



## Oman

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for the freedom to practice religious rites as long as doing so does not disrupt public order; in accordance with tradition, it declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the basis of legislation. Government policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion, but within defined parameters that placed some limitations on the right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period; however, the Government did lift previously imposed limitations on the number of religious workers in the country and shortened the process for granting permission to religious leaders to enter the country from two months to one week.

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

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 119,498 square miles and a population of 3.3 million, of whom 2.4 million are citizens. The Government does not keep statistics on religious affiliation, but almost all citizens are either Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims, with Shi'a Muslims forming 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 Shi'ism 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 noncitizen immigrant workers from South Asia, although there are small communities of ethnic Indians (Hindus and Christians) who have been naturalized.

Non-Muslim religious communities, made up primarily of expatriate workers, individually constitute less than 5 percent of the population and include various groups of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha'is, 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 fifty different Christian groups, fellowships, and assemblies are active in the Muscat metropolitan area. There are two Hindu temples and one Sikh temple in Muscat, as well as additional temples located on worksites, where the religious community located there is large enough to support them.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Basic Law provides for the freedom to practice religious rites as long as doing so does not disrupt public order; in accordance with tradition, it declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the basis of legislation. It also prohibits discrimination based on religion.

Apostasy is not a criminal offense under the law. Citizens who convert from Islam to another religion, however, may face problems under the Personal Status and Family Legal Code, which specifically prohibits a father who leaves Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children; however, this law has not been tested in practice. The law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing, but the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) could stop individuals or groups from engaging in it if the Ministry received complaints.

Non-Muslim communities are allowed to practice their beliefs without interference on land specifically donated by the Sultan for the purpose of collective worship.

In 2006 MERA issued a 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 informs them that gatherings of a religious nature are not allowed in private homes or any other location except government-approved houses of worship; however, the Government did not actively enforce the prohibition. The circular, which formalized existing but previously unwritten government policy, also requires groups to obtain approval from MERA before issuing religious publications outside their membership; this regulation does not differ from the requirement for government approval of any publication in Oman. Religious groups are requested to notify MERA prior to importing religious materials and submit a copy for the MERA files; however, the Ministry does not review all imported religious material for approval.

Citizens have the right to sue the Government for violation of the Basic Law granting them religious freedom; however, this right has never been tested in court.

Article 209 of 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; this article could be used to limit religious expression. However, there were no reports of any prosecutions under this statute during the reporting period.

Laws governing family and personal status are adjudicated by the country's civil courts, according to the Personal Status and Family Legal Code, which is based on principles of Shari'a. Article 282 of the code exempts non-Muslims from the code's provisions, allowing them to follow their own religious rules pertaining to family or personal status. Shi'a Muslims may resolve family and personal status cases according to Shi'a jurisprudence outside of the courts, but retain the right to transfer their case to a civil court if they cannot find a resolution.

The Government funds the salary for some Ibadhi and Sunni Imams.

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.

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-Islamic 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, and the number of active members, and for submitting this information to the Ministry. Members of non-Islamic communities were free to maintain links with fellow adherents abroad and undertake foreign travel for religious

purposes. 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.

Officials at MERA state there is no limit on the number of groups that can be registered. New religious groups unaffiliated with one of the main communities must gain ministerial approval before being registered. While the Government has not published the rules, regulations, or criteria for approval, the Ministry generally considers the group's size, theology or 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. According to government regulations, mosques must be built at least 1 kilometer (two-thirds of a mile) apart and only on government-owned land.

Leaders of all religious groups must be registered with MERA. The Ministry has a formal licensing process for imams, and unlicensed lay members are prohibited from leading prayers in mosques. Lay members of non-Islamic communities may lead worship if they are specified as leaders in their group's registration application. Foreigners on tourist visas are prohibited from preaching, teaching, or leading worship.

Islam is taught from a cultural and historical perspective in public and private schools, and 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 provided alternate religious studies instruction.

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

Women are permitted to wear the hijab in official photographs; however, full veils are not allowed.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

Buddhists requested permission to hold worship meetings, and MERA granted this permission. However, by the end of the reporting period, they were not able to find a corporate sponsor to provide facilities, and the Government had not yet granted them land.

The 2006 MERA-issued circular stated that gatherings of a religious nature are not allowed in private homes or any other location except government-approved houses of worship. This limited the ability of some adherents who were physically distant from officially sanctioned locations or who lacked reliable transportation to practice their religion collectively or engage in communal religious rites. MERA enforced the prohibition on group worship in unsanctioned locations only when it received complaints. On the whole, churches and temples voluntarily abided by the 2006 circular, providing space on their compounds for worship; however, the lack of space in the locations sanctioned by the Government for collective worship effectively limited the number of groups that could operate.

Private groups that promote interfaith dialogue were permitted to exist, as long as the discussions were not an attempt to cause Muslims to recant their Islamic beliefs.

On December 7, 2008, the Government issued a circular stating that the country would celebrate Eid Al-Adha on December 9 and informed all citizens that anyone who prayed on a different date would be subject to legal action.

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

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 return to the United States.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, MERA lifted the restriction on the number of religious leaders allowed to enter the country on "church visas." Further, it reduced the amount of time to obtain permission to enter from two months to one week.

The Government, through MERA, publishes *Al Tasamoh* ("Tolerance"), a periodical devoted to broadening the dialogue within Islam and promoting respectful discussion of differences with other faiths and cultures.

The Government sponsored forums for examining differing interpretations of Islam, Christian views, and philosophical approaches that are not tied to a specific religion. Government-sponsored interfaith dialogues took place on a regular basis. During the reporting period, MERA hosted several Christian and Muslim scholars and lecturers of various schools of thought to discuss interfaith relations and tolerance in Islamic traditions, including a Christian professor from Cambridge who addressed the topic "Seeking Muslim, Christian, and Jewish wisdom in the 21st century," related to the "Common Word," a worldwide interfaith initiative.

The Institute for Shari'a Sciences (home to a bachelor's program in which many religious leaders are educated) also hosts speakers on similar themes in the Grand Mosque series. Occasionally, the Institute hosts non-Muslim students from foreign institutions for extended periods to perform in-depth research on Islam.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Discrimination was largely absent.

Anti-Semitism was present in the reporting period in the private media, with anti-Semitic editorial cartoons depicting stereotypical and negative images of Jews, along with Jewish symbols. These expressions occurred primarily in the privately owned daily newspaper *Al-Watan*. A senior columnist at privately owned sister papers *The Times of Oman/Al-Shabiba* on several occasions attacked Israeli actions and policies in anti-Semitic tones, including citations of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

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 have increasingly broadened 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. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy continued to raise its concern with MERA about space limitations created

by the 2006 circular prohibiting group worship in private homes and encouraged the Government to ensure all groups that wished to meet had a location available for religious practices. The Embassy also worked closely with MERA to promote interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue. Embassy officials also met regularly with representatives of Islamic and non-Islamic groups to discuss religious freedom concerns.