



NGOs Call on Pope Francis to Refrain from Building on Legacy of Repression

15 December 2014 - Today, Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) sent a letter to His Holiness, Pope Francis, urging the pontiff to halt the construction of a church complex on a [9,000 square meter](#) royal land grant in Alawi, Bahrain due to concerns that the land may have been seized from the public trust. Additionally, the letter urges Pope Francis and the Catholic Church to reconsider partnering with the Bahraini ruling family on any future projects until international calls for reform are met.

A recent Financial Times article revealed that the Bahraini royal family currently [possesses](#) billions of dollars' worth of land holdings, much of which was accrued over the last fifteen years through a project to "reclaim" lands that traditionally benefited the public. These lands, once [utilized](#) by fishermen and other Bahrainis attempting to earn their living, have been transformed into high-rise housing complexes and commercial developments which enrich the Bahraini governing elite at the expense of the nation's poor. While it is nearly impossible to determine if the entirety of the Alawi plot once constituted public land due to the opacity of the royal family's records, there is strong reason to suspect that the 9,000 meters is another act of public dispossession.

"We urge Pope Francis to reconsider establishing a church on land that may have been stolen from the public trust to benefit the ruling elite," said Husain Abdulla, Executive Director of ADHRB. "The international community cannot abet the appropriation of such public land for private gain, especially when it inordinately impacts the lives and livelihoods of the poorest of Bahraini society, the majority of whom are Shi'a."

The appropriation of public land is part of a larger campaign by the Bahraini government to economically marginalize and politically repress the nation's Shi'a religious majority. Since the 2011 popular protests for reform began, the government has sought to deepen societal divisions to silence dissent, going so far as to [raze](#) Shi'a mosques and [target](#) public Shi'a displays of worship. Bahraini government policies also serve to re-engineer population demographics by [naturalizing](#) tens of thousands of Sunni foreign nationals while [stripping](#) Bahraini Shi'a protesters of their citizenship. ADHRB and BIRD ask that Pope Francis reconsider involving the Catholic Church in this system of religious discrimination.

"We support the recognition of Bahrain's catholic population," said Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, Director of Advocacy at BIRD. "However, we fear that by accepting this land, the same Pope Francis who once lamented the global rise of '[religious harassment](#), repression, and even persecution' will inadvertently participate in a wider campaign of intolerance and the suppression of religious freedom in Bahrain."