



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Qatar

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of worship in accordance with the law and the requirements of protecting the public system and public behavior; however, the Government continues to prohibit proselytizing by non-Muslims and places some restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam, as interpreted by the strictly conservative Wahhabi order of the Sunni branch.

The status of respect for religious freedom improved somewhat during the reporting period. The constitution explicitly provides for freedom of worship, including the adoption of laws that provide for the freedom of association and public assembly. On April 25-27 2006, the country held its fourth conference on interfaith dialogue. In April 2006, construction began on the first Christian church to be built since the coming of Islam. 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.

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 a total land area of approximately 4,254 square miles and its population is an estimated 900,000, of whom approximately 200,000 are believed to be citizens. Of the citizen population, Shi'a Muslims accounted for approximately 10 percent and Sunni Muslims 90 percent. The majority of the estimated 600,000 noncitizens were individuals from South and Southeast Asian and Arab countries working on temporary employment contracts, along with their accompanying family members in some cases. They belonged to the following religious groups: Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is. Most foreign workers and their families lived near the major employment centers of Doha, Al Khor, Messaeed, and Dukhan.

The Christian community is composed of Indians, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, Africans, Europeans, Arabs, and Americans. It includes Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, Anglican, and other Protestant denominations. The Hindu community is almost exclusively Indian, while Buddhists include South, Southeast, and East Asians. Most Baha'is come from Iran. Religion is not indicated on national identity cards and passports, nor is it a criterion for citizenship according to the Nationality Law. However, nearly all Qatari citizens were by definition either Sunni or Shi'a Muslims, except for a Syrian Christian and a few Baha'is and their respective families who were granted citizenship.

No foreign missionary groups operate openly in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of worship in accordance with the law and the requirements of protecting society and public behavior. However, the Government continued to prohibit proselytizing by non-Muslims and placed some restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam, as interpreted by the strictly conservative Wahhabi order of the Sunni branch. Shi'a Muslims practice most aspects of their faith freely, and they may organize traditional Shi'a ceremonies and perform rites such as self-flagellation. The nationality law does not impose any restrictions on religious identity.

The Government and ruling family are linked inextricably to Islam. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs controls the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic education for adults and new converts. The emir participates in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally finances the Hajj for pilgrims who cannot afford to travel to Mecca.

The Government has granted legal status to Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Coptic, and many Asian Christian denominations. It maintains an official register of approved religious congregations.

The following Islamic holy days are considered national holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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 execution or other punishment for such a crime.

The Government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of non-Islamic religious literature. Individuals and religious institutions are allowed to import Bibles and other religious items for personal or congregational use. In addition, religious materials for use at Christmas and Easter are readily available in local shops.

Religious services were held without prior authorization from the Government; however, congregations may not publicly advertise them in advance or use visible religious symbols such as outdoor crosses. Christian services are regularly held and open to the public. Some services, particularly those on Easter and Christmas, drew more than one thousand worshippers.

Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, and members of other religious groups do not operate as freely as Christian congregations, because they have not sought official permission from the Government. However, there was no official effort to harass or hamper adherents of these religious groups in the private practice of their religion.

No foreign missionary groups operated openly in the country. In June 2004, a new criminal code was enacted that established new rules for proselytizing. Individuals caught proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation for any religion other than Islam, may be sentenced to a term in prison of up to ten years. If proselytizing is done on behalf of an individual, for any religion other than Islam, the sentence is imprisonment of up to five years. According to this new law, individuals who possess written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity are imprisoned for up to two years.

Discrimination in the areas of employment, education, housing, and health services occurred, but nationality was usually the determinant more than religion.

Islamic instruction is compulsory in public 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 co-educational private schools.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim litigants may request the Shari'a courts to assume jurisdiction in commercial or civil cases. In 2005, a new panel was established in the courts for the Shi'a. The panel decided cases in the following areas: marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other domestic disputes. Convicted Muslims may earn points for good behavior and have their sentences reduced by a few months by memorizing the Qur'an.

The official interpretation of Shari'a imposes some restrictions on Muslim women. Muslim wives have the right to inherit from their husbands. Non-Muslim wives inherit nothing, unless a special exception is arranged. Shari'a is also applied in cases of divorce. Both parents retain permanent rights of visitation; however, local authorities do not allow a non-citizen parent to take his or her child out of the country without permission of the citizen parent. Women may attend court proceedings. They are generally represented by a male relative; however, they may represent themselves. According to Shari'a, the testimony of two women equals that of one man, but the courts routinely interpret this on a case-by-case basis. A non-Muslim woman is not required to convert to Islam upon marriage to a Muslim; however, many make a personal decision to do so. A non-citizen woman is not required to become a citizen upon marriage to a citizen. Children born to a Muslim father are considered to be Muslim.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The emir and top Government officials strongly supported the swift construction and establishment of churches. The Government assigned a coordinator in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to speed up the process and facilitate all required building procedures and related matters, although some restrictions have been imposed on the use of certain religious symbols on buildings.

In May 2005, representatives of Christian churches in the country signed an agreement with the Government for a fifty-year lease on a large piece of property on the outskirts of Doha on which they intend to erect six churches at their own expense. The churches were expected to pay nominal lease fees of a few hundred dollars a year, renewable after ten years. The property was expected to include an Anglican church that may also be used by other Protestant denominations, a church to serve thirty four Indian-Christian congregations, a church for the country's small but influential Coptic community, and a site for two Orthodox churches, one Greek and one Eastern Rite. In December 2005, the foundation stone for the Catholic Church was laid and the ground-breaking took place at the end of April 2006. This would be the first church built since the coming of Islam. Other groups were in the process of raising funds for the construction of their churches. Also, a board composed of members of all the Christian churches was formed to liaise directly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding church matters. Previous barriers stemming from religious and cultural sensitivities were eased, and church representatives could now directly approach any Government agency to conduct their church affairs.

Each church was granted permission to apply for visas for visiting clerics to preside over and assist in church services. Non-Muslim religious

figures were seen in public.

The Fourth Conference for Religious Dialogue took place on April 25-27, 2006, in Doha. Representatives from the three largest monotheistic religions--Christianity, Islam, and Judaism--were invited. Invitations were extended to the Anglican Church, Coptic Church, Middle East Churches Council, Orthodox Church, the Vatican, and Jewish rabbis, among others. Rabbis from the U.S. and other countries attended and were full participants.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Relations between persons of differing religious beliefs generally are amicable and tolerant. The press and media generally treat non-Muslim religious groups in a respectful manner.

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.

U.S. embassy officials met with Government officials at all levels to address religious freedom issues. The embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the Government, and coordinated initiatives with other foreign embassies to increase their impact.

The ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials also met with representatives from religious communities in the country to discuss religious freedom issues, including protection of the interests of minority congregations and allegations of discrimination on religious grounds. These concerns were brought to the attention of appropriate officials in the Government and on the National Human Rights Committee.

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