



United Arab Emirates

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

October 26, 2009

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion with some restrictions. The Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of the country, and the Government defines all citizens as Muslims.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped without government interference, although there were restrictions. The Government controls virtually all Sunni mosques and places general restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, including for religious purposes. Nonetheless, religious groups with dedicated religious buildings can worship and conduct business. The Government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and in practice interfered very little in their religious activities. Proselytizing and publicly distributing non-Islamic religious literature is prohibited.

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, although societal pressure discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions, and there were instances of discriminatory caricatures in the media.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 32,300 square miles and a population of 4.8 million. An estimated 80 percent of the country's residents are noncitizens. Of the citizens, more than 85 percent are Sunni Muslim and an estimated 15 percent or fewer are Shi'a. Noncitizen residents are predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, although there are substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, and North America. According to the most recent Ministry of Economy census (2005), 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent is Christian, and 15 percent is "other." According to unofficial figures, at least 15 percent of the resident population is Hindu, and 5 percent is Buddhist. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Parsi, Baha'i, Sikh, and Jews. These estimates differ from census figures because census figures do not take into account "temporary" visitors and workers and they count Baha'is and Druze as Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion with some restrictions.

The Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven of the constituent emirates of the federal

union. The Government funds or subsidizes almost 95 percent of Sunni mosques and employs all Sunni imams. Five percent of Sunni mosques are considered private, and several mosques have large private endowments. The Government recognizes more than 30 Christian denominations and issues many of them land-use permits for the construction and operation of churches.

There is a dual system consisting of Shari'a (Islamic) courts for criminal and family law matters and secular courts for civil law matters. Shi'a Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shi'a family law cases (marriage, death, and inheritance cases) through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts. Non-Muslims are sometimes tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts. Not all crimes are punishable by Shari'a penalties. In cases punishable by a Shari'a penalty, non-Muslims generally receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims also may be overturned or modified by a higher court.

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims and non-Muslims are required by law to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during fasting hours out of respect for Islamic practice. Shi'a are free to celebrate Ashura according to their customs.

The General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments oversees most issues related to Islamic affairs in the country. The General Authority distributes weekly guidance to Sunni imams 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. Most imams are noncitizens; a significant number are Egyptian or Syrian. The Government does not appoint sheikhs (imams) for Shi'a mosques, except in Dubai, where the Department of Islamic Affairs and Endowments controls the appointment of clergy and their conduct in all mosques. Shi'a clergy are free to choose the subjects of their sermons, which reportedly did not deviate in practice from approved topics during the reporting period.

The Shi'a minority, concentrated in the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah, is free to worship and maintain its own mosques. All Shi'a mosques are considered private and may receive funds from the Government upon request.

While the Government does not require formal licensing or registration requirements for non-Muslim religious groups, it monitors their growth and development through land grants and grants permission on a case-by-case basis to build houses of worship when congregations outgrow smaller private facilities. The Government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and in practice interferes very little in their religious activities. The Government seeks to encourage citizens to avoid extremist tendencies or ideologies.

All schools, regardless of religion, must be registered with the Government. Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools (schools supported by the federal government primarily for citizens) and in private schools for Muslim children. Instruction of any religion other than Islam is not permitted in public schools; however, religious groups may conduct religious instruction for their members in their dedicated religious facilities. Private schools found to be teaching subjects that offend Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the country's ethics and beliefs may face penalties, including potential closure. Private parochial schools are free to teach their religion within the bounds of government guidelines and to practice religious rituals.

Although textbooks have been banned in the past for containing material offensive to Islam, there were no new reports of banned school books during the reporting period.

Proselytizing and distributing non-Islamic religious literature are prohibited under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation, on the grounds that such behavior transgresses core Islamic teachings. Although there are no specific laws against missionary activity, in the past the Government has reportedly threatened to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of proselytizing for religions other than Islam.

Immigration authorities routinely asked foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications; however, the Government reportedly does not collect or analyze this information, and there were no reports of religious affiliation negatively affecting the issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits.

During the period covered by this report, rulers of various emirates pardoned at least 2,000 prisoners on religious and national holidays, without regard to the prisoners' religious affiliations. Those pardoned generally were serving sentences of 3 to 5 years for financial crimes, immigration violations, and other relatively minor offenses; pardons reportedly were not extended to prisoners convicted of rape, murder, or kidnapping.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Waqfa, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Ascension Day, and Eid al-Fitr.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped without government interference, although there were restrictions. As the state religion, Islam is favored over other religious groups, and conversion to Islam is viewed favorably.

Under Shari'a, Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are "people of the book" (Christian or Jewish women); however, Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam. Because Islam does not consider marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both parties to such a union are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of fornication. There were no reports of such penalties applied during the period covered by this report.

Shari'a, according to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, applies in cases of divorce. According to a new personal status law, women generally are granted custody of female children until they reach the age of 13 and are granted custody of male children until they reach the age of 10. 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 polygamy (up to four legal wives).

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not recognized, and no data was available to assess if any such conversions took place. Converts may be persuaded to return to the Islamic fold, may conceal their new faith, or may travel to another country where their conversion is recognized to avoid the social stigma of converting from Islam to another religion.

A list of expatriate converts to Islam is published annually by the Government.

Non-Muslim groups can own houses of worship, where they can practice their religion freely, by requesting a land grant and permission from the local ruler to build a compound (the title for the land remains with the ruler). Those with land grants are not charged rent on this property. The Emirate of Sharjah also waives utility payments for religious buildings. There is no national standard for 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 emirate. The lack of clear guidelines can present a barrier to the acquisition of official status, leading to confusion and delay; a handful of requests were pending, some for years. Religious groups without dedicated buildings of worship often use the facilities of other religious groups or worship in private homes. There were no reports of government interference in this common practice.

Even though Christians represent a minority of the non-Muslim population, their facilities for worship outnumber those of other non-Muslim communities. The Government appears to look upon Christian congregations more favorably when considering land grants for houses of worship.

There are at least 33 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. In some cases, chapels are clustered in close proximity to one another or in locations some distance from the residential areas in which their congregation members live, effectively limiting attendance. Four emirates are home to Christian primary and secondary schools, in which students are generally free to study Christianity and perform religious rituals. The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai donated land for Christian cemeteries, and Abu Dhabi also donated land for a Baha'i cemetery.

The Government does not permit churches to display crosses on the outside of their premises or to erect bell towers; however, this restriction is not always enforced, and some churches display cross designs on their buildings. Some churches were overcrowded and conducted services or masses in open courtyards on special occasions due to limited space. There was no government interference within church compounds. As the Government does not recognize or permit conversion from Islam to another religion, churches accept converts from all religions except Islam.

There are no synagogues for the small expatriate Jewish population; however, Jews observed holidays in private residences without interference.

There are two Hindu temples, at least one of which is shared with Sikhs, in Dubai. A new Sikh temple was under construction in Dubai. There are no Buddhist temples. Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. There was reportedly a pending request to build a temple for the growing Buddhist population.

There are two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one each in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. New crematoriums anticipated in al-Ain and Sharjah encountered delays. However, the crematoriums currently in use meet present demand. Official permission must be obtained for their use in every instance; however, procedures are straightforward and do not appear to create hardship. The Government allows people from all religions except Islam to use the cremation facilities.

Workers generally do not build Hindu temples at work sites, partly because facilities would need dedicated caretakers to maintain the temples according to Hindu practice, and such individuals may not be available. There were no reports during the reporting period of municipalities dismantling temples built by Hindu workers in labor camps.

Non-Muslim groups raise money from their congregations and receive financial support from abroad. Religious groups openly advertise religious functions in the press, such as holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events. Non-Muslim religious leaders reported that customs authorities rarely questioned 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 questioned the entry of religious materials deemed in excess of the normal requirements of existing congregations, although in most instances the items were permitted entry. Customs authorities reportedly were less likely to question the importation of Christian religious items than that of other non-Muslim religious items. Nonetheless, in virtually all instances, importation of the material in question was eventually permitted.

The country's two Internet service providers, Etisalat and du, occasionally blocked websites containing religious information. These sites included information on the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, atheism, negative critiques of Islam, and

testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity. The Government's Cyber Crime Law provides penalties for using the Internet to preach against Islam, inciting someone to commit sin, and using the Internet to promote a breach of public decency. No incidents were reported during the period covered by this report.

The Advisor to the President on Judicial and Religious Affairs, al-Sayed Ali al-Hashemi, as well as Chairman Hamdan Al Mazroui and Director General Mohammed Matar Al Kaabi of the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, regularly represented the country at Islamic, ecumenical, and Christian conferences and events abroad and met regularly with religious leaders in the country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

At the end of the reporting period, three large, non-Islamic religious institutions were under construction in Dubai: a Coptic church, an Eastern Orthodox church, and a Sikh temple.

On May 11, 2009, the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research met with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a group founded to fight anti-Semitism and bigotry. They discussed the need to cultivate cooperation, fraternity, and peace, irrespective of differences in customs, traditions, faith, ethnicity, and culture.

On December 25, 2008, Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed joined thousands of Christians and other pilgrims for midnight mass in Bethlehem to mark the Christmas holiday.

In October 2008 the Mar Thoma Church was granted land to build a church in Al Ain in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Also that month, the leader of the Federal National Council, Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair, led a delegation to meet with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican. The Pope acknowledged the Government's efforts to promote a culture of religious tolerance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, although societal pressures discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions, and there were instances of discriminatory caricatures in the media.

There were anti-Semitic or religiously intolerant editorials, op-eds, and editorial cartoons in the English and Arabic-language electronic and print media. The Arabic-language press, including newspapers such as *Al-Ittihad*, *Al-Bayan*, and *Al-Khaleej*, carried editorial cartoons depicting stereotypical and negative images of Jews along with Jewish symbols.

Citizens expressed concern regarding the influence of the cultures of the country's foreign majority on Emirati society (including the influence on Emirati children of non-Emirati household help). However, in general, citizens were familiar with foreign societies and believed that the best way to balance foreign influence was by supporting and strengthening indigenous cultural traditions.

Non-Muslim religious leaders from both within and outside the country regularly referred to it as one of the most liberal countries in the region in terms of governmental and societal attitudes toward allowing all persons to practice their religions freely. Although citizens regarded the country as a Muslim country that should respect Muslim religious sensibilities on matters such as public consumption of alcohol, modest dress, and public deportment, the society also emphasized respect for privacy and Islamic traditions of tolerance, particularly with respect to some Christian groups. Western casual attire for men and women was permitted throughout the country.

Many hotels, stores, and other businesses patronized by both citizens and foreigners were permitted to sell alcohol and pork to non-Muslims and to acknowledge openly non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali (although such displays generally are not permitted during the month of Ramadan). Shopping centers were festive during Christian holidays, and traditional Christian holiday foods, decorations, posters, books, and videotapes were widely available. School children gathered in malls across the country to sing Christmas carols while "department store Santas" handed out gifts. The news media regularly printed reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

U.S. embassy officials in Abu Dhabi and consulate general officials in Dubai discussed religious tolerance and freedom with government officials on a number of occasions and encouraged the Government to increase religious freedom by permitting the opening or expansion of religious facilities for the large expatriate population.

Embassy officials met with the leadership of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments on a regular basis to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officials also met periodically with the President's Religious Affairs Advisor al-Hashemi to discuss religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

Additionally, embassy and consulate general officers helped protect religious freedom by monitoring its status through informal inquiries and meetings with government officials and representatives of religious groups.