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Oman

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2005](#)

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The Sultanate of Oman is a hereditary monarchy with a population of approximately 2.3 million people, ruled by Sultan Qaboos Al Bu Sa'id. In 1996 the Sultan, who acceded to the throne in 1970, issued a royal decree promulgating a "Law of the State," characterizing the country as "Arab" and "Islamic." The law can only be amended by royal decree. The country has no political parties; however, the 83-member Consultative Council (Majlis Al-Shura) is a representative advisory institution whose members in 2003 were elected directly, freely, and fairly by all adult citizens, except military and security personnel. With 59 members appointed by the sultan, the State Council (Majlis Al-Dawla), along with the Consultative Council, forms the bicameral body known as the Council of Oman (Majlis Oman). The civilian authorities maintained effective control of the security forces.

Although the government respected a number of rights, many human rights problems remained. The following human rights problems were reported:

- inability of citizens to change the government
- arbitrary arrest
- arbitrary and incommunicado detention
- restrictions on the exercise of civil liberties-freedom of speech (including academic freedom), the press, assembly, and privacy
- limitations on the right of association, particularly for human rights groups
- restrictions on religious freedom
- discrimination and domestic violence against women
- restrictions on labor rights

The government improved workers' rights with the continued implementation of the 2003 Labor Law. The most significant labor development was the establishment of 25 worker representative committees and the independent election of their leadership. Newly elected committees also exercised their right to strike on at least four occasions.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, and the government generally respected these provisions in practice; however, there were accusations of police employing unnecessary force to disband protestors and of investigative judges threatening physical harm to uncooperative detainees. The government dismissed or demoted police found guilty of using excessive force.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions generally met international standards, and no international human rights observers requested visits during the year. The government permitted visits by local religious groups.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention. There were isolated reports of police arrest and interrogation that constituted incommunicado detention.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Royal Office, whose head holds cabinet status, controls internal and external security and coordinates all intelligence and security policies. Under the Royal Office, the Internal Security Service investigates all matters related to internal security, and the Sultan's Special Force has limited border security and antismuggling responsibility. The Royal Oman Police (ROP), whose head also holds cabinet status, performs regular police duties, provides security at airports, serves as the country's immigration agency, and operates the coast guard. The Ministry of Defense, and in particular the Royal Army of Oman, also has limited domestic security responsibilities. Corruption and impunity were not perceived to be widespread problems. There were no instances in which the police failed to respond to societal violence. The ROP's Directorate General of Inquiries and Criminal Investigation is charged with investigating allegations of police abuse, and its findings are turned over to the Director General of Human Resources for disciplinary action.

Arrest and Detention

The police are not required to obtain warrants prior to making an arrest. Within 48 hours of arrest, the police must either release the accused person or refer the matter to the public prosecution. The public prosecution must then, within 24 hours, either formally arrest or release the person. Authorities must obtain court orders to hold suspects in pretrial detention. Judges may order detentions for 14 days to allow investigation and may grant extensions if necessary. The authorities post the previous week's trial results near the magistrate court building. There was a functioning system of bail.

The police sometimes failed to follow legal procedures. In some instances, police handling of arrests and detentions constituted incommunicado detention. The police did not always inform detainees of the charges against them, nor did they always notify a detainee's family or, in the case of a foreign worker, the worker's sponsor, of the detention. At times notification was made just prior to the detainee's release. Public attorneys were provided to indigent detainees. The police did not always permit attorneys and family members to visit detainees, nor always permit attorneys to be present during questioning of the accused, as provided by law. Judges occasionally interceded to ensure that security officials allowed such visits.

According to Amnesty International (AI), there was one political detainee during the year. On July 12, the government held incommunicado writer and human rights activist Abdullah Al-Riyami on accusations of instigating civil unrest, urging people to change the laws, committing acts prejudicial to public order, encouraging dissent, damaging the unity of the nation, and committing treason for contacting international human rights organizations while expressing views critical of the government. International nongovernmental and human rights organizations criticized the government for his detention. Al-Riyami did not have access to family or a lawyer; police authorities released him on July 20 without filing charges.

Amnesty

On June 9, the sultan pardoned 31 Ibadhi Muslim citizens convicted on May 2 of belonging to a secret organization and plotting to overthrow the government (see section 2.b.). On July 18, the sultan also pardoned 206 citizens and 162 foreigners convicted of various crimes. On November 17, the sultan pardoned an additional 232 citizens and 43 foreigners convicted of crimes.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary; however, the various courts were subordinate to the sultan. The sultan appoints all judges, who serve at his discretion through royal decree. The sultan can act as a court of final appeal and intercede in cases, such as those concerning national security. However, there were no reported instances in which the sultan overturned a decision of the magistrate courts.

The Ministry of Justice administers all courts. The judiciary is composed of magistrate courts and Shari'a courts. The magistrate court system is composed of courts of first instance, courts of appeal, and the Supreme Court. There are 42 courts of first instance located throughout the Sultanate that hear civil, criminal, and commercial cases. A single judge presides over each of these courts, but the eight courts in the largest governorates also have a panel of three judges with jurisdiction over special cases. The six courts of appeal are presided over by three judges. The Supreme Court standardizes legal principles, reviews decisions of lower courts, and monitors judges in their application and interpretation of the law. Any appeals beyond the Supreme Court must be made directly to the sultan, who has the power to pardon or reduce sentences but cannot overturn a court verdict.

Shari'a courts have jurisdiction over matters of family law and personal status, such as divorce and inheritance. Appeals to decisions of Shari'a courts are brought before courts of appeal.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. However, there was one reported case of an individual's lawyer receiving little time to review the case, insufficient access to government-held documents regarding the case, and no opportunity to rebut. According to the defendant, only one relative was allowed in the courtroom, and the proceedings were closed.

The General Prosecutor's Office operates independently within the Ministry of Justice. All felonies are adjudicated at the central magistrate court by a panel whose rulings are final except for those in which the defendant is sentenced to death. The criminal appeals panel is composed of the president and vice-president of the magistrate court, and two judges. This panel hears appeals of rulings made by all courts of first instance.

A royal decree established criminal rules of procedure for criminal cases before the court, providing rules of evidence, procedures for entering cases into the criminal system, and detailing provisions for a public trial. In criminal cases, the police provide defendants with the written charges against them and defendants have the right to present evidence and confront witnesses. The prosecution and the defense question witnesses through the judge in court. The law provides for the presumption of innocence and the right to counsel. For defendants facing prison terms of three years or more, the law provides legal defense. Judges often pronounced the verdict and sentence within one day of the completion of a trial. Those convicted may appeal jail sentences longer than 3 months and fines over the equivalent of \$1,250 (480 rials) to a 3-judge panel.

The administrative court, under the authority of the diwan of royal court, reviews complaints against the misuse of governmental authority. It has the power to reverse decisions made by government bodies and can also award compensation.

The state security court tries cases involving national security and criminal matters that require expeditious or especially sensitive handling. Two royal decrees in 2003 gave the court a legal basis. The security court procedures mirror closely those applicable elsewhere in the criminal system. The sultan has exercised his powers to extend leniency, including cases involving state security.

Ministry and security personnel are subject to a military tribunal system of justice. Military officials were reportedly tried in secret military tribunals for alleged involvement with a secret organization and plotting to overthrow the government. However, all those convicted were released in the month following the trials (see section 1.d.).

Political Prisoners

On July 13, former parliamentarian Taybah Al-Ma'wali received a one-and-a-half year sentence for insulting a public official and using a mobile phone to send allegedly slanderous and libelous text messages, which criticized the government's arrest of Ibadhi activists. The government did not permit access by family during the detention and trial. AI and Reporters Without Borders voiced strong objections to the detention, trial, and conviction. Both domestic and international supporters petitioned the government for the activist's release. On August 7, a court of appeals reduced Al-Ma'wali's sentence to six months in prison.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law provides for broad governmental discretion, which the government utilized in practice.

The law does not require police to obtain search warrants, although the police often obtained them; however, the public prosecutor, not the court, issues them. The government eavesdropped on both oral and written communications, including mobile phones, e-mail, and Internet chat room exchanges (see section 1.e. and 2.a.). Citizens were required to obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior to marry foreigners, except nationals of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and permission was not granted automatically. Marriages to foreigners may lead to denial of entry of the foreign spouse into the country and prevent a legitimate child from claiming citizenship rights.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and of the press "within the limits of the law"; however, the law itself and government practice generally restricted freedom of speech and of the press. The law prohibits criticism of the sultan in any form or medium, or the publishing of "material that leads to public discord, violates the security of the state, or abuses a person's dignity or his rights." The government charged former parliamentarian Taybah Al-Ma'wali with violating the Telecommunications Act based on her mobile phone messages that criticized the government (see section 1.e.).

Journalists and writers generally exercised self-censorship due to fear of government reprisal. Various media companies reportedly refused to publish articles of several journalists. The authorities tolerated some degree of criticism of government officials and agencies, particularly on the Internet; however, such criticism rarely appeared in the mass media, and libel laws and concerns for national security were used as grounds to suppress criticism of government figures and politically objectionable views (see section 1.e.).

Censors enforced the Press and Publication Law, which authorizes the government to censor all domestic and imported publications. Ministry of Information censors may act against any material regarded as politically, culturally, or sexually offensive. Editorials generally were consistent with the government's views, although the authorities tolerated some criticism regarding foreign affairs issues. Citizens were publicly critical of GCC policies, which the country participates in determining.

There were six daily newspapers: three in Arabic and three in English. Arabic language dailies *Al-Watan* and *Shabiba* as well as the English dailies *Times of Oman* and *Oman Tribune* were privately owned. There were 31 state-owned and privately owned magazines published in the country.

The government owned three radio stations and one television station, which generally did not air politically controversial material. In August 2004 the government promulgated a new law allowing private radio and television companies. On October 10, the Ministry of Information approved licenses for one private television station and three private radio stations. Foreign broadcast information was accessible to those with the financial resources to obtain satellite dishes.

Customs officials confiscated videocassette tapes and erased offensive material. Such tapes may or may not have been returned to their owners. Government censorship decisions were changed periodically without any stated reason. The confiscation of books and tapes at the borders from private individuals and restrictions on popular novels reportedly eased.

The appropriate government authority, the police, or a relevant ministry must approve public cultural events. Most organizations avoided controversial issues due to belief that the authorities might not approve their events.

The government's national telecommunications company made Internet access available for a fee to citizens and foreign residents. However, it blocked numerous Web sites that it considered pornographic, politically sensitive, or competitive with local telecommunications services. As use of the Internet for expressing views normally not permitted in other media grew, the government took additional measures to monitor and censor it. The government placed warnings on Web sites that criticism of the sultan or personal criticism of government officials would be censored and could lead to police questioning, which increased self-censorship.

The government restricted academic freedom, particularly regarding publishing or discussing controversial matters, such as domestic politics. Professors could be dismissed if their work exceeded government boundaries; in November one professor was dismissed from

Sultan Qaboos University.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The law provides for a circumscribed freedom of assembly "within the limits of the law," and the government restricted the exercise of this right in practice. Prior government approval was necessary for all public gatherings. The authorities enforced this requirement with rare exceptions, such as demonstrations by teachers protesting the lack of promotions and expatriate workers protesting non-payment of back wages. On May 3, the police used unnecessary physical force to disband a demonstration held in connection with the convictions of 31 Ibadhi Muslims. Dozens of protestors were arrested but reportedly not charged; they were released after several days.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association "for legitimate objectives and in a proper manner." The government limited this freedom in practice, using its ability to prohibit associations whose activities were deemed "inimical to the social order." In January the government denied a request to establish a domestic human rights center (see section 4.). The law states that the Ministry of Social Development must approve the establishment of all organizations and their by-laws; however, some social or charitable groups were allowed to function without formal registration. The government used licensing to control the political environment and did not license groups regarded as a threat to the predominant social and political views or the interests of the country. Associations were not permitted to engage in politics, form parties, or interfere with religious matters (see section 3.). Formal registration of nationality-based associations was limited to a maximum of one association for any nationality.

On May 2, the government convicted 31 Islamists for establishing an illegal organization for the reported purpose of overthrowing the sultan and establishing an *Imamate* (a country governed by a Muslim scholar). Two men received 7-year sentences, one received a 10-year sentence, and the remaining received prison terms ranging from 7-20 years.

During the year nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders received letters from the government threatening sanctions unless their organizations completed a complicated and time-consuming registration process. There was a total of 16 registered NGOs; 3 were registered during the year. The average time required to register an NGO was at least two years.

The Law of National Associations provides for the establishment of associations within the limited spheres of women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and special groups such as economic, consumer protection, and environmental associations. There were 42 government-approved women's associations, some of which received limited government funding or in-kind support, while others were self-funded.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion within the limits of the law; however, the government generally restricted this right in practice. The law provides that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the source of all legislation. Most citizens were Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims, with some Shi'a and a few non-Muslim citizens. The government permits worship by non-Muslim residents. All religious organizations must be registered with the government, and some of their activities were restricted.

Non-Muslims were free to worship at churches and temples built on land donated by the sultan. Although the law does not prohibit proselytizing, the government prohibited non-Muslims from proselytizing Muslims, while proselytizing of non-Muslims by Muslims was allowed. The government also prohibited non-Muslim groups from publishing religious material, although religious material printed abroad could be brought into the country.

Members of all religions and religious groups were free to maintain links with members abroad and undertake foreign travel for religious purposes. Foreign clergy were allowed to visit religious groups.

The government required all imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts distributed monthly by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments. The government monitored mosque sermons to ensure that imams did not discuss political topics or instigate religious hatred or divisions and stayed within the state-approved interpretation of Islam. Imams may be suspended or dismissed for exceeding government boundaries; there were no reported suspensions or dismissals during the year. The government also monitored sermons of non-Muslim clergy.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The government does not officially collect or publish statistical data on the religious affiliation of the population. However, there were no reports of societal violence, harassment, discrimination, or anti-Semitic acts against members of religious groups.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2005 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The law does not provide for these rights; however, the government generally respected these rights in practice. The law prohibits exile, and there were no reported cases during the year.

Protection of Refugees

The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, although the country is not a state party to either the convention or the protocol. In practice the government provided

protection against *refoulement* but did not routinely grant refugee or asylum status. The government did not accept refugees for resettlement during the year.

The law prohibits the extradition of political refugees, and there were no reports of the forced return of persons to a country where they feared persecution. The issue of temporary protection for refugee and asylum-seekers did not arise during the year. Tight control over the entry of foreigners into the country effectively limited refugees and prospective asylum seekers from entering. Illegal immigrants numbering in the thousands, primarily from Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan were apprehended by the ROP and the Armed Forces. The detainees were held in special detention centers until their deportation could be arranged. The government sought advice from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: Citizen's Right to Change Their Government

The law does not provide citizens with the right to change their government. The Sultan retains ultimate authority on all foreign and domestic issues.

Elections and Political Participation

The law does not provide for political parties or direct elections, except for the Consultative Council. Citizens 21 years or older (except military and security personnel) may vote. In 2003 approximately 74 percent of registered voters, or approximately 194 thousand persons, turned out. The government did not allow candidates to advertise or actively campaign for office. A total of 506 candidates, including 15 women, competed in generally free and fair elections for the 83 council seats. Of the 15 female candidates, 2 were elected. In 2003 a royal decree also reappointed the incumbent president of the Consultative Council, although the council elected two vice-presidents from within its membership. The sultan did not influence the nomination of the consultative council candidates.

The Consultative Council serves as a conduit of information between the citizens and the government ministries; however, it has no formal legislative powers. Government ministries or the cabinet author all draft legislation. No serving government official is eligible to be a consultative council member. The Consultative Council may question government ministers in public or in private, review all draft laws on social and economic policy, and recommend new laws or legislative changes to the Sultan, who makes the final decision.

The State Council serves as an advisory body that reviews draft laws proposed by the government, and presents its opinions to the sultan and his ministers in cooperation with the Consultative Council. The State Council president is appointed by royal decree and its two vice-presidents are elected from within its membership. During the year the membership of the State Council increased from 58 to 59 members, and included 9 women. The State Council and the Consultative Council together form the Council of Oman. In 2003 a royal decree extended the term of office to four years for Council of Oman members.

Citizens had indirect access to senior officials through the traditional practice of petitioning their patrons, usually the appointed local governor, for redress of grievances. Successful redress depended on the effectiveness of a patron's access to appropriate decision makers. Decisions of government ministers can be contested in the administrative court.

There were 11 women in the 142-seat Council of Oman. There were 4 female ministers appointed to the 42-member cabinet.

The Council of Oman and the Cabinet of Ministers are composed of representatives from a variety of linguistic, religious, racial, and other backgrounds.

Government Corruption and Transparency

There were isolated reports of government corruption during the year. During the year the International Auditing Bureau reported 31 individuals, including government officials, were accused of bribery, forgery, misuse of job position, and divulging professional secrets. They received various jail sentences and fines.

The law does not provide public access to government information. All royal decrees and ministerial decisions are published in the *Official Gazette* for public access.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The government restricted NGO activity. There were no registered domestic human rights NGOs and no government-controlled or autonomous human rights entities in the country. In January the government denied a request from a human rights activist to establish a domestic human rights center. Activists involved in foreign-registered organizations were subject to the threat of arrest or loss of government employment or scholarships. No association may receive funding from an international group without government approval. Individuals convicted of doing so could receive up to 6 months in jail and a \$1,310 fine (500 rials).

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination against citizens on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, race, language, religion, place of residence, and social class. However, the government did not effectively enforce it. Societal and cultural discrimination based on gender, race, social class, and disability existed.

Women

The law does not specifically address domestic violence against women; however, Shari'a prohibits all forms of physical abuse. There was no evidence of a pattern of spousal abuse, although allegations of such abuse in Shari'a courts were reportedly common. Battered women may file a complaint with the police but often sought family intervention to protect them from violent domestic situations. Likewise, families sought to intervene to keep such problems from public view. Some employers reportedly sexually abused domestic servants. There were no

government programs for abused women.

The law prohibits rape, and the government enforced the law effectively. Approximately 132 persons were convicted of rape during the year.

There is no law prohibiting female genital mutilation (FGM); however, doctors in hospitals were not permitted to perform the procedure. Local women primarily performed FGM in villages. According to a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization study, FGM was broadly socially accepted. The government addressed the issue in its national health planning and allowed the July publication of a feature magazine article discussing the practice and its potential harm to women.

Prostitution was illegal and was not widespread due to strict cultural norms and immigration controls.

While progress has been made in changing laws and attitudes, women continued to face many forms of social discrimination.

Illiteracy among older women hampered their ability to own property, participate in the modern sector of the economy, or inform themselves of their rights. Women may own property. However, government officials applied different standards to female applicants for housing loans, resulting in fewer approvals for women.

Aspects of Islamic law and tradition as interpreted in the country also discriminated against women. Shari'a favors male heirs in adjudicating inheritance claims. Many women were reluctant to take an inheritance dispute to court for fear of alienating the family. Women married to noncitizens may not transmit citizenship to their children.

Women have equal opportunities for education. In addition, female students represented 63 percent of the national undergraduates studying abroad. A 2003 UNICEF report praised the country's achievements in closing the gender gap in education. Educated women have attained positions of authority in government, business, and the media. Approximately 33 percent of all civil servants were women. In both the public and private sectors, women were entitled to maternity leave and equal pay for equal work. The government, the country's largest employer of women, observed such regulations, as did many private sector employers. However, many educated women still faced job discrimination. The Ministry of Social Development is the umbrella ministry for women's affairs. The ministry provided support through the Oman Women's Association and local community development centers.

Children

The government has declared education, health, and general welfare of children a national priority. Primary school education for children, including noncitizen children, was free and universal but not compulsory. In 2003-2004 the ratio of female to male enrollment was equal in primary education. Primary school enrollment was 65 percent. Most children attended school through secondary school. The government provided free health care for all children up to age six. The infant mortality rate continued to decline, and comprehensive immunization rates rose. There were no public reports of violence against children; however, the government called publicly for greater awareness and prevention of child abuse. FGM was performed in some cases on girls aged one to nine years old (see section 5.).

There were no reports of child prostitution. Child labor existed in the informal, subsistence, and family business sectors of the economy; however, it was not a problem in the organized labor market (see section 6.d.).

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit trafficking in persons; however, trafficking crimes are prosecuted under the criminal code and those convicted face three to five years in prison.

While one NGO reported unsubstantiated claims of evidence near the Buraimi Oasis that foreign children were trafficked to the country for training as camel jockeys, the local UNICEF representative concurred with the government's denial that foreign children were trafficked and employed as camel jockeys. According to a December 20 statement from the International Labor Organization, child camel jockeys were no longer an issue in the country.

The government operated a 24-hour hot line to register complaints of potential victims and also worked with foreign governments to prevent trafficking in persons.

Persons with Disabilities

There was no government discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, or in the provision of other state services.

The Ministry of Social Development is responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and it implemented legislation during the year to ensure access to buildings for persons with disabilities. The government actively enforced the law through the construction permit process. The labor law stipulates that enterprises employing more than 50 persons should have at least 2 percent of the jobs reserved for persons with disabilities; however, this regulation was not widely enforced. There was 1 government-sponsored rehabilitation center in the capital area and 17 private rehabilitation centers throughout the country. A few persons with disabilities, including blind persons, worked in government offices. Persons with disabilities generally were not charged for physical therapy and prosthetics.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

While there were no reports of official discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS, societal attitude in the country remained fearful towards persons with the disease. A "Peer Education" pilot project promoted by the Ministry of Health and initiated in the Muscat area attempted to improve awareness and education on the disease among youth. In 2003 a toll-free AIDS hot line was inaugurated, and it fielded two thousand calls per month during the year. The hot line provided information on various sexually transmitted diseases.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. Right of Association

The 2003 labor law provides workers the right to form a representational committee with the goal of taking care of their interests, defending their rights, and representing them in all matters related to their affairs. There is an unofficial estimate that 25 committees representing 9.1 percent of wage-earners in the private sector have been registered since 2004. The provisions of the labor law apply to women and foreign workers. The law does not grant members of the armed forces, public security institutions, employees of the state, and domestic workers the right to form representational committees. Conditions of employment of these categories of workers are covered by the Civil Service Law and individual ministerial decrees.

Although any establishment may vote to elect a representational committee by secret ballot, committee leadership was restricted to employees who can speak and write Arabic. The Ministry of Manpower has final decision on committee registration and required prior notification and copies of agendas for committee meetings. Membership in the administrative body may be terminated if members "commit any act that causes material or moral harm to the committee or the establishment or its workers or the public interest of the Sultanate." In addition, committees may not accept grants from noncitizens and may not travel outside the country in an official capacity without approval from the Ministry of Manpower.

On May 4, the government appointed a Main Representative Committee (MRC), a national-level organization, composed of elected members from the registered committees and represented all workers at international conferences. During the year the MRC worked with the independent committees and the Ministry of Manpower to identify areas of concern and strengthen implementation of the labor law.

b. The Right To Organize and Bargain Collectively

The labor law does not address strikes or explicitly provide for the right to collective bargaining; however, the law details procedures for dispute resolution and removes a 1973 prohibition on strikes. Wages are set through individual contracts as well as sector and expatriate embassy minimum wage requirements. Representative committees are not prohibited from striking or collective bargaining. Although labor unrest was rare, there were four reported strikes during the year, the most significant of which closed the largest seaport for two days.

Domestic employees have the right to end a contract if they prove that employers or family members assaulted them. There were no available statistics on the number of complaints filed by domestic workers at year's end. The law also stipulates that employees should be paid within seven days of the end of each month, receive free food, accommodation, and medical treatment.

Work rules must be approved by the Ministry of Manpower and posted conspicuously in the workplace by employers of 15 or more workers. Government inspectors performed random inspections to enforce implementation of these regulations; there were more than 4,300 inspections in 2004. Similarly, any employer with 50 or more workers must establish a grievance procedure. All employees, including foreign workers, have the right to take disputes to the Labor Welfare Board (LWB) and are encouraged to contact the Ministry of Manpower's 24-hour hot line to report labor abuse or violations. The LWB attempts to mediate disputes between employers and employees. In some cases, worker representatives were able to file collective grievances. If a settlement cannot be reached, the parties may seek recourse in the appropriate courts.

There were no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or bonded labor, including of children, and the government generally enforced this prohibition.

At times foreign workers were reportedly placed in situations amounting to forced labor. Employers sometimes withheld documents that released workers from employment contracts and allowed them to change employers. Without such a letter, a foreign worker must continue to work for his current employer or become technically unemployed, and consequently a candidate for deportation.

Many foreign workers were not aware of their right to take such disputes before the LWB. Others were reluctant to file complaints for fear of retribution from unscrupulous employers. In most cases the LWB released the worker from service without deportation and awarded compensation for time worked under compulsion. In addition to reimbursing the worker's back wages, guilty employers were subject to fines. There were no available statistics on the number of disputes filed or resolutions by year's end.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law specifically prohibits forced or bonded labor by children, and there were no reports that the practice was common.

In 2003 the government raised the minimum age for children to work from 13 to 15. For certain hazardous occupations, the minimum employment age is 18. Children 15 to 18 years of age may be employed but cannot work at night, on weekends, or holidays. The Ministry of Manpower generally enforced the law; however, in practice enforcement often did not extend to some small family businesses that employed underage children, particularly in the agricultural and fishing sectors.

Child labor did not exist in any formal industry. As a cultural practice, Bedouin children participated in camel racing for their families. In August the government raised the minimum age of camel riders from 12 to 18 years, to rise annually by 1 year until the 18-year minimum is achieved in 2009. However, the initial minimum age was set at 14 years during the year.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The Ministry of Manpower issues minimum wage regulations for various categories of workers. The minimum wage for most citizens is

approximately \$260 (100 rials) per month, plus \$52 (20 rials) for transportation and housing. Minimum wage regulations did not apply to a variety of occupations and businesses, including small businesses that employed fewer than five persons, the self-employed, domestic servants, dependent family members working for a family firm, and some categories of manual labor. The minimum wage was insufficient to provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The private sector workweek was 40 to 45 hours and included a rest period from Thursday afternoon through Friday. Government workers have a 35-hour workweek. While the law does not designate the number of days in a workweek, it requires at least one 24-hour rest period per week and mandates overtime pay for hours in excess of 48 per week. Government regulations regarding hours of employment were not always enforced. Employees who worked extra hours without compensation could file a complaint with the LWB; however, the LWB rulings were not binding.

Every worker has the right to 15 days of annual leave during the first year of continual employment and 30 days per year thereafter.

The law states that an employee may remove himself from dangerous work without jeopardy to his continued employment if the employer was alerted to the danger and did not implement corrective measures. All employers were required by law to provide first aid facilities. Employees covered under the Labor Law could recover compensation for job-related injury or illness through employer-provided medical insurance. Inspectors from the Department of Health and Safety of the Directorate of Labor generally enforced the health and safety standard codes. As required by law, they made regular onsite inspections. Companies found guilty of withholding salaries were fined and prohibited from receiving commercial services, such as labor clearances. Such actions resulted in the immediate payment of salaries.

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