



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Oman

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 119,498 square miles, and its population is 2.33 million, of whom 1.8 million are citizens, according to the 2003 national census. While no official statistics were kept on religious affiliation, most citizens were Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims. The Government does not give official preference to any particular religious group. Statistical data on the religious affiliation of the population may be collected but is not publicized. There was a small but significant population of Shi'a Muslims concentrated in the capital area and along the country's Batinah coast. Ibadhism, a form of Islam distinct from Shi'ism and the "orthodox" schools of Sunnism, was the dominant religious sect in the country. Oman is the only country in the Islamic world to have had a majority Ibadhi population. A distinguishing feature of Ibadhism is the choice of ruler, known as the imam, who is appointed by communal consensus. Additionally, there was a small community of ethnically Indian-Hindu citizens and reportedly a very small number of Christian citizens, who came from India or the Levant, who have been naturalized.

The majority of non-Muslims were noncitizen immigrant workers from South Asia. There were a number of Christian denominations represented.

While there was no information regarding missionary groups in the country, several faith-based organizations operated. Clergy of the Anglican Church, the Reformed Church of America, and other Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox groups were present.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Basic Law, in accordance with tradition, provides for the freedom to practice religious rites if the practices do not breach public order. The Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The Basic Law declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the source of all legislation. Within these parameters, the Government permitted freedom of worship for non-Muslims. The Basic Law prohibits discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion or religious group. Some non-Muslims worship at churches and temples built on land donated by the Sultan, including at least seven Christian and Hindu complexes in three major cities. Adherents of other religious groups, typically found among expatriate residents, practiced their rites in less formal facilities, such as company labor compounds or personal residences.

All religious organizations must be registered with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and the Government restricts some of their activities. The criterion for registration is not clear. Religious groups seeking registration must submit an application to the ministry. The ministry investigates the number of affiliates and area of concentration and if approved, the ministry issues a written letter to the group allowing them to engage in religious activity or to establish a place of worship.

One non-Muslim religious organization present in the country for several decades has had its application for formal registration pending at the Ministry for several years. Anecdotal evidence suggested that visiting non-Muslim organizations are permitted to operate within legal boundaries if a registered entity agrees to sponsor them with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

The Government has sponsored forums at which differing interpretations of Islam have been examined, and government-sponsored interfaith dialogues took place on a regular basis. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs hosted several Christian and Muslim scholars and lecturers of various schools of thought to discuss interfaith relations and tolerance in Islamic traditions. In April 2006 the Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs participated in a forum in Qatar on U.S.-Islamic dialogue.

The following Islamic holy days are considered national holidays: Eid al-Adha, Islamic (Hijra) New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Mohammad,

Ascension Day, and Eid al-Fitr.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Citizens and noncitizen residents are free to discuss their religious beliefs within the limits of the law; however, the Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing Muslims. The Basic Law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing, nor does any other law; however, in practice the Government used immigration regulations and laws concerning morals to restrict individuals suspected of engaging in proselytizing.

Under Islamic law, a Muslim who recants belief in Islam is considered an apostate and dealt with under applicable Islamic legal procedure. During the reporting period, there were no cases of persons punished for conversion, and the Government asserts that it has no legal authority to prosecute persons for changing their religious beliefs. Proselytizing non-Muslims by Muslims is allowed but discouraged. The Government records religious affiliation on national identity cards for citizens and on residency cards for noncitizens. Religious affiliation was previously recorded on passports; however, they no longer contain this information. Statistics on religious affiliation are not published.

The Government prohibits non-Muslim groups from publishing religious material, although non-Muslim religious material printed abroad may be imported. Members of all religious groups are free to maintain links with coreligionists abroad and to undertake foreign travel for religious purposes. Clergy from abroad are permitted to visit to carry out duties related to registered religious organizations.

The Government expects all imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts distributed monthly by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. The Government monitors sermons at mosques to ensure that imams do not discuss political topics and stay within the state-approved orthodoxy of Islam. The ministry maintains a website and toll-free number whereby questions concerning the practice of faith and worship can be answered by the grand mufti or his representatives. The grand mufti regularly appears on television and radio to answer questions from the public.

Some aspects of Islamic law and tradition, as practiced in the country, discriminate against women. Shari'a favors male heirs in adjudicating inheritance claims. While there was continuing reluctance to take an inheritance dispute to court for fear of alienating the family, women increasingly were aware of and taking steps to protect and exercise their rights as citizens. When the country acceded in April 2005 to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it attached reservations on any provision within the convention deemed to be not in accordance with Islamic law.

Public schools must provide instruction in Islam; however, noncitizen students may attend schools that do not offer instruction in Islam. Instruction in Islam is a component of the basic curriculum in all public school grades K-12. The curriculum focuses on the Qur'an and Hadith, the life of the Prophet Muhammed and his companions, and the five pillars of the Islamic faith.

Military bases maintain at least one mosque and one imam for the convenience of military personnel. Moreover, training facilities dedicate approximately three sessions per week for the study of Islamic subjects. Non-Muslim members in the military are not prevented from practicing their religion or compelled to undertake mandatory Islamic studies; however, if they wish to worship they must seek places to do so on their own.

#### 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.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Religious discrimination in the private sector was largely absent. Christian theologians have met with local Islamic authorities and with members of the faculty at the country's major university. Private groups that promote interfaith dialogue were permitted to exist as long as discussions did not constitute an attempt to cause Muslims to recant their Islamic beliefs. Societal attitudes toward proselytizing and conversion generally were negative.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. This included inquiries into the arrests of the alleged Ibadhi conservatives during the previous reporting period. Representatives of the U.S. embassy freely participated in local religious ceremonies and have contact with members of non-Muslim religious groups. During the reporting period, the embassy sponsored the visit of a U.S. research specialist in the field of Islamic studies, who addressed audiences (including at the Sultan's Grand Mosque) on prophecy among the Arabs.

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