



Brunei

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution states, "The religion of Brunei Darussalam shall be the Muslim religion according to the Shafi'i sect of that religion: Provided that all other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony by the person professing them in any part of Brunei Darussalam." However, the Government imposed many restrictions on non-Shafi'i and non-Islamic religious practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. Practitioners of non-Muslim faiths are not allowed to proselytize. All private schools offer voluntary Islamic instruction to Muslim students, and all post-secondary students are required to attend courses on the national Malay Muslim Monarchy ideology. Schools are not allowed to teach Christianity. The Government uses a range of municipal and planning laws and other legislation to restrict the expansion of religions other than official Islam.

The Government sponsored a multi-faith delegation to the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue in Cyprus in July 2006.

The country's various religious groups coexisted peacefully. The law discourages Muslims from learning about other faiths. At the same time, Islamic authorities organize a range of activities to explain and propagate Islam, as well as offering financial incentives and housing. The Government also funds construction of mosques.

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy supported religious freedom through a number of programs, including the Fulbright exchange program, visits to places of worship, and dialogue with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 2,200 square miles and a population of 380,000. According to government statistics of citizens, there are 171,892 Muslims, 8,901 Buddhists, 3,530 Christians, 372 Catholics, 32 Baha'i, 131 Hindus, 23 Atheists, 22 Taoists, 18 Sikhs, 17 Jews, and 3 Nasrani; as well as 32 individuals of other faiths and 7,884 who did not state their faith. Among permanent residents, according to the same statistics, there are 13,911 Muslims, 9,088 Buddhists, 3,088 Christians, 322 Catholics, 40 Baha'i, 99 Hindus, 11 Atheists, 18 Taoists, 15 Sikhs, 13 Jews, and 2 Nasrani, as well as 31 of other faiths and 6,910 who did not state their faith. These statistics did not cover a large expatriate population of temporary residents that included Muslims, Christians, and Hindus.

There are 109 mosques and prayer halls, 7 Christian churches, 3 Chinese temples, and 2 Hindu temples officially registered in the country.

Proselytizing by faiths other than the officially sanctioned branch of Islam is not permitted. There are no missionaries reported working in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution states, "The religion of Brunei Darussalam shall be the Muslim religion according to the Shafi'i sect of that religion: Provided that all other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony by the person professing them in any part of Brunei Darussalam." However, the Government imposes many restrictions on non-Islamic religions and non-Shafi'i practitioners.

The Government describes the country as a Malay Islamic Monarchy and actively promotes adherence by its Muslim

residents to Islamic values and traditions. The Ministry of Religious Affairs deals solely with Islam and Islamic laws, which exist alongside secular laws and apply only to Muslims.

The Societies Order of 2005 compels all organizations, including any religious group that is a non-Sunni Shafi'i sect of Islam, to register. The order also requires organizations to name all members. An organization that fails to register can face charges of unlawful assembly and be fined. Individuals who participate in or influence others to join unregistered organizations can be fined, arrested, and imprisoned. Approval to register is at the discretion of the Registrar of Societies (who is also the Commissioner of Police) and may be refused for any reason. There were no reports of religiously motivated refusal to register organizations during the reporting period. The Government continued to use zoning laws that prohibit the use of private homes as places of worship. While the country has three officially registered Chinese temples, other unregistered temples, many of which are in private homes, are known to operate but have not faced charges for failing to register.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Since the early 1990s, the Government has reinforced the legitimacy of the hereditary monarchy and the observance of traditional and Muslim values by asserting a national ideology known as the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), or Malay Islamic Monarchy, the genesis of which reportedly dates from the 15th century. MIB principles have been adopted as the basis for government, and all meetings and ceremonies commence with a Muslim prayer. At citizenship ceremonies non-Muslims must wear national dress, which includes Muslim head coverings for men and women. There is no legal requirement for women to wear head coverings in public, and government officials are portrayed regularly, if infrequently, in the media without head coverings. There is social pressure for women to wear head coverings in public.

Despite constitutional provisions providing for the full and unconstrained exercise of religious freedom, the Government restricted the practice of non-Muslim religions by prohibiting proselytizing of all faiths other than the Shafi'i sect of Islam. The Government has banned the importation of religious teaching materials or scriptures such as the Bible and refused permission to establish or build churches, temples, or shrines. The Government allows only the practice of the official Shafi'i school of Islam. It has banned several other religious groups that it considers deviant, including the Islamic Al-Arqam movement and the Baha'i Faith. In February 2007 the Government banned as deviant teachings three sects: Saihoni Tasipan, Al-Ma'unah, and Abdul Razak Muhammad. The Government readily investigated and took proscriptive action against purveyors of radical Islam or "deviationist" Islamic groups. The Government periodically warned the population about "outsiders" preaching radical Islamic fundamentalist or unorthodox beliefs and warned Muslims against Christian evangelists, most recently in 2005 during a sermon at the national mosque.

A 1964 fatwa issued by the State Mufti strongly discourages Muslims from assisting non-Muslim organizations in perpetuating their faiths, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs reportedly uses the fatwa to influence other government authorities either to deny non-Muslim religious organizations permission for a range of religious and administration activities or to fail to respond to applications from these groups. Nonetheless, Christian churches and their associated schools have been allowed for safety reasons to repair, expand, and renovate buildings on their sites and to carry out minor building works. In 2006 the Government approved a request from Anglican St. Andrews Church to undertake a major refurbishment of its buildings, a significant development. Following a suspension of the permit, the reconstruction permit was reissued in March 2007, and reconstruction was largely completed during the reporting period.

The Government does not impose any restrictions on Chinese temples to celebrate seasonal religious events provided that the temples obtain permission from relevant authorities. Since 2005 the Government has begun permitting Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations outside the grounds of the Chinese temple, and public lion dances that are an integral part of celebrating this event at businesses and homes were common during the reporting period. Any public assembly of five or more persons requires official approval in advance, regardless of the purpose of the assembly, religious or other.

Unregistered temples -- as with any unregistered organization -- were not allowed to organize functions and celebrations

The Government routinely censors magazine articles on other faiths, blacking out or removing photographs of crucifixes and other Christian religious symbols. Government officials also guard against the distribution and sale of items that feature photographs of undesirable or religious symbols.

There were reports in the past that agents of the Internal Security Department monitored religious services at Christian churches and that senior church members believed that they were under intermittent surveillance.

The Government asks visitors to identify their religion on their landing cards, although many persons do not comply and have not been challenged.

Authorities continued to arrest persons for offenses under Shari'a, such as khalwat (close proximity between the sexes) and consumption of alcohol. According to statistics released by religious authorities, 31 khalwat cases were reported during the period covered by this report. The arresting forces in these crackdowns were comprised of civilian and religious police. Most of those arrested or detained for a first offense were fined and released, although in the past, some persons were imprisoned for up to four months for repeated offenses of khalwat. By law, men are liable to a \$634 (B\$1000) and women to a \$317 (B\$500) fine if convicted of khalwat.

Religious authorities regularly participated in raids to confiscate alcoholic beverages and non-halal meats. They also monitored restaurants and supermarkets to ensure conformity with halal practice. Restaurants and service employees that served a Muslim in daylight hours during the fasting month were subjected to fines. Non-halal restaurants and non-halal sections in supermarkets were allowed to operate without interference from religious authorities.

The Ministry of Education requires courses on Islam and the MIB in all public schools. Private schools are not required to teach Islam, but many make voluntary Ugama instruction available on an extra-curricular, after-hours basis. Ugama is a six year education system that teaches Islam under the Sunni Shafi'i school of thought. Most school textbooks were illustrated to depict Islam as the norm, and often all women and girls were shown wearing the Muslim head covering. There were no depictions of practices of other religions in textbooks. The Ministry prohibits the teaching of other religions and comparative religious studies. At one private school that offers Islam instruction during regular school hours, Christian students have been allowed to attend church during those periods when Muslim students receive instruction about Islam.

The Government did not prohibit or restrict parents from giving religious instruction to children in their own homes.

Religious authorities encouraged Muslim women to wear the tudong, a traditional head covering, and many women did so. In government schools and at higher institutes of learning, Muslim and non-Muslim female students must wear Muslim attire, including a head covering as a part of their uniform. Male students are expected to wear the songkok (hat). In the past there were reports that non-Muslim women teachers at public schools were sometimes pressured by government officials or colleagues to wear Muslim attire.

In accordance with the Government's interpretation of Qur'anic precepts, Muslim women have similar rights as Muslim men in important areas such as in divorce and custody of children as stated under the Emergency (Islamic Family Law) Order 1999. A Muslim woman can file for divorce on the grounds of long absence of her husband without valid reason, his long imprisonment, refusal to provide for his wife, or impotence. In case of divorce, the young children remain in custody of their mother; however, the father must provide financial support for the children's welfare. The Government's interpretation of Islamic practice for inheritance holds that female Muslims' inheritance will be half the size of the male's inheritance. A 2002 amendment to the Brunei Nationality Act allows citizenship to be transmitted through the mother as well as through the father.

Marriage between Muslims and those of other faiths is not permitted, and non-Muslims must convert to Islam if they wish to marry a Muslim. Muslims who wish to convert to another religion face such official and societal pressure not to leave Islam that conversion is extremely difficult if not impossible in practice. Permission from the Ministry of Religious Affairs must be obtained to convert from Islam, and there were no reports of anyone requesting such permission during the reporting period. There were instances during the period covered by this report of persons, often foreign women, who converted to Islam as a prelude to marrying Muslims. Government statistics reported that eight percent of the 312 conversions to Islam during the reporting period were due to marriage. Unlike in the past, there were no cases of divorced Muslim converts who, because of official and societal pressure, remained officially Muslim if they did not wish to do so.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Those adhering to faiths other than Islam are allowed to practice their beliefs, provided that they exercise restraint and do not proselytize. In the past non-Muslims who proselytized were arrested or detained and sometimes held without charges for extended periods of time; however, no such arrests or detentions occurred during the period covered by this report.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States. If parents convert to Islam, conversion of the child requires his or her personal commitment and is not automatic. A person must be at least 14 years old to make such a commitment. In the past there were reports of teenage children who refused such conversion despite family and official pressure.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In February 2007 the Sultan and royal family members attended several Chinese New Year celebration events sponsored by the Chinese community.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The country's various religious groups coexist peacefully, but ecumenical interaction is hampered by the dominant Islamic religious ethos, which discourages Muslims from learning about other faiths. At the same time, Islamic authorities organize a range of dakwah or proselytizing activities and incentives to explain and propagate Islam. Among the incentives to converts, especially those from the indigenous communities in rural areas, are monthly financial assistance, new homes, electric generators, and water pumps.

The country's national philosophy, the MIB concept, discourages open-mindedness to religions other than Islam, and there are no programs to promote understanding of other religions. The country's indigenous people generally convert either to Islam or Christianity but rarely to Buddhism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy has increased contacts and dialogue with government officials and representatives of all religious organizations. In 2006 the Embassy, as part of its outreach program, distributed "Islam in America" publications to higher educational institutes during a public exhibition. Embassy officials met with members of minority faiths. Embassy representatives continued to press the Government to adhere to the spirit of its Constitution and its declarations on human rights. On January 17, 2007, the Embassy also hosted its first digital video conference on Islamic Studies in the United States. The Embassy also supported the visit to the United States of the Deputy Minister of Education in April 2007 to promote student and teacher exchanges between United States and the country's Islamic studies programs.

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