Oman

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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The basic law prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the right to practice religious rites on condition that doing so does not disrupt public order and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. It declares that Islam is the state religion and that Sharia (Islamic law) is the basis of legislation.

The government selectively enforced existing legal restrictions on the right to collective worship. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no significant reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government continued to raise concerns regarding the government's reported delays in granting requests by religious groups for meeting spaces. The U.S. embassy maintained relationships with local religious leaders and communities and encouraged interfaith initiatives.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 119,498 square miles and a population of 2.7 million, including close to one million foreigners. The government does not keep statistics on religious affiliation, but almost all citizens are either Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims form a small but well-integrated minority of less than 5 percent of the population, concentrated in the capital area and along the northern coast. Ibadhism, a form of Islam distinct from Shiism and the "orthodox" schools of Sunnism, historically has been the country's dominant religious group, and the sultan is a member of the Ibadhi community.

The majority of non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia, although there are small communities of naturalized ethnic Indians who are mainly Hindus and Christians.

Non-Ibadhi Muslim religious communities are estimated to constitute between 25 and 50 percent of the population and include Sunni and Shia Muslims, and various groups of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahais, and Christians. Christian communities are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah and include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and various Protestant congregations. These groups tend to organize along linguistic and ethnic lines. More than 50 different Christian groups, fellowships, and assemblies are active in the Muscat metropolitan area. There are also three officially-recognized Hindu temples and two Sikh temples in Muscat, as well as additional temples located on worksites where the local religious community is large enough to support them.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards **http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm**.

The basic law protects the right to practice religious rites on condition that doing so does not disrupt public order, and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The basic law declares that Islam is the state religion and that Sharia is the basis of legislation. It also prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The country's civil courts adjudicate cases governed by the Personal Status and Family Legal Code. However, the Code exempts non-Muslims from its provisions in matters pertaining to family or personal status, allowing them to seek adjudication under the religious laws of their faith. Shia Muslims may resolve family and personal status cases according to Shia jurisprudence outside of the courts but retain the right to transfer their case to a civil court if they cannot find a resolution.

The Personal Status and Family Legal Code prohibits a father who commits apostasy from Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children. Apostasy is not a criminal or civil offense.

The government permitted members of non-Muslim communities to maintain links with fellow adherents abroad and undertake foreign travel for religious purposes.

Although the government records religion on birth certificates, it is not printed on other official identity documents.

Officials at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) stated there was no limit on the number of groups that can be registered. New religious groups unaffiliated with one of the recognized communities must gain ministerial approval before being registered. While the government has not published the rules, regulations, or criteria for approval, the ministry generally considered the group's size, theology, belief system, and availability of other worship opportunities before granting approval. The ministry employs similar criteria before granting approval for new Muslim groups to form.

All religious organizations must be registered by MERA. The ministry recognizes the Protestant Church of Oman, the Catholic Diocese of Oman, the al Amana Center (interdenominational Christian), the Hindu Mahajan Temple, and the Anwar al-Ghubaira Trading Company in Muscat (Sikh) as the official sponsors for non-Muslim religious communities. Groups seeking registration must request meeting and worship space from one of these sponsor organizations, which are responsible for recording the group's doctrinal adherence, the names of its leaders, the number of active members, and for submitting this information to the ministry.

Leaders of all religious groups must be registered with MERA. The formal licensing process for imams prohibits unlicensed lay members from leading prayers in mosques. Lay members of non-Muslim communities may lead worship if they are specified as leaders in their group's registration application.

The government funds the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but not Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders.

Citizens have the right to sue the government for violations of the right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order; however, this right has never been exercised in court.

Public proselytization by all religious groups is prohibited by law, although the government allows all religious groups to proselytize privately within legally registered houses of worship and Islamic propagation centers.

Non-Muslim communities are allowed to practice their beliefs without interference only on land specifically donated by the sultan for the purpose of collective worship. In 2006 the MERA issued a legally-binding circular to non-Muslim religious leaders and diplomatic missions reaffirming an individual's right to practice his or her own religious activities according to his or her values, customs, and traditions. The circular also states that gatherings of a religious nature are not allowed in private homes or in any location other than government-approved houses of worship; however, the government did not actively enforce the prohibition.

The construction and/or leasing of buildings by religious groups must be approved and/or built on land donated by the government. In addition, mosques must be built at least one kilometer (0.6 mile) apart.

The penal code prescribes a prison sentence and fine for anyone who publicly blasphemes God or His prophets, commits an affront to religious groups by spoken or written word, or breaches the peace of a lawful religious gathering.

Women are permitted to wear the hijab (Islamic head scarf) in official photographs but not the niqab (Islamic veil that covers the face).

MERA requires groups to obtain approval before issuing religious publications outside their membership; this regulation does not differ from the requirement for government approval of any publication in the country. Religious groups are requested to notify MERA prior to importing religious materials and to submit a copy for the MERA files; however, the ministry does not review all imported religious material for approval.

The ministry also prohibits foreigners on tourist visas from preaching, teaching, or leading worship. The government permitted clergy from abroad to enter the country to teach or lead worship under the sponsorship of registered religious organizations, which must apply to MERA for approval at least one week in advance of the visiting clergy's entry.

Islamic studies are required for Muslim students in public school grades K-12. Non-Muslim students are exempt from this requirement, and many private schools provide alternative religious studies.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Adha, Islamic New Year (Hijra), the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet's Ascension, and Eid al-Fitr.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government respected religious freedom in law and in practice with some limitations. The government selectively enforced existing legal restrictions on the right to collective worship.

The Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) applied for official recognition in November 2009, but their application was still pending at the end of the reporting period.

During the reporting period, an additional Hindu temple and Sikh gurdwara were approved.

Gatherings of a religious nature are not allowed in private homes or any other location except government-approved houses of worship; however, MERA enforced the prohibition on group worship in unsanctioned locations only when it

received complaints. Generally churches and temples voluntarily abided by this restriction, providing space on their compounds for worship; however, the lack of space in the locations sanctioned by the government for collective worship continued to limit the number of groups that could practice their religions.

The government permitted private groups to promote and engage in interfaith dialogue.

MERA monitored sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. The government required all imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts distributed monthly by the ministry.

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

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The government took several steps to promote tolerance and interfaith understanding, most notably through its relationship with Cambridge University. The sultan continued to support an endowed professorship: His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Professorship of Abrahamic Faiths. MERA officials met with a delegation of Protestant religious figures that included meeting with high level officials in MERA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The government, through MERA, continued to publish Al Tasamoh (Tolerance), a periodical devoted to broadening dialogue within Islam and promoting respectful discussion of differences with other faiths and cultures that includes articles by Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu religious scholars. MERA produced a documentary entitled "Religious Tolerance in Oman," showcasing the breadth of religious experience in the country by showing how, in its history and to this day, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and other religious communities have coexisted peacefully.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no significant reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

A local interfaith group focusing on improving Muslim-Christian understanding regularly sponsored exchange programs for leaders of both faiths, hosted scholars-in-residence, and worked closely with MERA on many of their projects.

Both state-owned and private papers expanded coverage of religious issues, positively addressing interfaith dialogue and encouraging tolerance among sects of Islam and between Islam and other faiths.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy continued to raise its concern with MERA about space limitations created by the government's prohibition of group worship in private homes and encouraged the government to grant the requests of any religious group that requested approval for a meeting location. The embassy also worked closely with MERA to promote interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue and met regularly with representatives of both Muslim and non-Muslim groups to discuss religious freedom concerns.

The ambassador established relationships with leaders of religious communities in the country. Senior embassy staff maintained good working relationships with religious government entities, leaders of religious organizations, and interfaith groups.

Back to Top