



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

United Arab Emirates

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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 no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

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

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country's population is estimated at 4.5 million, approximately 85 percent of which are noncitizens. Approximately 85 percent of citizens were Sunni Muslim and the remaining 15 percent were Shi'a. Foreigners were predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, although there were substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, former Commonwealth of Independent States, and North America. Although no official figures were available, local observers estimated that 55 percent of the foreign population was Muslim, 25 percent was Hindu, 10 percent was Christian, 5 percent was Buddhist, and 5 percent belonged to other religious groups, 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 was Muslim, 9 percent was Christian, and 15 percent was "other."

There were 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 continued to operate. Missionaries also operated a maternity hospital in the Emirate of Fujairah. An International Bible Society representative in al-Ain distributed 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 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 used the facilities of other religious groups or worship in private homes. There were 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 considered private, and several large mosques have large private endowments. The Government distributes guidance on religious sermons to mosques and clergy, 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 may receive funds from the government upon request. 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.

After a January 2006 cabinet reorganization, the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments, which operated as the central federal regulatory authority for Muslim imams and mosques, was divided into two separate bodies. The Islamic Affairs and Endowments section became the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments. At the end of the period covered by this report, the role of the Authority had been fully determined. There is neither an authority nor licensing or registration requirements for the recognition and regulation of non-Muslim religious groups.

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. Religious 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 were at least thirty-one Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. There were two Hindu temples operating in rented commercial buildings in Dubai, one of which was used by Sikhs as well. Sikhs and Hindus living in Abu Dhabi also practiced their religion in private homes. Four emirates were 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 were two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the Hindu community, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai.

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

Because an orthodox interpretation of Islam considers Christians to be "people of the book" (monotheists practicing an Abrahamic religion), facilities for Christian congregations were far greater in number and size than those for other non-Muslim communities, despite the fact that Christians were estimated to represent less than a quarter of the non-Muslim population.

In practice, the Government supports a moderate interpretation of Islam; however, as the state religion, Islam is favored over other religious groups 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an.

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 were serving sentences from three to five years for financial crimes, immigration violations, and other relatively minor offenses; pardons reportedly were not extended to prisoners convicted of rape, killing, and kidnapping.

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

The Government's religious adviser, Ali Al-Hashemi, regularly represented the country at Islamic, ecumenical, and Christian conferences, and events in other countries. Al-Hashemi met regularly with Christian leaders in the country.

The following religious holidays are considered national holidays: Waqfa, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Ascension Day, and Eid al-Fitr. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims and non-Muslims alike are required by law to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking publicly during fasting hours out of respect for Islamic practice.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Federal Ministry of Justice distributes weekly guidance to both Sunni sheikhs and Shi'a imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of religious sermons, and it ensures that clergy do not deviate frequently or significantly from approved topics in their sermons. Approximately 95 percent of Sunni imams are employees of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments 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.

There was one temple for both Sikhs and Hindus in Dubai. There were no Buddhist temples; however, Buddhists, along with Hindus and Sikhs in places without temples, conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. There were only two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai. Official permission must be obtained for their use in every instance, posing a hardship for the large Hindu community. The Government does not allow temples to be built on work premises. In contrast to previous years, there were no reports that the Sharjah municipality had dismantled temples built by Hindu workers in labor camps.

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 past years the media reported several cases where women claimed discrimination from employers in the private sector due to their decision to wear the hijab head covering at work, considered a religious mandate by many Muslim women. Some persons called for legal protection for female employees who wear the hijab. The Government did not publish an official position on the issue by the end of the

reporting period.

According to the OpenNet Initiative's "Internet Filtering in the United Arab Emirates in 2004-2005: A Country Study," the country's sole Internet service provider, Etisalat, blocked websites containing religious information. These sites included information on the Baha'i faith, Judaism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity.

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 have been no reports of religious affiliation affecting the issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits.

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 that they 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, although in virtually all instances importation of the material in question eventually was 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 twelve. 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.

Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools (schools supported by the federal Government primarily for citizen children) and in private schools for Muslim children. Religious instruction in non-Muslim religious groups 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 Federal Law No. 28 of 1999 concerning 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.

In March 2006, the Ministry of Education confiscated a social studies textbook entitled 'World Cultures,' which allegedly contained material offensive to Islam, glorified Israel, and promoted sentiments against tolerance. A ministry official described the book as "having a racist tone and is insulting to the country's religion and culture." The book has been used for the past ten years in one of the private schools in the country. The ministry banned the book from all private schools and severed ties with its publishing house.

Since many Baha'is and Druze had passports that identify them as Muslims, the Ministry of Education required their children to take the prescribed Islamic studies classes.

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

Forced Religious Conversions

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On May 3, 2006, the Ministry of Education banned a Dubai-based expatriate school principal from teaching or working in the educational field in the country, after she was found guilty of insulting religion, culture, and traditions of the country. According to the press statement, the principal prohibited Qur'an recitals during school activities.

On May 2, President Sheikh Khalifa offered a monetary grant to the Greek Orthodox assistant patriarch, as a contribution to build an orphanage house, under the umbrella of Sidnaya monastery in Damascus.

On May 1, the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research organized a session on "Criminalizing the Offending of Religions." The session, under the auspices of the minister of justice, discussed, among other subjects, how Islamic Shari'a prohibits offending other religious groups.

On April 27, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, met with a delegation from the Oasis Hospital in al-Ain, and emphasized that Islam was a religion of peace and tolerance and had nothing to do with violence. The hospital, along with a church, was originally built in 1959 to serve the Christian community in the country at that time.

On April 23, the assistant under secretary for mosques affairs participated in the Easter mass and celebration for the Egyptian Orthodox Coptic church in Abu Dhabi.

On April 19, the Federal National Council General Secretariat received a statement from the Orthodox Parliamentary Association, through the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), condemning any direct or indirect disrespect to any religious figure.

On April 13-16, the country hosted an Islamic-Danish dialogue conference with the aim of building bridges of understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. The conference included thirty Danish academic and intellectual participants and Muslim scholars from the UAE and Gulf region.

On April 2 Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al-Nahyan, the minister of higher education, attended the consecration of the new Mar Thoma Indian Church at Mussafah in Abu Dhabi. In his speech, the minister stated that the Government continued to support tolerance and mutual respect between persons of different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

On March 16 the Greek Orthodox patriarch for Antakya and Levant visited the country to inaugurate an exhibition at the Juma al-Majed Center for Culture and Heritage. During the inauguration speech, the patriarch commended the religious harmony in the country and called it a model for peaceful coexistence between different religious groups.

On February 27 the religious advisor organized a session on the concept of dialogue in Islam, attended by the cultural advisor, Arab dignitaries, foreign ambassadors, representatives from the Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian churches, and prominent scholars and academics. The session discussed the Government's policy of moderation and peace and the belief that Islam calls for justice and tolerance of other civilizations and religious groups.

On February 8, during a meeting with the OIC secretary general, Dubai Crown Prince Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum stressed the importance of civilized dialogue between Islamic leadership and non-Islamic leadership, and that human coexistence and communication was the common ground between all religious groups.

On February 7, during a meeting with the OIC secretary general, President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan emphasized the tolerance and moderation of Islam.

On February 4 the minister of higher education received the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem and discussed with him the importance of religious tolerance, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence between nations. That same day, the minister of justice and under secretaries from the Islamic Affairs section received the patriarch and expressed the necessity of dialogue between persons of different religious groups. The patriarch held a church Mass in Dubai on February 3.

In September 2005 the minister of justice met the head of foreign relations at the Evangelical Protestant Church in Germany and discussed religious tolerance. The meeting was attended by the under secretary and assistant under secretary for Islamic affairs.

In 1999 land was designated in the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah for the construction of a new Catholic church, which was completed in 2000. In December 2005 the church was allowed to open with the permission of the Ras al-Khaimah Crown Prince.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Non-Muslim religious leaders from inside and outside of the country regularly referred 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 regarded the country as a Muslim nation that should respect Muslim religious sensibilities on matters such as public consumption of alcohol, modest dress, and public comportment, society also emphasized respect for privacy and Islamic traditions of tolerance, particularly with respect to forms of Christianity. Modest 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 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 holiday foods, decorations, posters, books, and videotapes were widely available. School children gathered in Dubai malls to sing Christmas carols while "department-store Santas" handed out gifts. Reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services, were regularly printed in the media. The largest country carrier, Emirates Airline, brought European tourists to Dubai on "Easter-special sightseeing packages."

Citizens occasionally expressed 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 believed that the best way to balance foreign influence was 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom concerns 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 have 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 under secretary of Islamic affairs on a regular basis to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

On September 11, 2005, the embassy invited the president's Judicial and Religious Affairs advisor to speak at a commemorative event at the embassy where he stressed the nature of Islam as a religion of cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

In October 2005, the embassy brought Imam Yahya Hindi, from Georgetown University, to speak about Islam in the United States, the importance of establishing an interfaith dialogue, and religious tolerance.

In May 2006, the ambassador received both the chair of the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations and the president's judicial and religious affairs advisor at the embassy and discussed religious tolerance and the free practice of religion in the country. The ambassador invited the president's advisor to visit the United States and attend an iftar with the secretary of state during Ramadan.

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 religious groups.

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