



## United Arab Emirates

### International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The federal Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of the country.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

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

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 32,300 square miles and a permanent resident population of 4.1 million, with 78.1 percent of the country's population being noncitizens, according to the 2005 census. Of the citizens, 85 percent are Sunni Muslim and 15 percent are Shi'a. Foreigners are predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, although there are substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, the former Commonwealth of Independent States, and North America. According to a ministry report, which collected census data, 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent is Christian, and 15 percent is "other." Unofficial figures estimate that at least 15 percent of the population is Hindu, 5 percent is Buddhist, and 5 percent belong to other religious groups, including Parsi, Bahá'í, and Sikh. These estimates differ from census figures because census figures do not count "temporary" visitors and workers, and Bahá'ís and Druze are counted as Muslim.

There were foreign missionaries operating in the country. The Government does not permit foreign missionaries to proselytize Muslims; however, they have performed humanitarian (missionary) work in the country for several decades.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions.

The Government controls virtually all Sunni mosques, prohibits proselytizing, and restricts the freedom of assembly and association, thereby limiting the ability of religious groups without dedicated religious buildings to worship and conduct business. The Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven of the constituent emirates of the federal union. The Government recognizes a small number of Christian denominations, through the issuance of land-use permits, for the construction and operation of churches.

The Government funds or subsidizes almost 95 percent of Sunni mosques and employs all Sunni imams; 5 percent of Sunni mosques are considered private, and several mosques have large private endowments. The Government distributes guidance on religious sermons to mosques and clergy, whether Sunni or Shi'a, and monitors all sermons for political content.

The Shi'a minority, which is concentrated in the northern emirates, is free to worship and maintain its own mosques. All

Shi'a mosques are considered private and may receive funds from the Government upon request. Shi'a imams are government-appointed only in the Emirate of Dubai.

There is a dual system of Shari'a (Islamic) courts for criminal and family law matters and secular courts for civil law matters. Shi'a Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shi'a family law cases through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts. Non-Muslims are tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts. Not all crimes are punishable by Shari'a penalties. In cases punishable by Shari'a penalty, non-Muslims may receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge, which generally occurs. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims also may be overturned or modified by a higher court.

After a 2006 cabinet reorganization, the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments, which operated as the central federal regulatory authority for Muslim imams and mosques, was divided into two separate bodies. The Islamic Affairs and Endowments section was split from the Ministry of Justice and became the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments. This new General Authority took over all the duties the Islamic Affairs and Endowments section previously had under the Ministry of Justice. There are neither authority, licensing, nor registration requirements for the recognition and regulation of non-Muslim religious groups.

The Government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and, in practice, interfered very little in their religious activities.

Non-Muslim groups can own their own houses of worship, where they can practice their religion freely, by requesting a land grant and permission from the local ruler to build a compound (the title for the land remains with the ruler). Those with land grants are not charged rental payments. The Emirate of Sharjah also waives utility payments for religious buildings. There is no national-level method of granting official status to religious groups or approving land grants. Rather, rulers of the individual emirates exercise autonomy in choosing whether to grant access to land and permission to build houses of worship within their emirates. Religious groups without dedicated buildings of worship often use the facilities of other religious groups or worship in private homes. There were no reports of government interference in this common practice.

There are at least 31 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. There are two Hindu temples operating in rented commercial buildings in Dubai, one of which is used by Sikhs as well. Sikhs and Hindus living in Abu Dhabi also practice their religion in private homes. Four emirates are home to parochial Christian primary and secondary schools. The Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the Emirate of Dubai donated land for Christian cemeteries, and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi donated land for a Bahá'í cemetery. There are two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the Hindu community, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai.

Non-Muslim groups raise money from among their congregations and receive financial support from abroad. Religious groups openly advertise religious functions in the press, such as holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events.

Because an orthodox interpretation of Islam considers Christians to be "people of the book" (monotheists practicing an Abrahamic religion), facilities for Christian congregations are far greater in number and size than those for other non-Muslim communities, despite the fact that Christians are estimated to represent less than a quarter of the non-Muslim population.

In practice, the Government supports a moderate interpretation of Islam. As the state religion, Islam is favored over other religious groups and conversion to Islam is viewed favorably. A list of Muslim converts is published annually. Prisoners who convert to Islam often receive a reduction in their sentences. In Dubai, prisoners who memorize all or part of the Qur'an can receive a reduction in their sentences or a pardon, depending on the length of sentence and the number of sections memorized. Prisoners facing life sentences do not benefit from the memorization program. The ruler of the Emirate of Ajman offers a cash award for prisoners who memorize all or part of the Qur'an.

During the period covered by this report, the rulers of the various emirates pardoned prisoners on religious and national holidays, without regard to the prisoners' religious affiliations. Those pardoned generally were serving sentences from three to five years for financial crimes, immigration violations, and other relatively minor offenses; pardons reportedly were not extended to prisoners convicted of rape, killing, and kidnapping.

The Government's Religious Adviser, Ali Al-Hashemi, as well as the Director General of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments, regularly represented the country at Islamic, ecumenical, and Christian conferences, and events in other countries. Both met regularly with Christian leaders in the country.

The following religious holidays are considered national holidays: Waqfa, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Ascension Day, and Eid al-Fitr. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims and non-Muslims alike

are required by law to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking publicly during fasting hours, out of respect for Islamic practice.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, there were some restrictions.

The General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments distributes weekly guidance to both Sunni and Shi'a imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of religious sermons, and it ensures that clergy do not deviate frequently or significantly from approved topics in their sermons. Approximately 95 percent of Sunni imams are employees of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments or of individual emirate departments. Except in Dubai, where the Department of Islamic Affairs and Endowments controls the appointment of preachers and the conduct of their work in all mosques, the Government does not appoint sheikhs for Shi'a mosques.

There was one temple for both Sikhs and Hindus in Dubai. There were no Buddhist temples; however, in places without temples, Buddhists, along with Hindus and Sikhs, conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. There were only two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai. Official permission must be obtained for their use in every instance, posing a hardship for the large Hindu community. The Government does not allow temples to be built on work premises. In contrast to previous years, there were no reports that municipalities had dismantled temples built by Hindu workers in labor camps.

The Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing or distributing religious literature, under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation, as it constitutes engaging in behavior offensive to Islam. While there are no specific laws against missionary activities, in the past the Government reportedly has threatened to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of missionary activities. There were no reports of such threats during the period covered by this report.

The country's sole Internet service provider, Etisalat, sometimes blocked websites containing religious information. These sites included information on the Bahá'í faith, Judaism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity. The Government's Information and Privacy Law provides penalties for using the Internet to oppose Islam, inciting someone to commit sin, and using the Internet to promote a program in breach of public decency.

Immigration authorities routinely asked foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications; however, the Government reportedly does not collect or analyze this information, and there have been no reports of religious affiliation affecting the issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits.

Non-Muslim religious leaders reported that customs authorities rarely questioned the entry of religious materials such as Bibles and hymnals into the country, unless the materials were printed in Arabic. In the past, customs authorities questioned the entry of religious materials that they deemed in excess of the normal requirements of existing congregations, although in most instances the items were permitted entry. Customs authorities reportedly were less likely to question the importation of Christian religious items than that of other non-Muslim religious items; although, in virtually all instances, importation of the material in question eventually was permitted.

Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women "of the book," that is, Christian or Jewish women; however, Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men, unless the men convert to Islam. Because Islam does not consider the marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of fornication. There were no reports of this occurring during the period covered by this report. Shari'a, according to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, also is applied in cases of divorce. According to a new personal status law, women generally are granted custody of female children until they reach the age of thirteen and are granted custody of male children until they reach the age of ten. If the mother is deemed unfit, custody reverts to the next able female relative on the mother's side. Shari'a, as practiced in the country, permits polygamy.

Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools (schools supported by the federal government primarily for citizen children) and in private schools for Muslim children. Instruction of any religion other than Islam is not permitted in public schools; however, religious groups may conduct religious instruction for their members on their religious compounds. Private schools found teaching subjects that contravene Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the nation's ethics and beliefs, may face penalties, including closure.

On December 12, 2006, the press reported that a female foreign national teacher was dismissed from school for trying to convert her Muslim pupils to Christianity. According to the school's chairman, the teacher was deported following this

incident.

Although textbooks have been banned in the past for containing material offensive to Islam, there were no new reports of banned school books during the reporting period.

Since many Bahá'ís and Druze had passports that identify them as Muslims, the Ministry of Education required their children to take the prescribed Islamic studies classes.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversions

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.

#### Anti-Semitism

There were some anti-Semitic or religiously intolerant editorials, op-eds and editorial cartoons in the English and Arabic-language electronic and print media. The Arabic-language press, including government subsidized and quasi-governmental newspapers such as Al-Ittihad, Al-Bayan, and Al-Khaleej, carried editorial cartoons depicting negative images of Jews; Al-Bayan carried religiously intolerant articles as well.

On May 14, 2007, for example, Al-Ittihad carried a cartoon of "the Zionist Lobby" who was depicted as a stereotypical Jew with a hooked nose and wearing a yarmulke.

On August 2, 2006, Al-Bayan published an op-ed comparing "Zionism and Arabism," in which it made derogatory statements and asked, "are they (i.e. the Zionists) part of humanity?"

On July 16 and 17, 2006, Al-Bayan carried editorial articles comparing Israelis to Nazis.

On July 2, 2006, Al-Ittihad published a cartoon in which a stereotypically depicted Jew was standing astride the globe, a reference to the long-standing anti-Semitic conspiracy that Jews control the world.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On May 31, 2007, the Vatican and the country signed a joint communiqué to establish diplomatic relations.

On April 25-29, 2007, the Egyptian Coptic Pope Shnoudeh III attended the inauguration ceremony of a new Coptic church building in Abu Dhabi. At the ceremony, the Minister of Higher Education, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al-Nahyan, stated that the new building is an expression of the country's openness and tolerance for religions. Pope Shnoudeh lauded the country's encouragement of interfaith dialogue. On the same occasion, the Egyptian Ambassador expressed gratitude for the country's care for the Egyptian Copts. The Pope also met with President Sheikh Khalifa and religious officials, and presented a speech praising the country's religious tolerance policy and its role in enhancing co-existence between different religions.

On April 23, 2007, the Director General of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments headed the monthly meeting with the Authority's preachers, in which he encouraged moderation in preaching and spreading tolerance among all Muslims.

On April 12 and 13, 2007, the Evangelical Church of Abu Dhabi held its annual retreat at the Abu Dhabi Ladies Club, a nonprofit organization headed by Sheikha Fatima, widow of the late President Sheikh Zayed.

On April 11, 2007, during a lecture at the Deputy Prime Minister's Information Office, the Romanian Ambassador praised the country's leading role in providing religious freedom.

On April 7, 2007, the Coptic church and the Evangelical Church of Abu Dhabi held their Easter celebration service. Church officials expressed their gratitude to the country's leaders for allowing tolerance and respect for other religions. On the same day tens of thousands of Christians attended the Easter Mass in the Holy Trinity Church compound in Dubai.

In April 2007 the Zayed House for Islamic Culture held a seminar on cultural diversity and civilized communication, as part of the country's call for religious tolerance.

In March 2007 delegations from the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee visited the country and met with senior government officials to discuss religious tolerance. Both groups lauded the country for its moderate religious policy.

On February 27, 2007, during his visit to the country, the former Archbishop of Washington hailed the country's religious tolerance and the President's entrenchment of this policy.

On February 19, 2007, a religious dialogue attended by 130 Christian and Muslim students, was held at the University of Wollongong in Dubai. A pastor and an Islamic scholar presented lectures on interpretations and references to Jesus Christ in both Muslim and Christian holy books.

On February 9, 2007, the Archbishop of Canterbury lauded the President's encouragement of cultural and interfaith dialogue and the country's role in spreading tolerance and co-existence among different religions and civilizations.

On February 8, 2007, the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments held meetings with imams and preachers in all emirates, and discussed their evolving role in educating themselves and delivering messages of tolerance and moderation, and condemning extremist thoughts.

On February 8, 2007, the Latin Archbishop of Jerusalem, Jordan, and Cyprus, praised the country's leadership in spreading justice and tolerance values, and in enhancing peace and dialogue among nations.

On January 23, 2007, the Roman Catholic Bishop spoke about religious tolerance at the symposium "Khalifa and the Culture of Tolerance." The Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and Religious Advisor Ali Al-Heshimi spoke about tolerance as a second nature of the country's people and about the efforts of the country's leadership to promote peace and the spirit of dialogue among different religions.

On January 6, 2007, the Religious Advisor and other religious officials attended the Christmas celebrations of the Orthodox Coptic church. The Coptic pastor thanked the country's leadership for its religious tolerance.

On December 23, 2006, the Dawoodi Bohra Community's spiritual head arrived in the country for a 1-week stay, during which he gave a speech in Dubai to more than 10,000 community members from across the country, as part of Eid al-Adha celebrations. He also inaugurated a new mosque complex in Ajman and laid the foundation stone for an upscale community residential project in Al Ghusais.

In December 2006 the Deputy Ruler of Ras al-Khaimah donated a parcel of land for several Christian denominations, including a new Catholic church.

On November 26, 2006, the Ruler of Sharjah received the Anglican Bishop in Cyprus and the Gulf.

On October 1, 2006, as part of a series of presentations during the month of Ramadan, a renowned Islamic scholar gave a speech in Dubai on the characteristics of Islam, stating that Islam is moderate and balanced, and cannot be linked to terrorism and extremism because of the mistakes of some individuals.

The Anglican pastor in Abu Dhabi regularly attended open majlis with the Minister of Higher Education, Sheikh Nahyan, to confirm friendship and solidarity between the two faiths.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

Non-Muslim religious leaders from inside and outside of the country regularly referred to it as one of the most liberal and broadminded countries in the region, in terms of governmental and societal attitudes toward allowing all persons to practice their faiths freely. While citizens regarded the country as a Muslim nation that should respect Muslim religious sensibilities on matters such as public consumption of alcohol, modest dress, and public comportment, UAE society also emphasized respect for privacy and Islamic traditions of tolerance, particularly with respect to forms of Christianity. Modest casual attire for men and women was permitted throughout the country.

Many hotels, stores, and other businesses patronized by both citizens and foreigners were permitted to sell alcohol and pork to non-Muslims and to acknowledge openly non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali (although such displays generally are not permitted during the month of Ramadan). Shopping centers were festive during Christian holidays, and traditional holiday foods, decorations, posters, books, and videotapes were widely available. School children gathered in Dubai malls to sing Christmas carols while "department-store Santas" handed out gifts. Reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services, were regularly printed in the media. The largest air carrier in the country, Emirates Airline, brought European tourists to Dubai on "Easter-special sightseeing packages."

Citizens occasionally expressed concern regarding the influence on their society of the cultures of the country's foreign majority. However, in general, citizens were familiar with foreign societies and believed that the best way to balance foreign influence was by supporting and strengthening indigenous cultural traditions.

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

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

U.S. embassy officials in Abu Dhabi and consulate general officials in Dubai discussed religious tolerance and freedom with government officials on a number of occasions and encouraged the Government to increase religious freedom by permitting the opening or expansion of religious facilities for the large expatriate population.

Embassy officials met with the Director General of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments on a regular basis to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

On May 2, 2007, embassy officials and a State Department representative on Anti-Semitism visited the Director of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments to discuss the country's moderate policy and tolerance for all faiths.

Embassy and consulate officials also helped to protect religious freedom by monitoring its status through informal inquiries and meetings with government officials and representatives of Muslim, Christian, and other religious groups.

Released on September 14, 2007

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