

OMAN 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and protects the right of individuals to practice religious rites on the condition that doing so does not disrupt public order. In practice, the government generally guaranteed these protections. The Basic Law declares that Islam is the state religion and that sharia (Islamic law) is the basis of legislation, although legislation is largely based on a civil code. There are some restrictions on the right to collective worship which the government enforced inconsistently.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy officials regularly met with officials at the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) to discuss the expansion of worship space for non-Muslim religious groups. The Ambassador established relationships with leaders of religious groups in the country and encouraged the tolerant interfaith policies of the government. Embassy staff spoke regularly with minority religious groups, and attended government and community interfaith and religious community events.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 3.1 million, 67 percent of whom are citizens. An estimated 75 percent of citizens, including Sultan Qaboos, are Ibadhi Muslims. Ibadhism is a form of Islam distinct from Shiism and Sunnism and is the historically dominant religious group. Shia Muslims comprise less than 5 percent of citizens, and live mainly in the capital area and along the northern coast. The remainder of the citizen population is Sunni Muslim.

The majority of non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia, although there are a few extended families of naturalized ethnic Indians who are mainly Hindu or Christian. Non-Ibadhi religious groups constitute approximately 25 percent of the population and include Sunni and Shia Muslims, as well as Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahais, and Christians. Christian groups are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah and include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant congregations. These groups tend to organize along linguistic and ethnic lines. There are more than 60 different Christian groups,

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fellowships, and assemblies active in the Muscat metropolitan area. There are also three officially recognized Hindu temples and two Sikh temples in Muscat, as well as additional temples located in foreign laborer camps.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the right of individuals to practice religious rites on condition that doing so does not disrupt public order. The Basic Law declares that Islam is the state religion and that sharia is the basis of legislation, although legislation is largely based on civil code and civil courts replaced sharia courts in 1999.

It is a criminal offense to “defame” any faith. The law provides for a maximum 10 years’ imprisonment for inciting religious or sectarian strife. The law also prescribes a maximum three-year sentence and fine of 500 rials (\$1,300) for anyone who “publicly blasphemes God or His prophets,” commits an affront to religious groups by spoken or written word, or breaches the peace of a lawful religious gathering. Using the internet in a way that “might prejudice public order or religious values” is also a crime, with a penalty of between one month and a year in prison, and fines of not less than 1,000 rials (\$2,600).

The law prohibits public proselytizing by all religious groups, although the government allows religious groups to proselytize privately within legally registered houses of worship and “Islamic propagation centers.”

The country’s civil courts adjudicate cases governed by the Personal Status and Family Legal Code. The code exempts non-Muslims from its provisions in matters pertaining to family or personal status, allowing them to seek adjudication under the religious laws of their faith. Shia Muslims may resolve family and personal status cases according to Shia jurisprudence outside the courts, and retain the right to transfer their case to a civil court if they cannot find a resolution within the Shia religious tradition.

Apostasy is not a criminal or civil offense, but the Personal Status and Family Legal Code prohibits a father who converts from Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children.

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All religious organizations must register with the government. According to the MERA, there is no limit on the number of religious groups that can be registered. New religious groups unaffiliated with a previously recognized group must gain ministerial approval before registering. While no published rules, regulations, or criteria for approval exist, the ministry generally considers the group's size, theology, belief system, and availability of other worship opportunities before granting approval. The ministry employs similar criteria before granting approval for new Muslim groups to form.

The ministry recognizes the Protestant Church of Oman, the Catholic Diocese of Oman, the al Amana Center (interdenominational Christian), the Hindu Mahajan Temple, and the Anwar al-Ghubaira Trading Company in Muscat (Sikh) as the official sponsors for non-Muslim religious groups. Groups seeking registration must request meeting and worship space from one of these sponsor organizations, which are responsible for recording the group's doctrinal adherence, the names of its leaders, and the number of active members, and for submitting this information to the ministry.

Leaders of all religious groups must register with MERA. The formal licensing process for imams prohibits unlicensed lay members from preaching sermons in mosques, and licensed imams must follow government-approved sermons. Lay members of non-Muslim groups may lead prayers if they are specified as leaders in their group's registration application. The ministry prohibits foreigners on tourist visas from preaching, teaching, or leading worship. The government permits clergy from abroad to enter the country to teach or lead worship under the sponsorship of registered religious groups, which must apply to MERA for approval before the visiting clergy's entry.

MERA requires religious groups to obtain approval before disseminating religious publications outside their memberships; the government must approve any publication in the country. Religious groups must notify MERA before importing religious materials and submit a copy for the MERA files; however, the ministry does not review all imported religious material for approval.

Non-Muslim groups may practice their religion according to their values, customs, and traditions without interference only on land specifically donated by the sultan for the purpose of collective worship. The government does not permit gatherings for religious purposes in private homes or in any location other than government-approved houses of worship.

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The government must approve construction and/or leasing of buildings by religious groups. In addition, mosques must be built at least one kilometer (0.6 mile) apart from each other.

Although the government records religion on birth certificates, it is not printed on other official identity documents.

Women are permitted to wear the hijab (Islamic headscarf), but cannot wear the niqab (Islamic veil that covers the face), in official photographs for passports and other identification.

Citizens have the right to sue the government for violations of their right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order; however, this right has never been exercised in court.

Islamic studies are mandatory for Muslim students in public school grades K-12. Non-Muslim students are exempt from this requirement, and many private schools provide alternative religious studies courses.

Government Practices

The government inconsistently enforced legal restrictions on the right to collective worship.

In general, non-Muslim groups voluntarily abided by government restrictions on religious gatherings in private homes or any location other than government-approved houses of worship. Churches provided space on their compounds for worship; however, the lack of space in government-approved locations continued to limit the number of groups able to practice their religion.

MERA monitored sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. The government required all Ibadhi and Sunni imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts it distributed monthly.

The government funded the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but not of Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders.

The government promoted tolerance and interfaith understanding through continued support of an endowed professorship of Abrahamic Faiths and sponsorship of 10 Omani students in a religious pluralism program at Cambridge

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University. The government, through MERA, continued to publish *Al Tafaham (Understanding)*, a periodical devoted to broadening dialogue within Islam and promoting respectful discussion of differences with other faiths and cultures. It included articles by Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu religious scholars. The government sponsored the opening of the Center for International Dialogue in Lebanon, whose purpose is dialogue between different faiths. The government also brought many scholars of different faiths, including Christianity and Judaism, to speak on tolerance and interfaith understanding at the Grand Mosque. These lectures were given in English and Arabic.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In March, a local, privately-owned newspaper, *The Times of Oman*, published an editorial by its opinion editor making anti-Semitic allegations about Jews and denying the Holocaust. There was no government or societal response.

In March, nearly 100 Omanis protested outside the Royal Opera House in Muscat after an American Muslim member of a visiting jazz group sang verses of the Quran to music. Although the American singer believed he was expressing his love for his religion, spectators found it offensive and claimed that it violated Islamic values. Police broke up the protests on the second day.

The Al Amana Center, a local interfaith group focusing on improving Muslim-Christian understanding, regularly sponsored exchange programs for leaders of Christian and Muslim communities, hosted scholars-in-residence, and worked closely with MERA on many of its projects.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials regularly met with MERA officials to discuss the expansion of worship space for non-Muslim religious communities. The Ambassador established relationships with leaders of interfaith groups. Embassy staff spoke regularly with minority religious groups, and attended government and community interfaith and religious group events. Embassy staff developed relationships with the major Christian groups in Muscat, as well as the Al Amana Center. The embassy hosted an iftar during Ramadan. The embassy also sponsored a participant on an interfaith dialogue exchange program to the United States.