U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Brunei

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution states, "The religion of Brunei Darussalam shall be the Muslim religion according to the Shafeite 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-Shafeite and non-Islamic religious practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Practitioners of non-Muslim faiths are not allowed to proselytize. Christian schools are required under the Education Order of 2003 to give Islamic instruction to Muslim students, and all post-secondary students are required to attend courses on the national religious 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 International Conference on Faith and Service, in Manila in March 2006, and to the East Asian Religious Leaders Forum held in Jakarta in February 2006 with officials from various religions.

The country's various religious groups coexisted peacefully. The law discouraged Muslims from learning about other faiths and forbid persons of other faiths from proselytizing. At the same time, Islamic authorities organize a range of activities to explain and propagate Islam, and they also offer financial incentives, housing, and new mosques for converts to Islam.

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 Bruneian citizens, there were 162,542 Muslims; 8543 Buddhists; 3703 Christians; 124 Hindus; 20 Atheists; 19 Taoists; and 18 Sikhs; as well as 69 individuals of other faiths and 10,392 who did not state their faith. Among permanent residents, according to the same statistics, there were 12,941 Muslims; 8801 Buddhists; 3204 Christians; 91 Hindus; 18 Taoists; 15 Sikhs; 10 Atheists; 70 of other faiths and 7,615 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 were 107 mosques and prayer halls, 7 Christian churches, several Chinese temples, and 2 Hindu temples in the country.

Proselytizing by faiths other than the officially sanctioned branch of Islam is not permitted. There were no missionaries 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 Shafeite 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-Shafeite 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.

In January 2005 the Government introduced legislation under the Societies Order that replaced the Societies Act. As did the act, the order compels all organizations, including religious groups not specifically mentioned in the constitution 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 or Commissioner of Police and may be refused for any reason.

The Government continued to use zoning laws that prohibit the use of private homes as places of worship. While the country had several

Chinese temples, only the temple in the capital was registered officially. The other temples did not face charges for failing to register, but they were not allowed to organize functions and celebrations.

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 fifteenth 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.

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 Muslims. The Government has also in previous years occasionally denied entry to foreign clergy or particular priests, bishops, or ministers; banned the importation of religious teaching materials or scriptures such as the Bible; and refused permission to establish, expand, repair, or build churches, temples, or shrines. The Government allows only the practice of the official Shafeite school of Islam. It has banned several other religious groups that it considers deviant, including the radical Islamic Al-Arqam movement and the Baha'i Faith; however, the Government did not ban any new groups during the period covered by this report. Citizens deemed to have been influenced by the teachings of such groups (usually students returning from overseas study) have been "shown the error of their ways" in study seminars organized by mainstream Islamic religious leaders. 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 May 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 it reportedly has been used by the Ministry of Religious Affairs 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.

The sole official Chinese temple must obtain permission for seasonal religious events and could not organize processions outside the bounds of its half-acre site. However, in 2005 the Government permitted Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations outside the grounds of the Chinese temple. The Government does not impose any restriction for the Chinese temple to celebrate seasonal religious events provided that the committee obtains permission from relevant authorities. Christian organizations are subjected to the same restrictions on processions.

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.

The Government requires residents to carry an identity card that states the bearer's religion. The Government also asks visitors to identify their religion on their landing cards, although many people 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, 389 "khalwat" cases were reported during the period of July 2005 to April 2006. 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. Under Bruneian 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 nonhalal 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.

The Ministry of Education requires courses on Islam and the MIB in all schools. Most school textbooks were illustrated to promote Islam as the norm, with all women and girls 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. Private mission schools are required to give instruction about Islam to Muslim students and are not allowed to give Christian instruction, although at one such school Christian students have been allowed to attend church during those periods when Muslim students receive instruction about Islam. The ministry requires that all students learn the Jawi (Arabic script in Malay language). The International School of Brunei, the Jerudong International School, and the Panaga School are the only schools exempt from this regulation; however, these private institutions are required to teach MIB. In January 2004, under its integrated education plan to combine religious and academic education, the ministry introduced a pilot program in thirty-eight government primary schools that requires the compulsory study of Arabic by all students; this plan was abolished in January 2006. In December 2005 the Institute of Tahfiz al-Quran, previously run by His Majesty the Sultan's Foundation, was handed over to the Ministry of Religious Affairs where the institute's education, curriculum and courses would come under the ministry's jurisdiction.

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." Muslim male students are expected to wear the songkok (hat). There also were reports that non Muslim women teachers at public schools are sometimes pressured by government officials or colleagues to wear Muslim attire. In March 2006 a Government-approved Friday sermon called for women to cease playing soccer. According to the sermon, "it is a grievous sin for women to behave like men on the playing field. They should not resemble males in terms of their garb, conversation or action." The Government took no action along the line of this Friday sermon, and women continued to play soccer.

In accordance with the Government's interpretation of Qur'anic precepts, women are denied equal status with men in a number of important areas such as divorce, inheritance, and custody of children. 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. If the marriages took place, these women faced intense official pressure not to return to their former religions or faced extraordinary delays in obtaining permission to do so. There also were known cases of divorced Muslim converts who, because of official and societal pressure, remained Muslim although they preferred to revert to their former faiths.

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. Non-Muslims who proselytized have in the past been 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 have been 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.

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. However, it is an accepted practice for the children of parents converting to Islam to be converted to Islam as well. There were reports in the past of teenage children who refused such conversion despite family and official pressure.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

In February 2006 the sultan attended a Chinese New Year's celebration sponsored by the Chinese community in. The Government sponsored a delegation to the International Conference on Faith and Service held in Manila in March 2006. This concession to interfaith dialogue was not reported on state-run television. The local press reported on officials attending the East Asian Religious Leaders Forum held in Jakarta in February 2006, with officials from various religions. A former ambassador represented the Government at the funeral of Pope John Paul II, and the then deputy minister of foreign affairs signed a condolence book at the Brunei Catholic diocese. In June 2005 Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, Secretary for the Holy See's Relations with States, traveled to the country where he met with senior Government officials.

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 religious authority also builds mosques and prayer halls for converts in these areas but will not allow the construction of churches or other non-Muslim houses of worship.

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. Consequently, Muslim officials view Christianity as the main rival to Islam.

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 2005 the embassy selected a Fulbright grant recipient to undertake a graduate program in Islamic Studies and Comparative Religions in the United States. 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 have 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.

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