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Qatar

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and private 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.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims practice Islam freely. Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist practitioners generally worshipped in private locations without government or societal harassment but there were restrictions on public worship.

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and the senior leadership of the country continued its support for advancing religious freedom.

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 Shi'a 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 Shi'a 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 (80,000 to 100,000), 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 estimated at more than 100,000, while Buddhists are from South, Southeast, and East Asia and are estimated at 300,000-350,000. There are an estimated 100 Baha'is of Iranian origin, some of whom are nationals of the country.

Section II. Status of government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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 placed restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam.

Converting to another religion from Islam was 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 were strongly linked to Islam. Non-Muslims, however, served in government posts. 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 could be imprisoned for up to two years. However, the government has not convicted anyone for proselytizing since the law's 1973 inception.

Both Muslims and non-Muslims are tried under a unified court system, incorporating both secular law and Islamic law (Shari'a), with the exception of a separate limited dispute resolution system for financial service companies managed under the Qatar Financial Center. Separate Islamic courts were legally abolished in 2003, although Islamic law is still applied in certain cases. Most notable are cases of inheritance and the rules surrounding court testimony. There were also certain criminal cases, such as adultery and drunkenness, in which Muslims were tried and punished under Islamic law; however, all proceedings were conducted in the same unified court system. In matters involving religious issues, Shi'a and Sunni judges may apply their interpretations for their respective groups.

Convicted Muslims may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Qur'an. Litigants in civil cases may request that Islamic law courts assume jurisdiction in dispute resolution and other civil matters. In 2005 a judicial panel for Shi'a 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 observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

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.

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, other Eastern 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, outside 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 (MOI) when required. Other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Baha'ism, were not legally recognized, although adherents were permitted to worship privately in their homes or with others.

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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, but the committee had not met by the end of the reporting period. Smaller non-Muslim religious groups continue to face difficulties in receiving assistance and guidance in the registration process. This has made it difficult and quite cumbersome for smaller faiths that sought recognition or to perform financial activity in the name of their church.

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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped without government interference, although there were restrictions.

The registration process has continued to be cumbersome. During the reporting period, no religious groups successfully completed the process, although there were many attempts. The main obstacle to registration for smaller faiths 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.

According to both senior MOI and MFA officials, there continued to be no restrictions on individual and small group worship in places of residence and other designated areas within the scope of laws on public safety, congestion, neighborhood impact, and other matters. This permission extended to all religious groups.

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.

Christian group worship was permitted among the six registered Christian denominations at a government-provided area in Mesaymir. In May 2009 MFA officials stated that unregistered churches and congregations were required to perform group 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 have been in the process of being codified since late 2008. 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.

The government reviewed and infrequently censored foreign newspapers and magazines for objectionable religious political content.

The government restricted the peaceful expression of 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.

The government prohibited Christian congregations from advertising religious services or using religious symbols visible to the public, such as outdoor crosses; the government stated, however, that this was done to protect the congregations from attack by Muslim extremists.

Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, 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.

In June 2010, an Irish woman was sentenced to seven years in prison following her conviction for insulting the Qur'an in a September 2009 incident in the women's mosque at the Doha International Airport. Government authorities claimed that the woman entered the mosque wearing indecent clothing, took a copy of the Qur'an, and threw it on the ground. The woman denied the charge and claimed that the Qur'an fell from her hands by accident. The court further ruled that the woman should leave the country following her punishment.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In June 2010 the emir approved the establishment of the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialog (DICID). The center was established with an initial contribution of \$8.2 million (32 million Qatari riyals), and will address the issues and problems of concern to humanity and seek to promote a culture of peaceful coexistence. In March 2010 prior to its official approval, DICID held an interfaith roundtable attended by a number of minority religious groups in the country. Further, DICID organized a lecture on the relationship between Islamic civilization and Europe in June 2010.

Construction on the Indian Interdenominational Christian Church at the "Church City" complex in Mesaymir, outside Doha, was completed in 2009, and the complex was inaugurated in March. The building was expected to house places of worship for 28 Indian Christian denominations. Construction continued on the separate Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Syrian Christian churches at the Mesaymir complex in accordance with a 2005 agreement between the government and Christian representatives. Individual churches within the Indian Interdenominational Christian Church, which began services during the reporting period, included the Mar Thoma Syrian church in June, the Saint Thomas Syro-Malabar church, and the Pentecostal church in May. In 2008 a Roman Catholic Church opened for services, becoming the first church built in Doha.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders, including the emir, took positive steps to promote religious freedom. Religious discrimination was largely absent. While discrimination occurred against foreigners in employment, education, housing, and health services, nationality, rather than religion, was usually the determining factor. However, there were frequent reports of anti-Semitism by the media.

Frequently specific privately owned newspapers 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 incidents drew no government response.

During a sermon broadcast on Qatari television in October 2009, Sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi denounced the interfaith dialogue conferences at DICID. Qaradawi commented that other religions did not respect Islam and that interfaith conferences were pointless if other faiths do not accept Islam as divinely inspired.

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. The embassy facilitated the participation of several minority religious leaders in the DICID roundtable held in March 2010.

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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