



United Arab Emirates

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The Federal Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of the country.

There was some change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report; government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. In August 2003, the Government closed the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-up, an Abu Dhabi-based think tank that published and distributed literature, sponsored lectures, and operated a website. This center was accused of providing a platform for some anti-Semitic individuals. In October 2003, the Dubai Evangelical Church Center (DECC) opened in a large compound of Christian churches just outside of Dubai. In April the evangelical Christian men's group "Promise Keepers" held a 2-day religious convention in Dubai, the first of its kind in the Middle East.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country's total land area is 32,300 square miles, and its population is approximately 4 million. Approximately 85 percent of the population is comprised of noncitizens. The vast majority of the country's citizens are Muslims; approximately 85 percent are Sunni and the remaining 15 percent are Shi'a. Foreigners are predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, although there are a substantial number from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, former Commonwealth of Independent States, and North America. Although no official figures are available, local observers estimate that approximately 55 percent of the foreign population is Muslim, 25 percent is Hindu, 10 percent is Christian, 5 percent is Buddhist, and 5 percent (most of whom reside in Dubai and Abu Dhabi) belongs to other religions, including Parsi, Baha'i, and Sikh.

In late 2001, the Ministry of Planning inquired about religious affiliation in its first federal census. According to a Ministry report compiled in 2003 using data collected during the census, 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent is Christian, and 15 percent is "other."

There are foreign missionaries operating in the country. The Government does not permit foreign missionaries to proselytize Muslims; however, they have performed humanitarian missionary work since before the country's independence in 1971. In 1960, Christian missionaries opened a maternity hospital in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi; the hospital continues to operate. Missionaries also operate a maternity hospital in the Emirate of Fujairah. An International Bible Society representative in Al-Ain distributes Bibles and other religious material to Christian religious groups throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The Government controls virtually all Sunni mosques, prohibits proselytizing, and restricts the freedom of assembly and association, thereby limiting the ability of religious groups without dedicated religious buildings to worship and conduct business. The Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven of the constituent emirates of the federal union. The Government in effect recognizes a small number of Christian denominations through the issuance of land use permits for the construction and operation of churches. Religious groups without dedicated buildings of worship often use the facilities of other religious groups or worship in private homes. There have been no reports of government interference in this common practice.

The Government funds or subsidizes almost 95 percent of Sunni mosques and employs all Sunni imams; approximately 5 percent of Sunni mosques are entirely private, and several large mosques have large private endowments. The Government distributes guidance on religious sermons to mosques and imams, whether Sunni or Shi'a, and monitors all sermons for political content.

The Shi'a minority, which is concentrated in the northern emirates, is free to worship and maintain its own mosques. All Shi'a mosques are considered private and receive no funds from the Government. Shi'a imams are government-appointed only in the Emirate of Dubai. Shi'a Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shi'a family law cases through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts.

The Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf operate as the central federal regulatory authority for Muslim imams and mosques. There is no such authority and no licensing or registration requirements for the recognition and regulation of non-Muslim religions.

Non-Muslim groups can own their own houses of worship, wherein they can practice their religion freely, by requesting a land grant and permission to build a compound from the local ruler (the title for the land remains with the ruler). There is no federal-level method of granting official status to religious groups or approving land grants. Rather, rulers of the individual emirates exercise autonomy in choosing whether to grant access to land and permission to build houses of worship within their emirates. Groups that do not have their own buildings must use the facilities of other religious organizations or worship in private homes. The police or other security forces do not interfere with gatherings held in private homes.

There are 24 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. There are also two Sikh temples and one Hindu temple operating in the country, and another Sikh temple reportedly being built in the Emirate of Dubai. Four emirates are home to parochial, Christian, primary and secondary schools. The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai have donated land for Christian cemeteries, and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi has donated land for a Baha'i cemetery. There are two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the Hindu community, one in Dubai and one in Sharjah.

Non-Muslim religious groups do not receive funds from the Government; however, those with land grants are not charged rental payments and the local ruling families donate the land grants for some religious buildings. In addition the Emirate of Sharjah waives utility payments for religious buildings. Non-Muslim groups raise money from among their congregants and receive financial support from abroad. Religious groups also advertise certain religious functions in the press, such as holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events.

The Government supports in practice a moderate interpretation of Islam.

Because the official interpretation of Islam considers Christianity to be one of the three monotheistic religions, facilities for Christian congregations are far greater in number and size than those for other non-Muslim communities, despite the fact that Christians represent less than a quarter of the non-Muslim population.

As the state religion, Islam is favored over other religions and conversion to Islam is viewed favorably. A list of Muslim converts is published annually. Prisoners who convert to Islam often receive a reduction in their sentences. In Dubai prisoners who memorize all or part of the Koran can receive a reduction in their sentences or a pardon, depending on the length of sentence and the number of sections memorized. Prisoners facing life sentences do not benefit from the memorization program. The ruler of the Emirate of Ajman offers a cash award for prisoners who memorize all or part of the Koran.

During the period covered by this report, the rulers of the various emirates pardoned prisoners on religious and national holidays without regard to the prisoners' religious affiliations. Those pardoned generally are serving sentences from 3 to 5 years for financial crimes, immigration violations, and other minor offenses; pardons reportedly were not extended to prisoners convicted of murder, rape, and kidnapping.

The Government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religions and, in practice, interferes very little in their religious activities.

The Religious Advisor to the President, Ali Al Hashemi, regularly represents the country at Islamic, ecumenical, Christian conferences and events in other countries. In September 2003, he attended a conference in Bahrain intended to forge closer ties between Islamic sects, and in June he attended a conference on Islamic counseling in Yemen.

The following religious holidays are considered national holidays: Waqfa, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the Prophet's Birthday, Ascension Day, and Eid Al-Fitr. There are no reports that these holidays negatively affect other religious groups because of their religious affiliation; however, all residents and visitors are required by law during Ramadan to publicly respect and abide by some of the behavior restrictions imposed on Muslims, they are forbidden to eat, drink, or smoke publicly during fasting hours.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Federal Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf distribute weekly guidance to both Sunni imams and Shi'a sheikhs regarding subject matter, themes, and content of religious sermons, and ensures that clergy do not deviate frequently or significantly from approved topics in their sermons. There were reports that an unknown number of foreign imams were deported in 2003 for preaching messages of intolerance. All Sunni imams are employees of the Federal Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf, or of individual emirate departments. Except in Dubai, where the Department of Islamic Affairs and Endowments controls the appointment of preachers and the conduct of their work in all mosques, the Government does not appoint sheikhs for Shi'a mosques.

In 1999, land was designated in the Emirate of Ras Al-Khaimah for the construction of a new Catholic church, but at the end of the period covered by this report, the church had not received permission to open, although construction was completed in 2000. According to a church representative, construction on the Catholic church has been completed, but there are legal issues arising from the church's change in building plans that are preventing it from opening. Parishioners continue to hold mass in the Anglican church compound.

There are no Buddhist temples; however, Buddhists, along with Hindus and Sikhs in cities without temples, conduct religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. There are two Sikh temples and one Hindu temple in the country, and another Sikh temple reportedly is being built in the Emirate of Dubai. There are only two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one in Dubai and one in Sharjah. Official permission must be obtained for their use in every instance, posing a hardship for the large Hindu community.

The Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing or distributing religious literature under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation, for engaging in behavior offensive to Islam. While there are no specific laws against missionary activities, in the past the Government reportedly has threatened to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of missionary

activities. There were no reports of such threats during the period covered by this report.

In 2002, Dubai Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) arrested a Filipino evangelical Christian pastor, Fernando Alconga, for distributing Christian and Biblical literature to an Egyptian Muslim in a parking lot. Alconga was detained for 36 days for "preaching other than the Islamic religion" and then released on bail. His movements in the country were not restricted, and he continued to preach to church congregations throughout the country after his release. A panel of Islamic scholars found Alconga's materials to be "acceptable for private use, but not for distributing to non-Christians," and a court convicted him of "abusing Islam." In 2003 Alconga was given a suspended 1-year sentence and deported to the Philippines. After this case concluded, the Dubai Supreme Court ruled that deportation would always be required as part of the punishment for all types of religious crimes committed by expatriates. The court further ruled that appellate courts do not have the authority to cancel deportation orders from a lower court's sentence, so long as the conviction stands.

Immigration authorities routinely ask foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation; however, the Government reportedly does not collect or analyze this information, and religious affiliation is not a factor in the issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits. In late 2001, the Ministry of Planning inquired about religious affiliation in its first federal census. According to a Ministry report compiled in 2003 using data collected during the census, 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent is Christian, and 15 percent is "other."

Non-Muslim religious leaders have reported that customs authorities rarely question the entry of religious materials such as Bibles and hymnals into the country, unless the materials are printed in Arabic. In the past, customs authorities have questioned the entry of religious materials that they deemed in excess of the normal requirements of existing congregations, although in most instances the items were permitted entry. Customs authorities reportedly are less likely to question the importation of Christian religious items than that of non-Muslim, non-Christian religious items, although in virtually all instances importation of the material in question eventually has been permitted.

There is a dual system of Shari'a (Islamic) courts for criminal and family law matters and secular courts for civil law matters. Non-Muslims are tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts. Not all crimes are punishable by Shari'a penalties. In cases punishable by Shari'a penalty, non-Muslims may receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge, which generally occurs. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims also may be overturned or modified by a higher court.

Family law for Muslims is governed by Shari'a and the local Shari'a courts. Dubai has a special Shi'a council to act on matters pertaining to Shi'a family law. Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women "of the book," that is, Christian or Jewish women; however, Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men unless the men convert to Islam. Because Islam does not consider the marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of fornication. There were no reports of this occurring during the period covered by this report. Shari'a, according to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, also is applied in cases of divorce. Women generally are granted custody of female children until they reach the age of maturity and are granted temporary custody of male children until they reach the age of 12. If the mother is deemed unfit, custody reverts to the next able female relative on the mother's side. Shari'a, as practiced in the country, permits polygyny.

Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools (schools supported by the Federal Government for primarily citizen children) and in private schools for Muslim children. Religious instruction in non-Muslim religions is not permitted in public schools; however, religious groups may conduct religious instruction for their members on their religious compounds. According to Article 84 of the Executive System of Private Education, private schools found teaching subjects that contravene Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the nation's ethics and beliefs may face penalties, including closure.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In October 2003, the DECC opened in a large compound of Christian churches just outside of Dubai. The de facto ruler of Dubai donated the land to the interdenominational United Christian Church of Dubai (UCCD). Both Catholic and Protestant churches have been built on the compound, and other Christian congregations without their own buildings, such as the Anglicans and Orthodox, regularly conduct services in the existing facilities.

Many Christians were pleased that the Government allowed Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" to air in theaters over the Easter holiday season. Attended by Christians and Muslims alike, the movie broke the country's box office records during its run.

In January Ras Al Khaimah Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi met with officials and members of the Indian Orthodox Christian community to discuss opening a church in that emirate. Currently, Ras Al Khaimah has only one non-Muslim worship center, which various communities rent to conduct their services.

In April the evangelical Christian men's group "Promise Keepers" held a 2-day religious conference in Dubai. About 500 persons from all emirates as well as other countries in the region attended the event, which was the first of its kind in the Middle East. There was no government interference or police presence at the event.

Also in April, a high-ranking leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, traveled to the country to meet with government officials and build links between the Russian Orthodox Church and Muslim leaders. Widely reported in the press, Kirill said he applauded the Government's determination to promote fraternity and tolerance among different nationalities and cultures. The 8,000-member Orthodox Russian community in the country hopes to eventually build a church in Sharjah.

In June 2003, the Government initiated a public religious education campaign to promote a better understanding of Islam, including a 1-year training course for 166 imams.

In July 2003, the Vatican representative in the Arabian Peninsula, Bishop Bernardo Giovanni Gremoli, delivered a lecture on "Religious Tolerance in the UAE and the Importance of Dialogue Among Religions." During the lecture, Bishop Gremoli stated that in the country, each person can practice his own religion and live in peace. He also said that the Vatican has always enjoyed good relations with the country, and that religious leaders representing the country and the Vatican have exerted tremendous efforts to improve dialogue over the past few years.

In 2003, the Coptic Orthodox Church received permission to build a church in Abu Dhabi; construction began in April and is expected to take more than a year to complete. Two new churches also opened: a 1,000-plus capacity Coptic Orthodox church and service facility in Sharjah; and a 1,000-plus capacity Catholic church and hall in Fujairah. In 2002 the Al Ain municipal government authorized a land grant to the Anglican Church. The Fujairah government authorized land grants for the construction of an Indian Orthodox church and a Catholic church. Also in 2003, the Indian Orthodox church opened in a public ceremony.

In 2003, a government official arranged for a Christian prayer and healing "festival" at the Dubai

Handicapped Club. Lee Jae-Rock, a pastor of the Manmin Joong-Ang Church in Seoul, Korea, spoke and performed a healing ceremony for 100 persons, including nationals, with various disabilities. Arabic and Russian television crews recorded the service, and Jae-Rock's words were translated into Arabic.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

Non-Muslim religious leaders from inside and outside of the country regularly refer to it as one of the most liberal and broadminded countries in the region in terms of governmental and societal attitudes toward allowing all persons to practice their faiths freely. While citizens regard the country as a Muslim nation that should respect Muslim religious sensibilities on matters such as public consumption of alcohol, proper dress, and proper public comportment, society also emphasizes respect for privacy and Islamic traditions of tolerance, particularly with respect to forms of Christianity. Modest casual attire for men and women is permitted throughout the country.

Many hotels, stores, and other businesses patronized by both citizens and foreigners are permitted to sell alcohol and pork to non-Muslims, and to acknowledge non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali (although such displays generally are not permitted during the month of Ramadan). Shopping centers are festive during Christian holidays, and traditional holiday foods, decorations, posters, books, and videotapes are widely available. School children gather in Dubai malls to sing Christmas carols while Santa hands out gifts. Reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services, are regularly printed in the media. The largest country carrier, Emirates Airline, brings European tourists to Dubai on "Easter-special sightseeing packages."

Citizens occasionally express concern regarding the influence on society of the cultures of the country's foreign majority. However, in general, citizens are familiar with foreign societies and believe that the best way to balance foreign influence is by supporting and strengthening indigenous cultural traditions.

There were no anti-Semitic or religiously intolerant articles or statements in the English- and Arabic-language electronic and print media. On a routine basis, all media carried articles or statements criticizing the policies and actions of the Israeli Government.

In August 2003, the Government closed the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-up, an Abu Dhabi-based think tank affiliated with the Arab League and created in 1997, that published and distributed literature, sponsored lectures, and operated a website. Over the past few years, the center published some books with anti-Semitic themes such as "The Zionist Movement and its Animosity to Jews" and "Al Buraq Wall, Not Wailing Wall." It also allowed some anti-Semitic language on its website and hosted some speakers who promoted anti-Semitic views. One such event was a symposium on "Semitism" in the summer of 2002, during which remarks attributed to center employees and speakers denied the Holocaust. According to a statement from President Zayed's office, the Government closed the center because its activities "starkly contradicted the principles of interfaith tolerance" advocated by the president.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Embassy officials in Abu Dhabi and Consulate General officials in Dubai have discussed religious tolerance and freedom with government officials on a number of occasions, and have encouraged the Government to increase religious freedom by permitting the opening or expansion of religious facilities for the large expatriate population. Embassy officials expressed concern to the Government about statements and publications expressing religious intolerance on the website of Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-up prior to its August 2003 closure. Embassy and consulate officials also help to protect religious freedom by monitoring its status through informal inquiries and

meetings with government officials and representatives of Muslim, Christian, and other faiths. For example, in 2003 U.S. Embassy and Consulate officials closely monitored the criminal proceedings and deportation in the case of the evangelical Christian pastor convicted of proselytizing. The Consul General urged government officials to dispose of the case in a manner acceptable to all parties involved.

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