



Qatar

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution and various laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship, so long as these freedoms are exercised in a manner consistent with requirements and standards of public order and morality. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and places restrictions on 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. Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped without government interference, although there were restrictions. In May 2009, the Government issued a number of deportation orders to a multinational group of Christian expatriates for their involvement in unauthorized organized charity activities at labor camps in the industrial areas. All these deportation orders were later rescinded, allowing those affected to continue living in the country. However, deportation orders for two Indian Christians, possibly in connection with religious activities, were still being processed at the end of the reporting period. There were also reports of deportations of 40 Hindu families and a number of Christians in 2008, although the exact reasons for the deportations or links to religious worship were not substantiated. However, the Government took steps to allow for increased religious expression during the reporting period, as the Indian Inter-Denominational Christian Church complex at Mesaimeer (offering Protestant and Catholic services) was inaugurated, and construction continued on four additional church facilities within the complex.

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent government leaders, including the Amir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the Heir Apparent Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Amir's second wife and consort wife Shaykha Muza Al-Misnad, and Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor al-Thani took positive steps to promote religious freedom in the country.

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 1.9 million, of whom 250,000 are citizens and nationals. Of the citizen population, Sunni Muslims constitute the vast majority, while Shi'a Muslims account for less than 5 percent. There are fewer than 500 Baha'i and Christian citizens.

The majority of noncitizens are from South and Southeast Asia and Arab countries and are in the country on temporary employment contracts, in some cases accompanied by family members. Most noncitizens are Sunni or Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or Buddhists. Most foreign workers and their families live near the major employment centers of Doha, Al Khor, Mesaieed, 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 (80,000-100,000), Anglicans (10,000-15,000), Egyptian Copts (3,000), and Greek and other Eastern Orthodox (no estimate available).

The Hindu community is almost exclusively from India (estimated at more than 100,000), while Buddhists come from South, Southeast, and East Asia, and are estimated at more than 150,000-200,000. There are an estimated 500 Baha'is of Iranian origin, some of whom are Qatari nationals.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution and various laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship, so long as these freedoms are exercised in a manner consistent with requirements and standards of public order and morality. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and places restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam.

The Government and ruling family are strongly linked to Islam. Non-Muslims, however, serve in government posts. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs controls the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic education for adults and new converts. The Amir participates in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally finances the Hajj for citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who cannot otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

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

The Government observes the Islamic holy days of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as national holidays.

Both Muslims and non-Muslims are tried under a unified court system, incorporating both secular law and Shari'a (Islamic law), with the exception of a separate limited dispute resolution system for financial service companies managed under the Qatar Financial Center. Separate Shari'a courts were abolished in 2003 following issuance of law number 10 of 2003, although Shari'a is still applied in certain cases. Most notable among these are cases of inheritance and the rules surrounding court testimony. There are also certain types of criminal cases, such as adultery and drunkenness, in which Muslims are tried and punished under Shari'a; however, all proceedings are conducted in the same unified court system.

Convicted Muslims may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Qur'an. Litigants in civil cases may request that Shari'a 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.

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 possess written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity can be imprisoned for up to two years. However, there have been no recorded convictions for proselytizing since the law's 1973 inception following independence.

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for legal recognition. The Government maintains an official register of approved major Christian denominations and has granted legal status to the Catholic, Anglican, Greek and 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 centrally located in Mesaimeer, outside Doha. While several evangelical Christian congregations are not legally recognized because they individually lack the required membership, some organize worship and are provided physical security for their congregations by

the Ministry of Interior (MOI) when required. Other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Baha'ism, are not legally recognized, although adherents are permitted to worship privately in their homes or with others.

The Government continued to form and implement a permanent intergovernmental committee, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), to address issues concerning non-Muslim religious groups, including legal incorporation and sponsorship of religious leaders. The committee was not operational by the end of the reporting period; however, in April 2009, the MFA raised the status of the portfolio and placed the issue under the office of the Assistant Minister for Follow-up Affairs, the third ranking official at the MFA.

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 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped without government interference, although there were restrictions. In May, the Government issued a number of deportation orders to a multinational group of Christian expatriates for their involvement in unauthorized organized charity activities at labor camps in industrial areas. All of the deportation orders were later rescinded, allowing those affected to continue living in the country. However, deportation orders for two Indian Christians, possibly initiated in connection with religious activities, were still being processed at the end of the reporting period.

Christian group worship was permitted among the six registered Christian denominations at a Government-provided area in Mesaimeer. In May 2009, MFA officials stated that unregistered churches and congregations are 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. While government regulations for denomination and congregation registration were still in the process of being codified, MFA officials stated that smaller congregations not meeting the threshold of 1,500 registered congregants, would require an endorsement from the council of churches, made up of the representatives of the six registered denominations in Mesaimeer, before being officially registered.

However, according to both senior Ministry of Interior and MFA officials, there continue to be no restrictions placed on individual and small group worship in places of residence and other designated areas within the scope of public laws on public safety, congestion, neighborhood impact, and other matters. This permission extends to all religious groups.

In February 2009, the Doha Criminal Court sentenced a Christian Lebanese expatriate to three years in prison and eventual deportation for blasphemy. The incident was brought to the attention of authorities by two non-Qatari Muslim men working for the Lebanese national, who alleged he insulted God during a dispute over attendance. Also in 2009, six Lebanese mechanics were sentenced to three years imprisonment each and subsequent deportation for "uttering blasphemous words."

The Government prohibited Christian congregations from advertising religious services or using religious symbols visible to the public, such as outdoor crosses; the Government has 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 considers 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 is allowed.

While discrimination occurred against expatriates in the areas of employment, education, housing, and health services, nationality, rather than religion, was usually the determining factor.

The Government places limits on the length of Friday sermons at mosques. The Government also previews 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.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners 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 be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In May 2009, several public Sri Lankan Buddhist Vesak celebrations took place. In addition, throughout the year, several public Hindu celebrations were attended by thousands of followers.

Construction on the Indian Inter-Denominational Christian Church at Church City complex in Mesaimmer, outside Doha, was completed in 2009, and the complex was inaugurated in March. The complex is expected to house places of worship for 28 Indian denominations. Construction continued on the separate Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Syrian Christian churches at the Mesaimmer complex in accordance with an agreement signed by the Government and Christian representatives in May 2005. Individual churches within the Indian Inter-Denominational Christian Church that began services during the reporting period included the Mar Thoma Syrian church in June as well as the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar church and the Pentecostal church building 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 Amir, took positive steps to promote religious freedom. Discrimination was largely absent; however, there were a few reports of anti-Semitism in the media.

On occasion, in response to political events and developments in the region, some privately owned newspapers carried editorials and cartoons depicting caricatures of Jews and Jewish symbols that compared Israeli leaders and Israel to Hitler and the Nazis. These occurred primarily in the Arabic daily newspapers, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Sharq*, and *Al-Raya*, and drew no government response.

On January 9, 2009, Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi, in an angry response to Israeli attacks on Gaza, delivered strongly worded anti-Semitic remarks. The remarks were also broadcast on the Doha-based Al Jazeera Arabic channel.

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 impact.

U.S. embassy officials also met 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 the National Human Rights Committee and other appropriate officials in the Government.