

HM Sheikh Hamad bin Isa AlKhalifa  
Office of HM the King  
P.O. Box 555  
Rifa'a Palace  
Kingdom of Bahrain

3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2020

Your Majesty,

We, the undersigned organizations, would like to raise our collective concern regarding ongoing religious freedom violations in the Kingdom of Bahrain, in particular against the kingdom's Shia Muslim population and surrounding important Shia religious dates and events, as well as political marginalization based on religion. We fear that these violations and this marginalization has the potential to lead to destabilizing issues, including further protests and possible unrest. In order to forestall this, we urge you to take action to end violations of religious freedom against Bahrain's Shia community, including installing legislation protecting the right to participate in religious events, and engaging Shia communities in the political process. We call upon you to order the release of imprisoned Shia clerics as a way to build confidence and demonstrate your government's seriousness to put these protections in place.

The Government of Bahrain has maintained that the country is tolerant of other religions and ethnicities, that all cultures are respected, and that "[religious freedom is the law of the land](#)." Indeed, religious minorities in Bahrain are treated well, with "non-Muslim religious minorities including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Jews reporting they could practice their religion openly without fear of interference from the government" [according](#) to the United States Department of State (US DoS).

While minorities receive good treatment, Bahrain's Shia Muslim community – which constitutes a majority of the kingdom's citizen population – faces repression. Government security forces [detain Shia clerics and religious leaders](#) including over the content of their sermons, arrest peaceful Shia activists on trumped-up charges including of terror-related offenses, and disrupt and disperse crowds during religious processions commemorating Ashura.

Longstanding repression targeting Bahrain's Shia population has increased within the past two years as security forces and officials suppress celebrations surrounding the Shia month of Muharram and Ashura. In September 2018 in the run-up to Ashura, more than 14 Shia clergymen and orators were [harassed](#) by authorities and arrested over the content of their sermons. According to [reports](#) from Amnesty International and the US DoS, "many of those detained were reportedly under investigation for inciting hatred of the regime." This pattern has continued into 2019, and there have been [reports](#) that in early September 2019, the government summoned over 20 preachers for investigation after they delivered sermons during Muharram. There have also been attacks on Ashura processions around Bahrain in 2019, including in the areas and neighborhoods of Muharraq, Bilad Al Qadeem, and Nabih Saleh. Such attacks follow similar actions by security forces in previous years in the villages of Sitra, Isa Town, Sanabis, and Bani Jamra, among other towns.

Bahrain's discrimination against its Shia population also manifests in the political arena, where systematic [gerrymandering](#) has ensured that Shia are less represented in government. Shia areas that are densely populated have the same number of parliamentary representatives as less populated Sunni areas. As a result, in the 2010 parliamentary elections, Shia candidates won 64 percent of the vote but received only 18 out of 40 parliamentary seats. As a result, Shia parties and other opposition parties boycotted the

elections in 2014. In the run-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections, the government took further steps, banning many opposition parties and passing legislation forbidding many who had belonged to banned opposition parties from running for office.

This combination of overt religious discrimination through arrest and detention of religious leaders and disrespect for religiously significant days, and political disenfranchisement based on religion has deepened the marginalization of Bahrain's Shia population. The most effective way to counter such marginalization is for the government to not only halt the targeting of Shia religious leaders and clerics, but to end political marginalization and re-start a genuine national dialogue with prominent and independent Shia leaders with an aim to reconciliation between the government and ruling family and the kingdom's Shia population. We therefore urge you to release clerics from prison as well as anyone arrested around Ashura on non-violent charges. We further recall Bahrain's own stated commitment to religious tolerance and call upon you to direct your government to abide by these precepts as well as international religious freedom standards.

Yours sincerely,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, Washington DC, USA

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, London, United Kingdom

Center for Pluralism, Washington DC, USA

Centro Studi per la Libertà di Religione, Credo e Coscienza (LIREC), Roma, Italy

Charter for Compassion, Sana'a, Yemen

China Aid Association, Washington DC, USA

Citizen Power Initiatives for China, Washington DC, USA

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, Paris, France

Dr. Howard Burman Interim President, Atheist Alliance International, Blaine, Washington, USA

Dr. Mike Ghose, Center for Pluralism, Washington DC, USA

Dutch Network for the Parliament of the World's Religions – Utrecht, Netherlands

European Center for Democracy and Human Rights, Brussels, Belgium

European Federation for Freedom of Belief, Berlin, Germany

European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom, Paris, France & Brussels, Belgium

Freedom House, Washington DC, USA

Gemeinsam für Menschenrechte Deutschland, Berlin, Germany

Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Gurdwara (Sikh Temple), Geneva, Switzerland

Human Rights Without Frontiers, Brussels, Belgium

International Christian Concern, Washington DC, USA

Religious Freedom Coalition, Washington DC, USA

Society for Threatened Peoples/ Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, Berlin, Germany