



BIRD
BAHRAIN INSTITUTE FOR
RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY



12 May 2014

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Your Holiness,

We are writing to you regarding a proposed request by the King of Bahrain, Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, to meet with your holiness in the wake of severe human rights abuses. It is also our intention to inform you about these abuses in Bahrain that have targeted ordinary civilians, men, women and children of faith and their holy places of worship.

In 14 February 2011, ordinary civilians in Bahrain took to the streets demanding a constitution that is agreed upon by the people, the recognition of their human rights, civil liberties, an end to corruption and greater representation in the political sphere. These peaceful protests were responded to with a brutal crackdown taking the lives of at least [95 individuals to date](#)¹. The government of Bahrain began a widespread crackdown against civilians: thousands were [sacked from their jobs, expelled schools and universities](#)², [systematically tortured](#)³ and [imprisoned](#)⁴.

Since the beginning of the crackdown, the government of Bahrain used sectarian targeting as one of the main tools to divide society. Bahrain has a documented [history of systematic marginalization and discrimination](#)⁵ against the Shia majority. The government of Bahrain destroyed over [28 places of worship](#)⁶ as reprisals against protesters after inviting foreign troops into the country to crush peaceful demonstrations. During the destruction, security forces even [prevented](#)⁷ locals from removing holy books and religious artifacts from the places of worship. This included the [Amir Mohammed Barbagi Mosque](#)⁸ which was more than 400 years old and an important religious and cultural site. The destruction was described as *collective punishment* by an [independent commission of inquiry](#)⁹ in 2011. These attacks against places of worship and

¹ <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3864>

² <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/bahrain>

³ <http://www.redress.org/downloads/publications/Fundamentalreform.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/bahrain>

⁵ <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/2480>

⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2011/05/2011513112016389348.html>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26721084>

⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26721084>

⁹ <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>

[religious mourning and celebratory events](#)¹⁰ in Bahrain have continued to this day with mosques being [tear gassed](#)¹¹, [ransacked and desecrated](#)¹² by security forces.

The reprisals have included the [targeting of religious figures](#)¹³ including scholars, theologians and religious leaders. On 23 April 2014, Bahrain targeted and [deported](#)¹⁴ the prominent Shia scholar Sheikh Hussein Al-Najati from the country. Sheikh Najati also had his citizenship arbitrarily revoked from him in November 2012 with [30 other individuals](#)¹⁵. Sheikh Najati is a prominent theologian and has never engaged in politics or any acts of violence. His activities were strictly limited to religious education and manifestation. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on religion [described this deportation](#)¹⁶ as “an act of religiously motivated discrimination”. It is also important to mention that on 29 January 2014, the government of Bahrain [dissolved and liquidized](#)¹⁷ the assets of the [Shia Islamic Scholars Council](#).

Another theologian, Mr. Abdulwahab Husain, was arrested after he and his daughter were beaten by police. This arrest was based on the peaceful expression of political opinions. He was later brutally [tortured](#)¹⁸, imprisoned, and has been consistently denied medical treatment in prison. In addition to Mr Husain, a prominent religious scholar, [Sheikh Mohammed Ali Al-Mahfoodh](#), who was head of the *Islamic Action Society*, was arrested, stripped naked, and tortured during detention. The government imprisoned Sheikh Al-Mahfoodh and later [dissolved](#)¹⁹ the *Islamic Action Society*. These are merely two cases out of numerous others.

Your Holiness,

These abuses are yet to end and the government of Bahrain continues to undergo religiously motivated attacks against civilians and protesters. According to the [2014 Human Rights Watch annual report](#)²⁰, “*Bahrain’s human rights record regressed further in key areas in 2013 and the government made little real progress regarding reforms it claimed to pursue.*” This has included continued torture, ill treatment, arbitrary detention, prosecution and harassment of government critics, the lack of accountability, the lack of freedoms of association, expression and assembly

¹⁰ <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/6565>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SAKZG5zT-g>

¹² <http://youtu.be/D5SoB0xMFa0>

¹³ <http://adhrb.org/2014/04/u-n-special-rapporteur-on-religious-freedom-admonishes-bahrain/>

¹⁴ <http://news.yahoo.com/bahrain-expels-envoy-shiite-ayatollah-sistani-151349739.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/bahraini-opposition-figures-stripped-nationality-frightening-development-2012-11-07>

¹⁶ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14533&LanglD=E>

¹⁷ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/01/bahrain-court-decision-resolve-islamic-council.html>

¹⁸ <http://birdbh.org/2012/05/abdulwahab-husains-speech-before-the-supreme-court-of-appeal/>

¹⁹ http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/bahrain0613webwcover_0.pdf

²⁰ <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/bahrain>

and the failure to protect women and migrant workers. The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#)²¹ has ranked Bahrain as 2nd worst in the world for number of journalists imprisoned per capita and Freedom House ranked Bahrain, in its [2014 World Freedom Report](#)²², as 'Not Free' and as the 3rd worst country in the Middle East and North Africa for Freedom. The [US State Department 2013 Human Rights Report](#)²³ found that Bahrain takes part in the [arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life, torture and degrading treatment](#)²⁴. It also found that prison conditions are 'harsh' and that both youths and adults are mistreated and abused in detention. In [December 2013 Amnesty International](#)²⁵ showed dismay at findings of arbitrary detention, abuse, torture and sexual assault against children in Bahrain by security forces.

Your Holiness,

Since 2011, people in Bahrain have felt like they have been largely ignored internationally, with many governments turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to their suffering. They have been targeted though torture, abuse, their places of worship and their family members. Their pleas have been responded to with silence, neglect and ill-judgment, a refusal to recognise their legitimate aspirations and a refusal to hold those accountable for human rights crimes to justice. Whilst authorities in Bahrain continue to receive unconditional support from ally states, they continue to oppress their own people with impunity.

We ask that you refuse any meetings with the King of Bahrain or his officials so as to not give legitimacy to these severe abuses against civilians in Bahrain. If your Holiness so chooses to meet with the King of Bahrain, we ask that you publicly condemn the violations against freedom of religion committed by his government. We further ask you to actively advocate for an end to the oppression and attacks against places of worship in Bahrain. As is written in Proverbs 14:31:

"Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him."

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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²¹ <https://cpj.org/2014/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2013-bahrain.php>

²² <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/middle-east-and-north-africa-fact-sheet#.U14qddyCt5G>

²³ <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220560.pdf>

²⁴ <http://adhrb.org/2014/03/new-state-oig-report-underscores-need-for-clear-and-consistent-messaging-from-u-s-on-bahrain/>

²⁵ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/bahrain-halt-detention-abuse-and-torture-children-2013-12-13>

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