

Introducing the Bahrain Interfaith Centre

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Sectarianism in Bahrain

Throughout history, men and women of religion have stood against tyranny and fought for the natural right of all individuals to practice their own faiths and beliefs, free from harassment, suppression and persecution. Regimes and social powers have utilized sectarianism to divide human societies into sects living in conflict in many scenarios in history. Bahrain, after the unfortunate events which took place in the aftermath of 14th February 2011, has faced mass criticism at a public and governmental level for practicing, nurturing, developing and tolerating sectarianism.

Sectarianism is defined as discrimination or hatred arising from attaching importance to perceived differences between subdivisions within a group, such as between different denominations of a religion, class, regional or factions of a political movement.

The ideological underpinnings of attitudes and behaviours labelled 'sectarian' are extraordinarily varied. Members of a religious or political group may believe that their own salvation, or the success of their particular objectives, requires aggressively seeking converts from other groups; adherents of a given faction may believe that for the achievement of their own political or religious project their internal opponents must be purged.

At a governmental level the government of Bahrain claims to refuse sectarianism, however the *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, released to HM King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa on 23rd November 2011, finds that sectarianism was practiced at a governmental level especially in the following areas:

- Sectarianism has been broadcast, practiced and escalated in the public national media, especially on Bahrain TV
- Sectarianism was the drive to demolish more than 37 centres of worship;
- Sectarianism was the drive to expel and suspend thousands from their jobs in the private and public sector;
- Sectarianism was evident in the mass punishment of villages in Bahrain;
- Sectarianism is practiced in the linguistic and physical behaviour of the police forces

At a public level, reports have found that sectarianism is practiced, entrenched and escalated between Shi'a and Sunni, between local nationals and naturalized Bahrainis, those of Bedouin descent and of urban descent, the opposition and the government-loyal communities, and other social groups.

Bahrain: An instance of Religious Discrimination?

Religious discrimination is valuing or treating a person or group differently because of what they do or do not believe. A concept like 'religious discrimination' is necessary to take into account ambiguities of the term 'religious persecution': the most infamous cases in which people have been executed for beliefs perceived to be heretic are generally recognizable as persecution.

Although the constitution in Bahrain claims that Freedom of Religion is a constitutional right, the religious Shi'a majority claim religious discrimination is practiced on a mass scale against them.

Shi'a feel that they are denied the equal protection of the laws; equality of status under the law; equal treatment in the administration of justice; and equality of opportunity and access to employment, education, housing, public services and facilities, and public accommodation – all due to their exercise of their right to religious freedom and opinion.

Bahrain Interfaith Center

Bahrain Interfaith Center is a non-profit team of open-minded, moderate Bahraini volunteers attempting to protect religious rights, prevent religious and social discrimination and sectarianism, encourage interfaith dialogue, denounce sectarian violence and support peace initiatives.

Bahrain Interfaith Center was created in 2012 to cultivate harmony amongst religious groups and sects in Bahrain. We intend to be dedicated to protecting the religious and social rights of people in Bahrain. We will attempt to prevent discrimination, to uphold religious freedom, to investigate cultural and religious rights violations, and pressure the government to end abusive sectarian and religious practices, and respect international human rights law.

To accomplish this, we invite individuals and communities who respect religious and faith pluralism to join our mission in promoting tolerance, confronting sectarianism and religious discrimination and encouraging interfaith dialogue.

Our Vision

We believe that achieving internal and external peace is an agreed upon goal in the majority of religions and faiths. Thus it is the role of religious leaders to promote understanding among people of all faiths, and to strongly prohibit all forms of violence and aggression against all people, regardless of their faith or race. If religious leaders promote this vision, religious and cultural fears and hatreds will be replaced with understanding and respect.

Core Values

- **Personal worth:** People are worthy of respect, support, and caring simply because they are human. Everyone should be treated in a fair manner regardless of race, religion, and sect
- **Lack of discrimination:** Working towards promoting a culture in Bahrain that is relatively free of discrimination on the basis of religion, thought and social background
- **Dignity:** The dignity of the human person. We oppose the use of torture and cruel or unusual punishment against people regardless of their thought, religion or social background.
- **Democracy:** We believe that the promotion of true(not fake)democracy eliminates discrimination. We also support democratic processes within religious, political, and other structures.
- **Promoting religious neutrality within government:** We believe governments should treat everyone equally regardless of religion or sect. The government should not promote one religion or sect over another, promote religion over secular beliefs, or promote secular beliefs over religion, accuse a sect of being national and the other being a betrayer.
- **Personal freedom:** The freedoms of religious beliefs, speech, association, and expression at the individual, congregational and denominational level.
- **Freedom of speech:** “The freedom for faith groups to discuss each other’s traditions”.

Religious Freedom Unit

Bahrain Interfaith Centre has established a Religious Freedom Unit to report violations of religious freedom in Bahrain. The Unit is also heading the Religious Freedom Committee at the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory. The Unit has been active internationally and locally in issuing reports on violations of religious freedom.

