



Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

1001 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 205 • Washington, D.C. 20036 • (202) 621-6141 • www.adhrb.org • @ADHRB

15 December 2014

His Holiness, Pope Francis I
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Your Holiness,

I write on behalf of Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), two international non-governmental human rights organizations committed to promoting and protecting human rights in the Kingdom of Bahrain. We are happy to support your message of religious tolerance, and praise your promotion of dialogue and peaceful co-existence among all members of society in Bahrain. However, recent revelations about corruption and the misappropriation of lands by the Bahraini royal court has made us concerned about the nature of Bahraini land grants made to the Catholic Church in relation to a new church complex in Awali, Bahrain. Furthermore, given the appalling human rights record of the al-Khalifa government, we believe that the Catholic Church should reconsider partnering with the royal court on this or any future ventures until religious tolerance, free expression, free assembly and other political and human rights are universally supported and protected in Bahrain.

ADHRB was initially founded in the United States to advocate for greater emphasis on human rights in the US-Bahrain bilateral relationship. However, since 2011 when the Government of Bahrain violently cracked down against the country's peaceful reform movement, ADHRB has expanded to engage with internationally and multilaterally with UN Member States in New York and Geneva, and with the European Union, the European Parliament and other European institutions in Brussels. ADHRB, along with our London-based sister organization, BIRD, continues to push for greater international engagement with Bahrain and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to address various areas of human rights and democratic reforms in these Gulf States.

As you may know, in February 2011, more than half of the population of Bahrain came out in peaceful protest against structural inequalities, corruption, oppression and a lack of government representation. In response, the Government of Bahrain, with support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council states, sent security forces to suppress protestors. This response led to thousands of arrests, and the government's use of excessive force resulted in hundreds of injuries and dozens of deaths. The government's response dispersed the protest, but failed to silence calls for reform. Instead of heeding these calls, the government continues to persecute men, women and children for their peaceful actions. Today, there are thousands of political prisoners overwhelming Bahrain's prisons, including children as young as ten years old. These detainees are sentenced to years in prison for crimes such as "illegal protest" or for insulting the king. The government subjects these



Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

1001 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 205 • Washington, D.C. 20036 • (202) 621-6141 • www.adhrb.org • @ADHRB

prisoners to severe harassment and abuse, including arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial killings.

In May 2014, King Hamad [visited](#) the Vatican where he and your Holiness held “cordial discussions focused on various themes of common interest, with particular reference to the commitment towards peace and stability in the Middle East, as well as the promotion of dialogue and peaceful co-existence among all members of society.” Meanwhile, the al-Khalifa government continued to pursue systematic discrimination against the country’s largest religious group—Shi’a Muslims. Bahrain’s majority Shi’a population remains economically suppressed in both the public and private sectors, severely underrepresented and marginalized politically, and their mosques have been targeted for repeated demolition. At the same time, a government strategy of political naturalization of other religious and cultural groups—up to 30,000 Pakistanis have been [naturalized](#) in Bahrain—has sought to distort and dilute the historic demographic make-up of the country while marginalizing Bahrain’s native Shi’a majority. This policy can be clearly observed when King Hamad [granted Bahraini citizenship](#) to Bishop Carmillo Ballin, the Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia, after residing in the country for less than a year, yet in the same year stripping the citizenship of 18 native-born Bahraini Shi’a in response to their calls for human rights reforms in the kingdom.

Given the al-Khalifa’s longstanding and broad-based disregard for human rights in Bahrain, we in the Bahraini human rights community have been troubled by the Catholic Church’s public statements of praise for the Bahraini king’s support for “coexistence and tolerance between all religions.” We are likewise concerned that accepting a [9,000sqm land grant](#) from King Hamad upon which to build the largest cathedral in the region will be seen as a sign of further public support for al-Khalifa government and its repressive policies.

Recently, new information has come to light regarding the Bahraini royal family’s dubious acquisition and development of public lands, following an [in-depth investigation](#) into this issue by the Financial Times. The report details the US\$22 billion land holdings of the royal family across Bahrain. Much of this land, the report uncovered, may have rightfully been public land, appropriated by the royal family during land reclamation projects over the past fifteen years of King Hamad’s rule. These lands have then been used to grow the royal family’s wealth through investments in developing many of these plots into high end housing and commercial developments at a time when Bahrain is suffering a housing crisis. The report also discusses the highly secretive nature as to the extent of the royal family’s holdings, as well as its methods of acquiring these lands. Given the opacity of the al-Khalifa’s land holdings and the highly questionable nature of past land acquisitions across the country, we feel that the plans to build the region’s largest church on a potentially dubious land grant may exacerbate religious and political tensions in Bahrain and invite controversy abroad.

Therefore, in recognition of the wide-spread and systemic nature of human rights abuses in Bahrain, particularly targeting the country’s largest religious denomination, and in light of recent revelations regarding the al-Khalifa family’s corrupt acquisition of land, we call on the Catholic Church to halt construction on the new Awali church complex, and to reconsider the Church’s partnership with the



Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

1001 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 205 • Washington, D.C. 20036 • (202) 621-6141 • www.adhrb.org • @ADHRB

Bahraini royal court on this or any future projects. We further ask your Holiness to direct the ministers and government of the Holy See to publically recognize and condemn the ongoing human rights crisis in Bahrain. Finally, we hope that your Holiness will pray in support of honest and open dialogue toward addressing abuse, granting redress, and supporting comprehensive and compassionate human rights reform.

Sincerely,

Husain Abdulla,
Executive Director, Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)

CC: Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin
Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States for the Holy See
Bishop Camillo Ballin, Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia
Archbishop Giorgio Lingua, Apostolic Nuncio to Iraq and Jordan
Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States
Archbishop Antonio Mennini, Apostolic Nuncio to the Court of St. James's
Archbishop Silvano Maria Tomasi, Permanent Observer of Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva