



Bahrain

Report submitted to the Committee in the Elimination
of Racial Discrimination (CERD) on the issue of
Sectarian Discrimination in Bahrain

Al-Wafaq National Islamic Society

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Introduction

The population of Bahrain was estimated around 1.5 million in 2019. Bahraini citizens constitute less than half of the total population, with approximately 689,000 citizens. 99 percent of these citizens are Muslim, while the remaining 1 percent are a mix of Christians, Hindus, Baha'is, and Jews. For sectarian reasons, the Bahraini government does not publish statistics on Shi'a and Sunni citizens. According to most estimates from NGOs and international organizations, Shia constitute the majority of citizen population at around 60 percent.¹

After Al-Khalifa family entered Bahrain in 1782, the historically Shi'a population of the country became subject to sectarian discrimination for nearly two hundred years. This sectarian discrimination played a big role in starting civil unrests in the country throughout the years, with the most notable one in recent years, the February 2011 uprising. While there was substantial Sunni presence in the uprising, as more than half of the Bahraini population took the streets to demand for their fundamental rights and freedoms, the government tried to characterize the protests as a Shi'a led coup trying to overthrow the Sunni regime, in order to assure its control of the state and further sectarian tensions in the country. In the aftermath of the uprising, the government's persecution of the Shi'a community increased significantly. This report will examine the discrimination of Shi'a in Bahrain in its different aspects: Political discrimination, religious discrimination, media discrimination, discrimination in education, economic and public services discrimination.

Religious Persecution

Forms of sectarian persecution against Shi'a religious scholars have varied since 2011. In June 2014, the Islamic Scholars Council, the Islamic Enlightenment Society (Al-Tawiyah), and the Islamic Al-Risala Society were dissolved (Al-Tawiyah was allowed to resume its activities this year). In addition, the head of Al-Tawiyah Society at the time, Sheikh Baqer Al-Hawaj, was summoned and interrogated on charges of unlicensed collection of funds.

Security summons amounted to 156 cases, 60 of which were during July and August 2017. Moreover, 73 Shi'a religious scholars were arrested. In fact, 89 arrest cases were monitored, because some of them were arrested more than once. Malicious accusations were brought against them, and some of them were released after the end of their sentences. Several arbitrary sentences were issued against Shi'a religious scholars.

On June 20, 2016, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior issued a statement announcing the revocation of the nationality of the Shi'a community's leader in Bahrain, Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim. Then, they imposed a security siege on the village of Duraz and prosecuted 1,741 citizens for their peaceful protest near Sheikh Qassim's house. Meanwhile, the security services were involved in the extrajudicial killing of 6 citizens next to the house of Sheikh Isa Qassim.

Table of arbitrary sentences and summonses against Shi'a religious scholars since 2011

Arbitrary sentence or violation	Number
Police summons	156
Citizenship revocation	19

¹ U.S. Department of State, OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bahrain, available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bahrain/>

Life imprisonment	8
one year of imprisonment	11
Death penalty and citizenship revocation	3
Life imprisonment and citizenship revocation	4
15 years of imprisonment	5
10 years of imprisonment	4
5 years of imprisonment	4
Citizenship revocation and enforced deportation	2
3-4 years of imprisonment	3
2 years of imprisonment	2
Suspension from religious speeches	5

Note: Some cases include multiple categories, such as a life sentence and revocation of citizenship, or a summons and then a prison sentence.

Political Discrimination

Shi'a in Bahrain have a long history of opposition to the Al-Khalifa monarchy and attempts to exercise their fundamental civil and political rights by being involved in the country's political scene, starting with many civil unrests dating back to the 1920s, after the independence from Britain, to the mid and late 1990s and until the 2011 uprising. After Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa became ruler in 1999, hope for political reforms and shifting to a constitutional monarchy had increased in the country. In 2000, constitutional reforms that promised change were launched. These reforms were laid out in the National Action Charter, which was approved in a referendum by 98% of Bahrainis on 14 February 2001.

The National Action Charter have set the scene in 2002 for the first parliamentary elections since the short experiment in 1975. The reforms however had delivered little to Bahraini Shi'as, especially with the addition of an upper house in the national assembly in which its members are appointed by the king, and the gerrymandering of districts in the country to underrepresent the majority Shi'a and create a state-loyal House of Representatives. Even though the electoral system in every election cycle was unfair and international standards for democratic elections were not met, Shi'a backed political association Al-Wefaq managed to win a comfortable majority of eligible votes in the 2010 elections (after the uprising, the opposition boycotted the 2014 elections and was banned in 2018). However, the government's system in place made it impossible for Al-Wefaq to get a majority in the House of Representatives and enable Shi'a to enjoy their right in sharing the political power in the country.

Monopoly of Power

The Al-Khalifa ruling family controls all three branches of government. As it will be shown in the following section, Shiites are significantly excluded from the decision-making positions in the country. However, it is not only the Shi'a population that is excluded. Sunnis who are appointed in key positions in the branches of government in Bahrain are only those who are loyal to the ruling family. Therefore, they cannot be appointed based on their merits, but rather based on their loyalty to Al-Khalifa family only.

According to the 2002 Constitution, the King has full power over the three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial authorities.² The executive branch, which is the government, is significantly governed by the Al-Khalifa ruling family. The prime minister is appointed and discharged by a royal decision, and all members of the cabinet are appointed and dismissed by a royal decree.³ In 2013, fourteen of thirty-five cabinet positions were held by the Al-Khalifa family, fifteen positions were held by Sunni personnel outside of the ruling family, while Shia personnel held only six cabinet positions.⁴ Since Bahrain independence from Britain in 1971, Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the uncle of the current king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, was prime minister until his death in November 2020. Khalifa was the longest serving prime minister in the world. The current prime minister is Crown prince of Bahrain, Salam bin Hamad al-Khalifa.⁵ The king has also the full power on the judicial body. He can appoint and dismiss judges and judicial officers.⁶ In 2013, Shia judges occupied only twelve percent of the judiciary. The legislative power is vested in the National Assembly,⁷ which is divided in the lower house, or House of Representatives and the upper house, the Shura Council. The House of Representatives consists of forty elected members for a four-years term. The Shura Council consists of forty members appointed by the king.⁸ In 2013, Shia personnel occupied seventeen out of forty upper house seats. While after the 2014 elections, they occupied 16 (40%) upper house seats.⁹ The House of Representatives, the only elected body in the state, has the power to propose legislation, but it should be approved by the Shura Council in order to be promulgated. In addition, the cabinet and the king have the power to propose and pass legislation. This means that the king and the Al-Khalifa ruling family maintain monopoly on the whole political power in the country and mostly exclude Shia, the majority of the population, from sharing power.

² See Bahrain's 2002 Constitution

³ Article 33 of Bahrain's 2002 Constitution

⁴ "Chiefs of State and Cabinet Members: Bahrain," Central Intelligence Agency Library, 2013, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/world-leaders-1/BA.html>

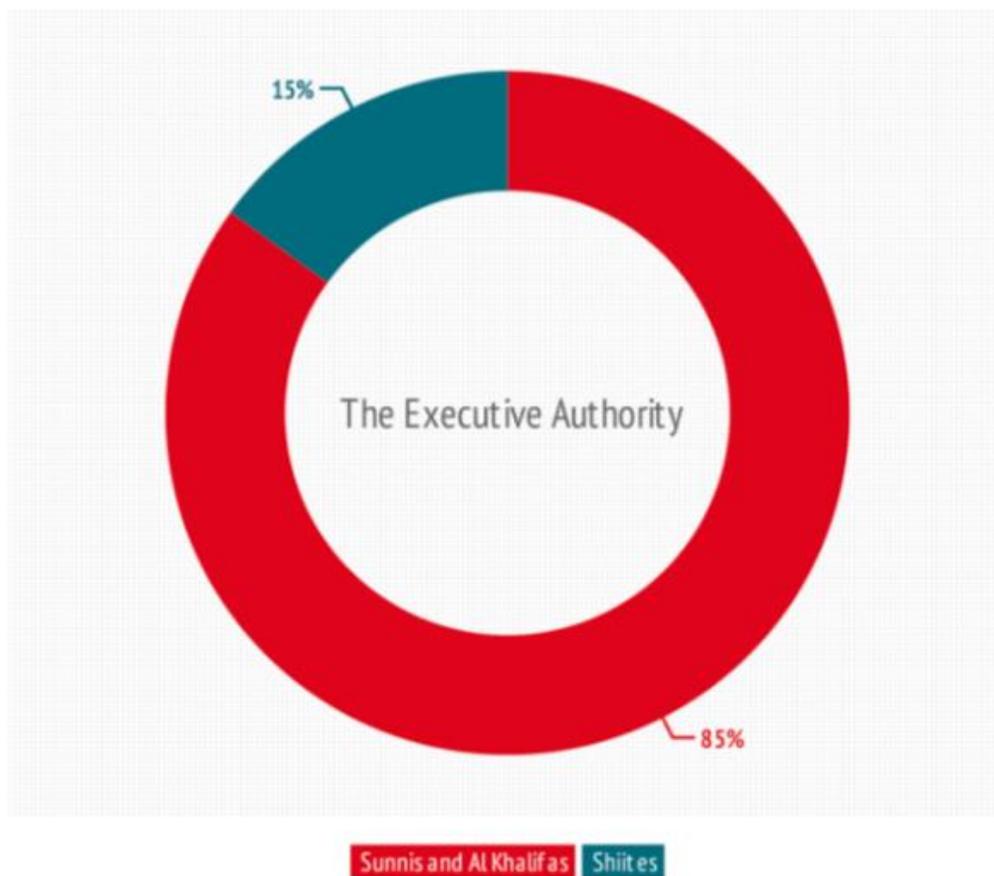
⁵ See Al-Wefaq, 'Equality and Citizenship are the Foundation of Democracy', 2013

⁶ Article 33 of Bahrain's 2002 Constitution

⁷ Article 52 of Bahrain's 2002 Constitution

⁸ See Al-Wefaq, 'Equality and Citizenship are the Foundation of Democracy', 2013

⁹ Ibid.



In 2013, there were only fifteen percent of Shiites in the Government.

Gerrymandering and Electoral Intimidation

Bahrain’s electoral framework was initially created to diminish and marginalize the majority Shi’a population. Electoral districts are deliberately designed in a way to underrepresent the Shi’a of the country and give a majority to Sunni in the parliament. According to Freedom House, “The government has also allegedly drawn district borders to put certain political societies, including leftist and Sunni Islamist groups, at a disadvantage. The government directorate responsible for administering elections is headed by the justice minister, a member of the royal family, and is not an independent body.”¹⁰ In addition, the royal court constantly uses its network and power to influence elections and candidates. Freedom House gives Bahrain 11/100 on freedom status, with 1/40 on political rights and 10/60 on civil liberties.¹¹

Since 2002, the authorities maintain that gerrymandering is an important part of politics. Note that Bahrain is divided into five governorates: Central, Northern, Southern, Capital and Muharraq Governorates. The Shi’a populated high density districts in the Capital and Northern

¹⁰ Freedom House, ‘FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020’, Bahrain, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2020>

¹¹ Ibid.

Governorates, while the Southern and Muharraq Governorates had majority Sunni voters in lower density districts.¹² The non-proportional voting districts highlights the unfair elections in the country.¹³ For example, During the 2010 election cycle, Northern 9 district had more than 16,000 eligible voters, while Southern 6 district held over 750 eligible voters. This means that the 750 voters in the Southern 6 had a bigger voting power than the 16,000 voters in Northern 9.¹⁴

Each district in the country elect one representative. Northern 1, the largest electoral district, had over 21 times the number of eligible voters than the smallest district, Southern 6.¹⁵ The largest opposition party, Al Wefaq, won all of the five largest districts in the country, and has won in total 181,238 eligible votes, while the rest of the parties combined won in total 137,430 votes, yet it only got 18 parliamentary seats out of 40 seats.¹⁶ This means that the party that won most of the votes in the elections did not even get a majority in the parliament.

The gerrymandering done by the government reflects the sectarian discrimination against Shi'a voters in the country. The king tried to ease tensions by promulgating some set of electoral reform in 2014, such as abolishing the Central governorate and subsuming some of the Southern governorate's constituencies. However, these attempted reforms implementations did not really constitute any serious challenge for the pro-regime representatives.¹⁷ The Northern and Capital governorates contain a majority of Shi'a with a total of 209,816 voters in twenty-two districts, while the Muharraq and Southern governorates contain Sunni majority with a total of 139,897 voters in eighteen districts.

In addition to the gerrymandering by the government, the unfair electoral system made it very hard for non-religious parties to be represented in the parliament. For example, the largest secular party in the country, the National Democratic Action Society (Waad), did not win any seat in the parliamentary elections of 2006 and 2010, despite having a large base of supporters. After boycotting the 2014 elections by the opposition, which was the first elections after the 2011 uprising, the government reported a 51.5 percent voter turnout in the country. However, according to Al Wefaq and other opposition societies, the real turnout was around only 30 percent. This led the government to use many forms of intimidation against the citizens to force them to participate in the 2018 elections, either by forcing them to vote in general or to vote for certain candidates in some cases.

The Bahraini constitution and laws stipulate that the right to participate in the elections is protected by the law, which means that every citizen has the freedom to vote for any candidate or to boycott the elections. The elections were held without allowing observation by international organizations and coverage by international media, the main opposition parties Al Wefaq and Waad, with other opposition members or civil society leaders were banned from participating or running for election, and the electoral system still set unfair constituencies with a non-independent election committee.

¹² BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, 'Apart in Their Own Land', 2015, available at: https://adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ADHRB_Apart-in-Their-Own-Land_web.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Bahrain Watch, 'Gerrymandering in Bahrain: Twenty One Persons, One Vote', available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28083>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, 'Apart in Their Own Land', 2015, available at: https://adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ADHRB_Apart-in-Their-Own-Land_web.pdf

According to NGO's sources,¹⁸ some citizens were summoned by the Criminal Investigation Department at the Ministry of Interior prior to the elections, where they were interrogated and were given a choice either to vote in the elections or to be deprived of their housing benefits by refusing their applications.¹⁹ Some rumors were spread on social media intimidating those who were boycotting the elections, such as depriving people of employment or revoking nationalities. In addition, a rumor was widespread that the government intended to enact a law aimed at depriving those who abstain from voting in the parliamentary and municipal elections of 2018 from their housing units, depriving the people of the Northern Governorate of more than 7000 units. The Royal Court asked ministers and government officials to intervene prior to the elections to pressure people to vote. Ministries of interior, foreign affairs, health, and defense sent threat messages to make them participate and certain employees were ordered to vote for certain candidates.

On November 21, 2018, Ahmad al-Mulla, speaker of the House of Representatives, made some statements in the media in which he showed support for taking measures against those who boycott the elections and said measures such as depriving people from their housing benefits in case of a boycott promotes "good citizenship" and calling for strict accountability. On October 6, 2018, the Ministry of Interior issued a statement announcing that the General Directorate of Anti-Corruption, Economic and Cyber Security will «monitor any news or messages calling for not participating in the elections by using fraudulent telephone numbers, and will take legal action against those involved in them and submit them to the Public Prosecution. It will also take the necessary measures to ensure the movement of voters in a way that guarantees their exercise of their electoral rights with ease.»

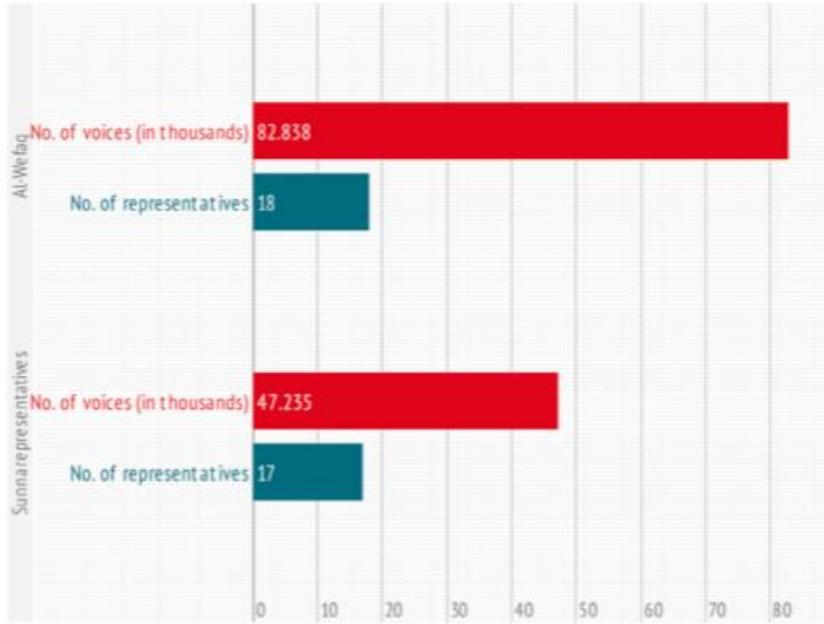
Official media and official local newspapers promoted and published hate speech against citizens boycotting the elections and called for their punishment. Moreover, the National Security Agency, which is known for torturing Human rights and political activists, forced security personnel to vote for state-loyal candidates, interrogated a candidate in the Capital Governorate forcing her to withdraw or face criminal charges, threatened a candidate who revealed that a large number of voters were removed from his constituency and provided sensitive information for state-loyal candidates to help them win. Citizens were threatened with the following punishments in case they boycott the elections: prosecutions; denial of housing rights; denial of citizenship rights; denial of civil and political rights; denial of education rights in the university; etc.²⁰

The following graph makes a comparison between the number of elected representatives of Al Wefaq in the 2010 elections and the Sunni-state-loyalists elected representatives, according to the number of votes:

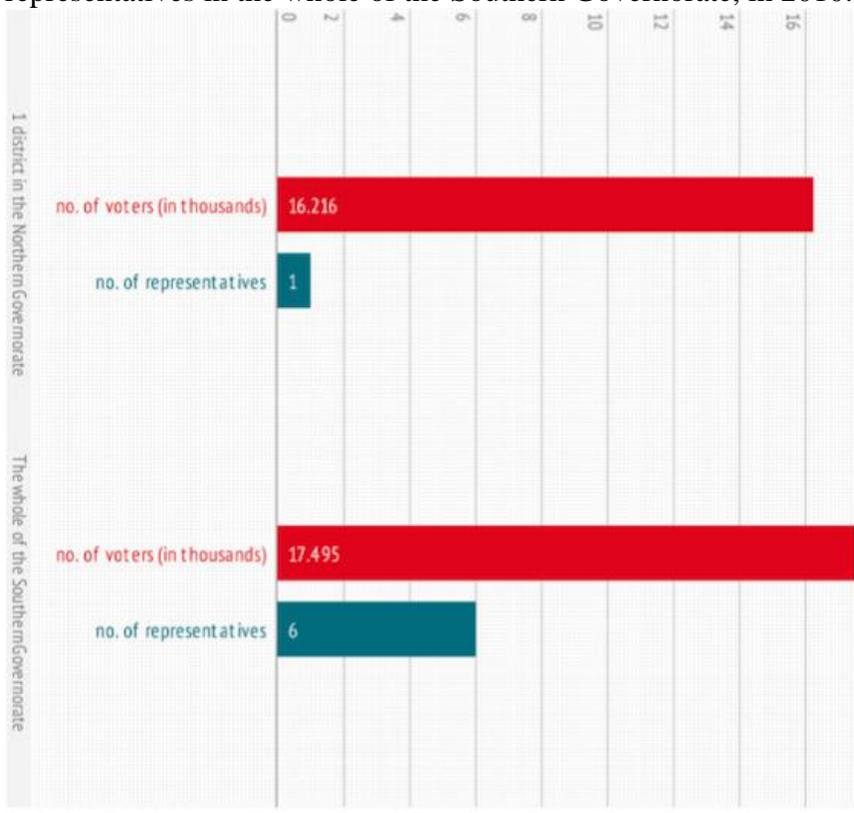
¹⁸ Salam DHR, GIDHR, BFHR, 'Electoral Intimidation', 2018, available at: <https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Electoral-Intimidation-.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Salam DHR, GIDHR, BFHR, 'Electoral Intimidation', 2018, available at: <https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Electoral-Intimidation-.pdf>



The 2010 elections revealed the blatant gerrymandering in Bahrain. 18 representatives of Al-Wefaq bloc won 82,838 votes, an equivalent of 64% of all votes, while other 17 representatives from Al-Asala and Al-Minbar blocs won 47,235 votes, an equivalent of only 36% of all votes. Furthermore, the following graph shows the number of votes and number of representatives in one district in the Northern Governorate, compared to the number of votes and number of representatives in the whole of the Southern Governorate, in 2010:



This graph gives the best example for the unfair elections in Bahrain. One district in the Northern Governorate with 16,216 votes elects one representative, while the whole of the Southern Governorate with 17,495 elects six representatives.

In the amendments to the distribution of electoral districts through Royal Decree No. (71) of 2014,²¹ the two most prominent indicators of political discrimination were the unequal distribution of the electoral bloc, whether in districts classified as opposition or loyal, as well as the abolition of the central governorate and the addition of its largest electoral constituency to the capital governorate.

According to the official figures published by Al-Wefaq, the total electoral bloc in 2014 in Bahrain was 349,596, distributed among 40 districts, which in the event of a fair distribution is necessary for the average of the districts to be 8,740. However, the official distribution showed a clear disparity between districts, with an increase of 151.04% in the Muharraq Seventh constituency (13,201 votes) in contrast to the smallest bloc of the Southern tenth constituency (2,367), at 27.93%. In addition, the districts were distributed in a way that guarantees a comfortable political majority for the government, so that the percentage of opposition constituencies does not exceed 18, which resulted in an increase in the Southern District versus a shortfall in the North district. The new distribution of votes among districts can be showed in the following table:

District	Capital	Muharraq	Northern	Southern
1	6,312	8,066	10,745	7,981
2	8,352	7,849	6,967	8,209
3	10,221	7,561	6,078	7,226
4	7,008	7,908	9,272	8,618
5	7,775	7,180	10,372	8,779
6	10,941	7,761	10,697	8,260
7	10,701	13,201	10,238	8,324
8	9,377	9,056	8,519	6,447
9	9,574		12,314	5,091
10	10,035		10,551	2,367
11			12,341	
12			11,322	
Total	90,296	68,582	119,416	71,302
Average	9030	8573	9951	7130
Supposed number of districts	10	8	14	8

²¹ Royal Decree No. 71 of 2014, available at: <https://www.legalaffairs.gov.bh/AdvancedSearchDetails.aspx?id=931>

Political Isolation

The Bahraini authorities have prevented opposition groups from participating in the political process. In Bahrain, political parties are not officially allowed, therefore the traditional parties go under the name of political associations. In 2016, 'Al-Wefaq', the largest opposition group was forcibly dissolved for 'fostering violence and terrorism', and its assets liquidated. In 2017, the National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad), the largest secular party, also faced forced dissolution following claims that its members 'incited terrorism'.²²

In June 2018, the King of Bahrain ratified an amendment to Law No. 14 of 2002²³ that permanently prevents some individuals from running for parliamentary elections, including those previously convicted to a jail sentence of six months or more, and leaders and members of dissolved political organizations. These conditions apply to almost all political activists and political societies (de facto political parties), as many political leaders have been arbitrarily punished with jail sentences, while political groups have been forcibly dissolved in the past years. Opposition activists and politicians were also banned from voting in the 2018 parliamentary elections, running for municipal elections, and from establishing or being board members in civil society association (political, sports, NGOs, etc.). In addition, since the 2011 uprising, opposition political leaders faced unfair trials and were sentenced to life imprisonment, including Sheikh Ali Salman, the Secretary General of Al-Wefaq²⁴ who was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to life in prison in 2018.

Demographic Change

The dilemma of demographics has faced the Al Khalifa ruling family since it came to power in Bahrain more than two centuries ago, as they have constantly sought to alter it. They have been partially successful. In the past, they entreated with tribes for political control. Today, they oversee an illegal program that naturalizes the largest possible number of Sunni foreigners and awards sensitive positions in government institutions, the army and the police. In exchange, their absolute loyalty to the Al Khalifa family is expected. With purely sectarian motives, tens of thousands of foreign Sunnis have been naturalized, settled and employed.

The regime in Bahrain has long considered the unity between its people a threat to its existence. Consequently, it has always used sectarianism to divide Sunnis and Shias in the country because unity leads to greater opposition to the ruling family. Positions in state institutions are mostly reserved for Sunnis in the country. In addition, the Bahraini government has also been using mercenaries and foreigners to suppress and torture dissidents.²⁵

The architects of political naturalization hope that changing the demographic situation in Bahrain, along with its cultural identity, will make it a small group of compliant, heterogeneous

²² See Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, 'Bahrain: A Deepening Spiral of Repression', 2018, available at: https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/الانكليزي_2018_لعام_السنوي_التقرير.pdf

²³ See Law No. 25 of 2018 amending Law No. 14 of 2002:

<https://www.legalaffairs.gov.bh/AdvancedSearchDetails.aspx?id=14264>

²⁴ See Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, 'Bahrain: A Deepening Spiral of Repression', 2018, available at: https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/الانكليزي_2018_لعام_السنوي_التقرير.pdf

²⁵ See Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'Demography and Bahrain's Unrest', 2011, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/43079>

societies, will further marginalize the Shia majority to avoid protests and revolutions, and will preserve the political and economic dominance of the Al-Khalifa family.

There are many reasons for the political naturalization policy of the ruling family: Creating a loyal state that preserves the ruling authoritarian regime; Ending or nullifying the Shia majority in the country; Utilizing naturalized foreigners, who are unquestioningly loyal to the regime, against Bahraini citizens; Creating new voters for pro-regime parties in elections; Crushing any opposition and revolution in the country.

Most of these naturalizations by the regime were against Bahraini law. Most of those naturalized do not fulfill the legal requirements. Some had never even set foot in Bahrain and others had only been in Bahrain for weeks or months. Moreover, the majority of them do not speak Arabic (a legal requirement in the law). While many were given nationality without legal basis, myriad residents in Bahrain, who meet the legal requirements, are still unable to obtain Bahraini nationality because they do not fit into the Government's long-term strategy to end the Shia majority in the country and create a state loyal to the ruling family.²⁶

While the regime in Bahrain is relying on sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias, Bahraini people from all backgrounds oppose this state policy of political naturalization. People have expressed their opposition to the state's strategy in many ways: protests, conferences, through political parties and in the media.²⁷

Until today, the government still does not disclose the real numbers and details of naturalized people. It has even given many false details with no substantial evidence or documentation. It still claims the numbers are small while it continues its policy of political naturalization. However, estimates of their numbers range from 50,000 to 200,000, constituting between one-tenth and one-third of the total number of citizens.²⁸

Exclusion of Shia Citizens from Security Forces

Some of the largest employers in Bahrain are the security forces. In general, the security-related government agencies, such as the National Security Agency, Police force, Bahrain Defense Force and others, refuse to hire Shia citizens who represent the majority of the country. Even though the Shia community constitutes around 60% of the population, Shia employment in the security forces is estimated around 2-5%.²⁹ In 2011, the BICI estimated the Bahraini Defense Forces to be around 12,000 personnel, with significant number of non-nationals. Out of these 12,000, less than 10% are Shia.³⁰ The Ministry of Interior employs around 30,000 personnel in

²⁶ See BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, 'Apart in Their Own Land', 2015, available at: https://adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ADHRB_Apart-in-Their-Own-Land_web.pdf

²⁷ See Middle East Eye, 'Bahrainis allege a plot to change country's sectarian balance', 2015, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/bahrainis-allege-plot-change-countrys-sectarian-balance>

²⁸ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'Demography and Bahrain's Unrest', 2011, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/43079>

²⁹ Ian Siperco, "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge," Middle East Policy Council, available at: <https://mepc.org/commentary/bahrains-sectarian-challenge?print=>

³⁰ Brian Dooley, "Bahrain's Soldier Sailor Sunni Shia Struggle," The Huffington Post, February 7, 2014, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-dooley/bahrains-soldier-sailor-s_b_4745595.html

the police force, in which only around 3,000 are Shia. In addition, most Shia employees work in administrative roles and not on the ground.³¹ In the National Security Agency, Shia constitute only around 4% of its workforce in low-rank positions.³²

While the Shia, the majority of the population, are excluded from the security forces, the government of Bahrain employs non-nationals from Sunni background. This government policy was implemented in the past several decades in order to create a Sunni loyal state, especially in the security forces where tens of thousands of people originally from Pakistan, Yemen, Syria and Jordan, serve. Bahrain's policy of political naturalization is aimed at changing the demographics of the country.³³

Media Discrimination

The government of Bahrain's ongoing campaign against the Shia community in the country includes an established control of the national media in order to incite hatred and manipulate public opinion against the pro-democracy and human rights movements. Bahrain enforced a system of censorship, by influencing 'independent' media to ensure anti-Shia language, banning pro-democracy media, and regulating social media usage to punish dissidents and those who express freely their opinion.

According to the latest Freedom House's report on Bahrain, "The government owns all national broadcast media outlets, and the private owners of Bahrain's main newspapers have close ties to the state. Self-censorship is encouraged by the vaguely worded Press Law, which allows the state to imprison journalists for criticizing the king or for threatening national security. Insulting the king is punishable by up to seven years in prison. The government selectively blocks online content, including opposition websites and content that criticizes religion or highlights human rights abuses."³⁴ Freedom House gives Bahrain a rating of 0/4 for free and independent media.³⁵

State-Controlled Media

According to the BICI report, the radio and television broadcasts in Bahrain are all controlled by the state, through the Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation, and the Bahrain News Agency is also state-controlled.³⁶ During the 2011 uprising, state controlled media produced biased reports against the protests, used inflammatory language and incited hatred against protesters and opposition supporters. Bahrain Television portrayed the manifestations as sectarian Shia movement that wants to import the Iranian revolution.

A program on Bahrain Television called "Al Rased" continuously incited hatred and violence against the Shia community, through several episodes that aired during February and March

³¹ BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, 'Apart in Their Own Land', 2015, available at: https://usercontent.one/wp/www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ADHRB_ApartLand_Vol2_Web.pdf

³² Ibid.

³³ Al-Khawaja, "Beneath Bahrain's Shia-versus-Sunni narrative, only the tyrants benefit."

³⁴ Freedom House, 'FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020', Bahrain, available at:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2020>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, REPORT OF THE BAHRAIN INDEPENDENT COMMISSION OF INQUIRY, 23 NOVEMBER 2011, p. 389

2011. The program shared names of protestors such as athletes, journalists and medical staff, and it also shared some photographs of protestors describing them as traitors to the Bahraini society.³⁷ In one of Al Rased episodes, the anchor described the Shia community as a “military organization” and extremists taking orders from the Iranian government.³⁸ Another show called “Hiwar Maftouh”, frequently accused Bahraini Shia as being traitors by nature and a threat to the Sunni community.³⁹ In addition, Bahrain Television incited hatred between Sunni and Shia students at the University of Bahrain, by making false allegations that Shia students were attacking Sunni students on March 13, 2011, which only highlights the efforts done by state-media to increase sectarian tensions between members of the community. The Shia community in Bahrain, their culture, and their rituals have been excluded from the mainstream national media for years, although they represent the majority of citizens in the country. For example, Friday prayers coverage never included Shia prayer services, and no Shia religious shows or religious related activities are allowed to broadcast. In addition, the State Information Services blocks websites that broadcast any Shia religious programs, using a cybersecurity doctrine that interprets any Shia religious expression as sectarian incitement.⁴⁰ According to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, in 2013, the government blocked ‘matam.tv’, a Shia religious website that livestreams Bahrain’s matams (traditional Bahraini Shia congregation halls).⁴¹

State Influence on ‘Independent’ Publications

According to the BICI report, six of the seven Bahraini daily newspapers are classified as pro-government and are owned by people affiliated with the government. These six newspapers are: Akhbar Al-Khaleej; Al-Ayam; Al-Bilad; Al-Watan; the Bahrain Tribune; the Gulf Daily News. The other newspaper, which is the only one classified as opposition paper, is Al-Wasat. The BICI report mentions the attack and ban of Al-Wasat during the uprising. The report stated the following: “On 15 March 2011, the offices and printing presses of Al-Wasat newspaper were attacked and vandalised. The newspaper was temporarily forced to stop publishing and to relocate its offices. The co-founder and board member of Al-Wasat newspaper, Mr Karim Fakhrawy, was detained and died while in custody, approximately one week after he was arrested. After the attack, the newspaper did not publish a Sunday edition and its website was blocked by the GoB. The Information Affairs Authority of Bahrain (IAA) suspended Al-Wasat on 2 April 2011 following a programme that was broadcast on State-controlled Bahrain Television alleging that the paper had published “false news and photographs” in the editions published on 26 and 29 March 2011. Al-Wasat was not permitted to publish an edition on 3 April 2011. The IAA permitted Al-Wasat to resume publishing on 4 April, but this permission for publication was only given after the Editor-in-Chief, Managing Editor and Local News Editor

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, ‘Apart in Their Own Land’, 2015, available at: https://usercontent.one/wp/www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ADHRB_ApartLand_Vol2_Web.pdf

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Bahrain: The ‘Cyber Safety Directorate’ Monitors Internet Activity In Style Similar to Big Brother,”

were forced to resign.”⁴² The paper was suspended two times later on and was shut down in 2017. In August 2015, it was suspended for two days for no reason, and in January 2017 for three days for “inciting division, jeopardizing national unity, and disrupting public peace.” On June 4, 2017, the authorities ordered the immediate indefinite suspension of Al Wasat, which was described by Human Rights Watch as one of the very few independent news sites in the entire Gulf region. “Shutting down Al Wasat is a prime example of Bahraini authorities’ complete intolerance of any kind of independent expression,” Human Rights Watch added.⁴³

According to the BICI report, the six pro-government newspapers, along with national television and radio, published material that contains “derogatory language and inflammatory coverage of events, and some may have been defamatory.”⁴⁴ In a column in the Al-Watan newspaper, Sawsan al-Shaer, regularly and falsely accuse the Shia community in Bahraini of extremism and terrorism, and accuse them of being Iranian agents. In the December 2, 2013 issue, she writes that “there is a lesson to be learned about Arab Shia who rushed to be carpets under the feet of Iranian clerics to enter their countries.”⁴⁵ Moreover, columnist Hisham al-Zayani accused Bahraini Shia of condoning an attack that killed two police officers in Sitra on July 28, 2015. In an article published by Al-Watan, al-Zayani described the attack as a proof of “systematic Shia terrorism” and urged the government to retaliate against “Shia terrorists” by depriving them from their fundamental social rights. He also compared the bombing to the actions of Shia doctors who treated wounded protestors during the 2011 demonstrations at Salmaniya Hospital. He referred to those doctors as terrorists. Even though the Shia community condemned the attack, Al-Zayani called the government to exclude the Shia majority from employment in major businesses and ministries.⁴⁶

Social Media

Freedom House rates Bahrain internet freedom as not free, giving it a 29/100 rating, with 15/25 on obstacles to access, 8/35 on limits on content and 6/40 on violations of user rights. The internet in Bahrain is restricted, as “numerous websites continued to be blocked, social media users were continuously interrogated at the security department and were pressured to remove content, and citizens were arrested and jailed for content posted online. The Ministry of Interior continued to warn about the discussion of new critical topics as they emerged such as local and regional political situations. Authorities threatened legal action for following social media accounts critical of the government, and the levels of self-censorship and state surveillance were high. Journalists and activists who work online, including those abroad, continued to face

⁴² Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, REPORT OF THE BAHRAIN INDEPENDENT COMMISSION OF INQUIRY, 23 NOVEMBER 2011, p. 389-390.

⁴³ HRW, ‘Bahrain: Only Independent Newspaper Shut Down’, 2017, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/18/bahrain-only-independent-newspaper-shut-down>

⁴⁴ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, REPORT OF THE BAHRAIN INDEPENDENT COMMISSION OF INQUIRY, 23 NOVEMBER 2011, p. 399.

⁴⁵ BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, ‘Apart in Their Own Land’, 2015, available at: https://usercontent.one/wp/www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ADHRB_ApartLand_Vol2_Web.pdf

⁴⁶ Ibid.

extralegal intimidation, and reports continued of severe abuse of those taken into custody. The government works to manipulate and control online information.”⁴⁷

Since the 2011 uprising, the government has been using discriminatory cybersecurity policies to censor dissent and push for sectarian hate speech against the Shia community.

The cybersecurity and press laws are frequently used as a tool to punish dissidents and pro-democracy social media users, while online hate speech against the Shia community and Shia religious figures go unpunished, and in some cases, even rewarded. The government was encouraging and rewarding those who use social media to incite hatred against Shia. For example, the ex-Prime Minister of Bahrain Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa held a meeting with a group of pro-government social media users, where he praised their efforts to defend the Bahraini ruling system and facing those who he described as “traitors” to the country. One of the social media users present in the meeting, was a known twitter user in the name of @khalidburshai, an account that consistently called for attacking Bahraini Shia, discredited their heritage, and called them foreigners, killers, and racists.⁴⁸

Discrimination in Public Services

Housing

Low-income families in Bahrain rely on state subsidized housing, which is often a source of government corruption and favoritism. One of the most prominent forms of discrimination Shia citizens face in the country is unfair access to housing. Over the years, the Ministry of Housing has received overwhelming housing requests by developing thousands of housing units. These units are usually built in majority Sunni districts and governorates. For example, there is a big difference in housing units between the Northern Governorate that contains around over 194,000 citizens, and the Southern Governorate that contains around 33000 citizens.⁴⁹ While the Northern Governorate with a predominant majority Shia has a population five times bigger than the Southern Governorate, more housing units are built in the latter. In 2012, the Ministry of Housing stated that it had received 18,045 housing requests from the Northern Governorate and 3,779 from the Southern. As of 2015, the Bahraini government completed the construction of 1,017 new units in the Northern Governorate, while in the Southern Governorate 1,271 new units were completed.⁵⁰

The Bahraini government also favors new politically naturalized Sunnis in housing services. Naturalized citizens are provided with houses by the state almost immediately, while many Shia

⁴⁷ Freedom House, FREEDOM ON THE NET 2020, Bahrain, available at:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-net/2020>

⁴⁸ BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, ‘Apart in Their Own Land’, 2015, available at:

https://usercontent.one/wp/www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ADHRB_ApartLand_Vol2_Web.pdf

⁴⁹ Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population Programme, ‘Bahrain: Population by governorate, nationality and sex, 2010, available at: <https://gulfmigration.org/population-by-governorate-nationality-and-sex-2010/>

⁵⁰ BCHR, ADHRB, BIRD, ‘Apart in Their Own Land’, 2015, available at:

https://usercontent.one/wp/www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ADHRB_ApartLand_Vol2_Web.pdf

citizens' housing applications date back to the 1990s. Shia citizens are still waiting for periods longer than fifteen to twenty years for housing, which reflects the government's discriminatory policies. In 2013-2014, the government canceled six housing projects located in Shia areas that were going to provide around 1,462 residential units.⁵¹ Until today, the government of Bahrain continue implementing its discriminatory policies in housing projects, ignoring the alarming situation and the long years waiting period of Shia citizens.

Urban Developments

Many Shia areas in the Northern District still lack the necessary infrastructure and services compared to other areas in the country. The government tends to implement a discrimination policy in services, ignoring the urgent needs of many Shia areas. Some of these areas remain without appropriate sewage system, streetlights, gardens, infrastructure, roads, etc. Maintenance in these areas is also ignored for many years. In addition, many Shia areas suffer from lack of schools, so parents send their children to elementary, middle, and secondary schools in other areas, despite the fact that there are spaces and budget available for the construction of schools.⁵²

The Bahraini authorities insist that there is no poverty in the country and that the people's basic needs are provided.

⁵¹ International Conference on Persecution of Shia in Bahrain, The Persecution of Shia Citizens in Bahrain, available at: <https://oldsite.salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Idtihad-Shiaa-english.pdf>

⁵² Ibid.

The following images are from some Shias villages neglected by the authorities:



Source: Al-Wasat Newspaper



Source: Bahrain Mirror



Source: Al Wasat Newspaper



Source: Al Alam Channel



Source: Al Wasat Newspaper



Source: Al Wasat Newspaper

Conclusion

The Bahraini government's discrimination against the Shia population has significantly increased in the past decade, notably after the 2011 uprising. Even though Shias constitute the majority of the population, they are excluded from the executive power and judicial power. The government has also tried to exclude Shias from the legislative power in the past two decades, with the addition of an upper house in the National Assembly, which its members are appointed by the king, and the gerrymandering of districts in the country to underrepresent the majority Shia in the House of Representatives.

After boycotting the 2014 elections, the Bahraini authorities have prevented opposition groups from participating in the political process. 'Al-Wefaq' and Wa'ad, were forcibly dissolved and Shia opposition leaders and human rights activists were banned from running or voting in the elections.

The Shia community has also been subject to systematic religious discrimination, which increased after the uprising. The last ten years saw massive violations of the religious rights of the Bahraini Shia. Religious structures, including mosques, Hussainiyas and shrines were demolished and vandalized by the state's security forces. Shia's freedom of exercising their religion is continuously violated, by restricting the rituals related to Ashura, which has been turned into an occasion to exercise collective punishment on Shia citizens. Shia religious scholars and leaders were arbitrarily arrested, tortured and imprisoned for solely exercising their right to freedom of religion, and freedom of expression and association.

The government ongoing campaign against the Shia community includes an established control of the national media in order to incite hatred and manipulate public opinion against the pro-democracy and human rights movements. Bahrain enforced a system of censorship, by influencing 'independent' media, ensuring anti-Shia language, banning pro-democracy media and regulating social media usage to punish dissidents and those who express freely their opinion.

The Bahraini institutions discriminate against Shia students by depriving them of hard-earned scholarships and interfering in choosing their majors. In addition, the Jaafari Shia doctrine is banned from the school curricula. The government imposes the Maliki Sunni religious education in public and private schools, although there is a significant difference between the two sects, including worship practices, prayers, pilgrimage, family issues and others. In some cases, the Sunni education directly demeans the Shia Jaafari beliefs and describes Shia followers as infidels, or Shia beliefs as blasphemous.

Furthermore, Bahraini Shias are treated as second-class citizens in the country, as there is no economic equality. Shia citizens are often excluded from positions in all fields of public sector, including in ministries and in the security forces, where the government prefer to hire politically naturalized citizens, in order to create a Sunni-loyal state and change the demographics of the country. The Shia community also face discrimination in public services, such as in housing services and urban developments.

Recommendations

In light of the above findings, we make the following recommendations:

The Government of Bahrain should carry out the following:

- Issue a new law regulating elections according to the principle of one citizen, one vote, in line with international standards
- Issue legislation criminalizing discrimination in all fields against citizens
- Immediately release all prisoners of conscience, and immediately reincorporate all dissolved political parties
- Cease all persecution policies against the Shia religious faith, release religious scholars and leaders and cease the further demolition of Shia religious structures
- End the incitement of hatred against the Shia community in the media, release all jailed journalists and allow independent newspapers and Shia websites to operate freely
- Remove all barriers against Shias in employment in the public and private sectors and equally provide public services to all citizens according to the principle of equal opportunities
- Cease unfair scholarship distributions that negatively affect Shia students and allow the teachings of the Jaafari Doctrine in schools
- Abolish Decree No. 1 of 2017 amending some provisions of Decree No. 14 of 2022 on establishing the National Security Agency, and re-enact the amendment issued in November 2011 based on the recommendations of the BICI, stipulating that the National Security Agency shall refer cases that require arrest or detention to the Ministry of Interior for legal action
- Abolish the amendment to Article 6 of Law No. (26) of 2005 with respect to Political Societies, which states that the basic system includes the method and procedure for forming the association's bodies and selecting its leaders, provided that they are not religious scholars engaged in preaching, guidance and speechmaking
- Abolish the amendment to Article 5 of Law No. (26) of 2005 with respect to Political Societies, which stipulates that it is not permissible to combine being a member of a political association and giving religious speeches
- Abolish the amendments issued in July 2014 to the Nationality Law, which enable the judiciary to revoke the nationality of convicts, and cancel the Ministry of Interior Decision No. 89 of 2016 regarding procedural controls for the application of Articles 8,9,10 of the Bahraini Nationality Law