Bahraini citizenship. Most of them were originally Arab Christians from the Middle East, although there are smaller numbers from India.^[9]

About 50 percent of Bahrain's population consist of foreign workers. The majority comes primarily from south Asian countries. Almost half of the expatriate workers are non-Muslim (about 250,000-300,000). Christians, including foreigners, comprise perhaps 10 percent of the population, out of which around 80,000 Catholics live in Bahrain.^[10] In 2014, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa granted the Catholic Church permission to build its first cathedral, although construction was delayed.

There are 19 registered churches.^[11] The first Christian church was built in 1905 by American missionaries soon after their arrival. A year later, the National Evangelical Church became the first church to offer services in Bahrain. There are currently two Roman Catholic churches: the Sacred Heart Church in Manama, and the Catholic Church of Our Lady of the Visitation in Awali.^[12]

There is a small Jewish community with fewer than 50 members,^[13] mostly descendants of families who came from Iraq, Iran and India and who settled in the island kingdom in the early 1900s. They have their own synagogue – Bahrain is the only Arab Persian Gulf state with an active synagogue^[14] – a cemetery and they do enjoy a certain social, political and financial status. The Jewish community has been represented in the upper chamber of the bicameral parliament by Ebrahim Daoud Nonoo. He was subsequently replaced by his niece, Houda Ezra Nonoo. This businesswoman, who was the first non-Muslim woman to head a human rights society and the first Jewish woman Member of Parliament in Bahrain, also became in 2008 the first Jewish Ambassador from an Arab and predominantly Muslim country appointed to the United States of America.^[15] Nancy Khadhori currently represents the Jewish community in Bahrain at the 40 seat Shura Council (upper chamber).

Incidents

In April 2018, the King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Co-existence inaugurated the "Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration"^[16] platform.^[17] This declaration, as opposed to the Marrakesh Declaration and the Jakarta Declaration (both signed in 2016), is unique in that it is signed by a head of state, and not by a group of scholars.^[18]

Johnnie Moore^[19] has told Christianity Today that the declaration goes farther than any similar document that he is aware of.^[20] Although it goes beyond previous statements regarding individual aspects of religious tolerance, the right of conversion is not mentioned in the document: "Compelled religion cannot bring a person into a meaningful relationship with God. [...] People of all faiths should be accorded the right to congregate to worship, educate, celebrate, and practice the requirements of their respective faiths."^[21] Individual religious freedom is just one of the five points raised in the declaration.

In October 2017, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa published an op-ed opinion piece in the Washington Post^[22] in which he called for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Despite these efforts to promote religious freedom, inter-faith understanding, and peaceful coexistence, religious freedom conditions did not improve for the Shi'a Muslim community. Although no Shi'a religious leaders were targeted in 2017,^[23] in May of the same year, authorities undertook a security operation in the predominantly Shi'a Muslim village of Diraz, causing many casualties: five Shi'a demonstrators died, dozens were injured and nearly 300 were arrested, among them civilians and religious leaders.^[24]

The independent news site Al Wasat was suspended by Bahraini authorities in June 2017. It was accused of publishing a column which abused a fellow Arab country and which intended to "stir up the community and affect the relations of the Kingdom of Bahrain with other countries".^[25] Al Wasat commonly reported on issues affecting the majority Shi'a community.

Prospects for freedom of religion

Recently, a Holy See diplomat stated: "The Kingdom of Bahrain, with its constitutional protections for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and the freedom to celebrate religious rites, [is] a beacon for religious pluralism and tolerance in a region where such openness is not ubiquitous."^[26]

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has concluded that the Bahraini government has made demonstrable progress in rebuilding demolished Shi'a mosques and religious structures destroyed during the spring of 2011 unrest, as well as in implementing tolerance in school curricula.^[27]

Nevertheless, more needs to be done to implement recommendations from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to redress past abuses against Shi'a Muslims and improve further religious freedom conditions.^[28] There still remain major grievances for the country's Shi'a community. Because religion and political affiliation are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorise many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Given the geopolitical tensions in the region between Sunni and Shi'a powers led by Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the recent Qatari crisis, it will not be easy to address them.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Bahrain Constitution, Adopted on 14 February 2002, http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ba00000_.html, (accessed 20th April 2018).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] 'Bahrain Penal Code', 1976, Art. 309-311, https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/bhr/1976/bahrain_penal_code_html/Bahrain_Penal_Code_1976.pdf, (accessed 18th April 2018).

[5] 'Cabinet discusses security situation', Bahrain News Agency, 31st August 2015, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/684059>, (accessed 18th April 2018).

[6] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom –Bahrain, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/238662.pdf>, (accessed 20th April 2018).

[7] 'The Catholic Church in Bahrain', The Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia (AVONA), http://www.avona.org/bahrain/bahrain_about.htm#.WuCQX9PFLwc, (accessed 20th April 2018).

[8] Habib Toumi, 'Religious freedom is what makes life great in Bahrain', Gulf News, 7th July 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/religious-freedom-is-what-makes-life-great-in-bahrain-1.2054476>, (accessed 20th April 2018).

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[9] Ibid.

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[12] Willy Fautré, 'Christians in Bahrain', Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l, February 2012, <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Christians-in-Bahrain.pdf>, (accessed 29th April 2018).

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[14] Adam Valen Levinson, 'Finding the Persian Gulf's Only Synagogue', HuffPost, 12th June 2011, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/adam-valen-levinson/bahrain-synagogue_b_1122579.html, (accessed 20th April 2018).

[15] Habib Toumi, 'Religious freedom is what makes life great in Bahrain', Gulf News, 7th July 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/religious-freedom-is-what-makes-life-great-in-bahrain-1.2054476>, (accessed 18th April 2018).

[16] Bahrain Declaration, http://www.wiesenthal.com/atf/cf/%7B54d385e6-f1b9-4e9f-8e94-890c3e6d-d277%7D/BAHRAIN_DECLARATION.PDF,

[17] 'Bahrain Declaration platform inaugurated', Bahrain News Agency, 28th April 2018, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/838539>, (accessed 30th April 2018).

[18] Signed by the King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Manama on 3rd July 2017; 'Saudi Arabia's Neighbor Defends Religious Freedom of Individuals', Christianity Today, 13th September 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/bahrain-declaration-saudi-arabia-neighbor-religious-freedom.html>, (accessed 18th April 2018).

[19] Johnnie Moore is a board member of the National Association of Evangelicals.

[20] 'Saudi Arabia's Neighbor Defends Religious Freedom of Individuals', Christianity Today, 13th September 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/bahrain-declaration-saudi-arabia-neighbor-religious-freedom.html>, (accessed 30th April 2018).

[21] Respectively point 2 and 4 of the 'Bahrain Declaration'.

[22] 'Dispelling ignorance, the enemy of peace', The Washington Post, 7th October 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/oct/10/bahrain-king-calls-for-religious-tolerance/>, (accessed 12th April 2018).

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[24] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Bahrain 2018 Report, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_BAHRAIN.pdf, (accessed 22nd April 2018).

[25] Habib Toumi, 'Bahrain suspends Al Wasat daily', Gulf News, 4th June 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-suspends-al-wasat-daily-1.2038355>, (accessed 21st April 2018).

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<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf> (accessed 30th May 2018)

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