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Qatar

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship, within limits based on public order and morality concerns. The law forbids discrimination based on religion. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and restricts public worship. The state religion is Islam, and Sharia (Islamic law) is a main source of legislation.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice, although some groups had difficulty formally registering with the government as required for all organizations. The government continued to monitor peaceful religious expression via the Internet. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims practice freely. Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist practitioners generally worshipped in private locations without government or societal harassment, but there were restrictions on public worship. Converting to another religion from Islam was considered apostasy and technically a capital offense, although there has been no recorded punishment for such an act since the country gained independence in 1971.

There were few 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 4,254 square miles and a population of more than 1.7 million, of whom approximately 225,000 are citizens and nationals. Of the citizen population, Sunni Muslims constitute the vast majority, while Shia Muslims account for less than 5 percent.

Most noncitizens were from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Near Eastern countries. Most were in the country on temporary employment contracts; relatively few were accompanied by family members. Most noncitizens are Sunni or

Shia Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or Buddhists. Nearly all foreign workers and their families lived near the major employment centers of Doha, al-Khor, Mesayid, and Dukhan.

While the government does not release figures regarding religious affiliation, some membership estimates for noncitizens available from Christian community groups are as follows: Roman Catholics (200,000), Anglicans (20,000 to 25,000), and Egyptian Copts (3,000). There is no estimate for the small Greek and other Eastern Orthodox population. The Hindu community is almost exclusively from India and Nepal and estimated at more than 450,000, while Buddhists are from South, Southeast, and East Asia and are estimated at 100,000. There are an estimated 100 Bahais of Iranian origin, some of whom are nationals of the country.

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 constitution and laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship, within limits based on public order and morality concerns. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and places restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam, and Sharia (Islamic law) is a main source of legislation.

Converting to another religion from Islam is considered apostasy and technically a capital offense; however, since the country gained independence in 1971, there has been no recorded punishment for such an act.

The government and ruling family are strongly linked to Islam. All members of the ruling family and virtually all citizens are Muslim. Most high-level government positions are reserved for citizens, and thus most government officials are Muslims. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs controlled the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic education for adults and new converts. The emir participated in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally financed the Hajj for citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who could not otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

According to the criminal code, individuals caught proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam may be sentenced to a prison term of up to 10 years. Proselytizing on one's own accord for any religion other than Islam can result in a sentence of up to five years. Individuals who possessed written or recorded materials or items that supported or promoted missionary activity can be imprisoned for up to two years and fined 10,000 Qatari riyals (\$2,746). However, the government has not convicted anyone for proselytizing since the law's 1973 inception. In practice, individuals or groups caught proselytizing are deported without legal proceedings.

Both Muslims and non-Muslims are tried under a unified civil court system. National law incorporates both secular legal traditions and Sharia (Islamic law), with the exception of a separate limited dispute resolution system for financial service companies managed under the Qatar Financial Center. The unified court system applies Islamic law in family law cases--inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody. In these proceedings, the testimony of men can be weighted more than women's testimony on certain matters. There were also certain criminal cases, such as adultery and drunkenness, in which Muslims were tried and punished under Islamic law. In matters involving religious issues, Shia and Sunni judges have some discretion to apply their interpretations for their respective groups.

Convicted Muslims may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Qur'an while imprisoned. In 2005 a judicial panel for Shia Muslims was established in the courts. The panel decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other domestic matters. In other religious matters, the country's family law applies across branches of Islam.

The government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of all religious books and materials. However, in practice, individuals and religious institutions were not prevented from importing holy books and other religious items for personal or congregational use.

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Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for legal recognition. The government maintained an official register of approved major Christian denominations and has granted legal status to the Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, and Indian Christian churches. To be recognized, any denomination must have at least 1,500 members in the country. The MFA also requires smaller congregations to affiliate and worship under the patronage of one of the six recognized churches, all of which are centrally located in Mesaymir on the outskirts of Doha. While several evangelical Christian congregations were not legally recognized because they individually lacked the required membership, some organized worship and were provided physical security for their congregations by the Ministry of Interior when required. Other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Bahai Faith, were not legally recognized, although adherents were permitted to worship privately in their homes or with others.

The government announced the formation of a permanent intergovernmental committee, led by the MFA, to address issues concerning non-Muslim religious groups, including legal incorporation and sponsorship of religious leaders. The MFA placed the issue of starting the intergovernmental committee under the office of the assistant minister for follow-up affairs in April 2009. The assistant minister has managed church affairs since that time without the establishment of a formal committee. Smaller non-Muslim religious groups continue to face difficulties in receiving assistance and guidance in the registration process. This has made it difficult and cumbersome for smaller faiths that sought recognition or to conduct financial activity in the name of their churches.

Islamic instruction is compulsory for Muslims attending state-sponsored schools. While there were no restrictions on non-Muslims providing private religious instruction for children, most foreign children attended secular private schools. Muslim children were allowed to go to secular and coeducational private schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally enforced legal and policy protections of religious freedom. Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped with limited government interference, although there were restrictions.

The registration process for new religious groups continued to be cumbersome. The main obstacle to registration for faiths with fewer members is lack of government support. The MFA's office of the assistant minister for follow-up affairs maintains the religion portfolio, but religious leaders complained that it was difficult to make appointments and found the overall registration process inconsistent and confusing.

Christian group worship was permitted among the six registered Christian denominations at a government-provided area in Mesaymir. Unregistered churches and congregations were required to worship under the patronage of one of the six legally recognized and registered Christian denominations and as a subgroup of that particular church. For example, Protestant congregations would be required to register as a denomination of the Anglican Church. Government regulations for denomination and congregation registration are established in the Foreign Ministry but have not been fully codified in legislation. There are some restrictions on the number and type of bank accounts churches can hold, and there are reporting requirements for contractors who do business with the churches, as well as for donors who support them. Reflecting the government's approach to the registration of foreign businesses, MFA officials stated that smaller congregations not meeting the threshold of 1,500 registered congregants would require an endorsement from the Council

of Churches consisting of the representatives of the six registered denominations in Mesaymir before being officially registered.

Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and other religious groups do not have authorized facilities in which to practice their religions. The government generally considered members of these religious groups as transient members of the community not requiring permanent religious facilities or clergy; however, worship by these groups in private homes and workplaces was allowed and took place in practice .

The government placed limits on the length of Friday sermons at mosques. The government also previewed the sermons for inflammatory religious or ethnic language that might incite listeners to violence. The government may take judicial action against individuals and facilities when these standards are not met, but has not done so in the recent past, primarily because clerics adhere to these standards.

The government reviewed and infrequently censored foreign newspapers and magazines for objectionable religious content, such as the Danish caricature of the Prophet Muhammad.

The government restricted the peaceful expression of religious views via the Internet and at times censored the Internet for religious content through a proxy server, which monitored and blocked Web sites, e-mail, and chat rooms through the state-owned Internet service provider. For example, the government blocks sites/postings that call for violence against other religious groups in the country, or that support violent religious extremists, or Christian proselytizers.

The government prohibited Christian congregations from advertising religious services or using religious symbols visible to the public, such as outdoor crosses.

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

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In October the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) organized the eighth Annual Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue with the theme "Raising the New Generation with a Foundation of Values and Traditions." The three-day event attracted top world religious personalities representing three major religions--Islam, Christianity, and Judaism--and focused on the role of family, media, and education in raising the younger generation.

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

There were few reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. There were few manifestations of religious discrimination. While discrimination occurred against foreigners in employment, education, housing, and health services, nationality, rather than religion, was usually the determining factor. There were some examples of anti-Semitism in the media.

Privately owned newspapers occasionally carried editorials and cartoons, which stereotyped Israeli leaders, sometimes comparing Israelis to Nazis, and occasionally stereotyped Jews. These occurred primarily in the Arabic daily newspapers, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Sharq*, and *Al-Raya*. The government did not respond to these publications.

For the fifth consecutive year, Sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi, Chairman of the International Association of Muslim Scholars and one of the most prominent Sunni clerics in the world, boycotted the DICID, saying he opposed discourse with Jews except anti-Zionist Jews. A statement from al-Qaradawi's office said he took part in the first three conferences at which strictly Muslims and Christians were in attendance, but he refused to attend when Jews began participating, citing the Palestinian conflict.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the government and coordinated initiatives with other foreign embassies to increase their effect.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of religious communities to discuss religious freedom issues, including protection of the interests of minority congregations. The embassy brought these concerns to the attention of appropriate officials.

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