

# OMAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion but prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the right of individuals to practice religious rites as long as doing so does not “disrupt public order or contradict morals.” According to the law, it is a criminal offense to “defame” any faith. Proselytizing in public is illegal. Hassan Al-Basham, who had been sentenced to three years imprisonment in 2016 for blasphemy and disturbing religious values, arising out of his comments on social media, remained in prison at year’s end. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) monitored sermons and distributed approved texts for all imams. Non-Muslim groups reported they were able to worship freely in private homes and government-approved houses of worship, although space limitations continued to cause overcrowding at some locations. The MERA continued to require religious groups to request approval before publishing or importing religious texts.

The Protestant-run interfaith group Al-Amana Center and the MERA continued to host programs to introduce Protestant seminary students to Islam. In September Muscat’s College of Sharia Studies invited a delegation of European students of religion to study Islam and tour the country. Social media condemned a Sunni cleric who described southern Oman as a “Sunni land” in a July video.

In January the Ambassador met with the minister of endowments and religious affairs to discuss government protection of religious minorities. At various times throughout the year, embassy officers met with government officials to discuss the expansion of the country’s public campaign to counter violent extremism related to religion, and to encourage the government to continue to support religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. In April the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia visited the country and subsequently authored an article about religious tolerance to be published in *Al-Tafahum* (Understanding), a government-run magazine on religious topics.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.6 million (July 2017 estimate). Citizens constitute 55 percent of the population. The percentage of citizens who are Ibadhi Muslims (Ibadhi Islam is the historically dominant

religious group in the country and distinct from Shia and Sunni Islam) is estimated at 45 percent, according to many sources, and 75 percent, according to government estimates. Academic sources estimate Shia Muslims compose approximately 5 percent of citizens and live mainly in the capital area and along the northern coast, while another 5 percent are Hindus and Christians, mainly extended families of naturalized citizens of South Asian origin. According to academic sources, the remainder of the citizen population is Sunni Muslim.

Academic sources state the majority of non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia. Noncitizen religious groups include Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahais, and Christians. Christians are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah and include Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion and states that sharia is the basis for legislation. It protects the right of individuals to practice other religions as long as doing so does not “disrupt public order or contradict morals.” The Basic Law prohibits discrimination based on religion. According to the Basic Law, the sultan must be a Muslim.

The law prohibits a father who converts from Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children. There is no provision of the law specifically addressing apostasy, conversion, or renunciation of religious belief.

It is a criminal offense to “defame” any faith. The law provides for a maximum of 10 years’ imprisonment for inciting religious or sectarian strife. The law prescribes a maximum three-year prison sentence and fine of 500 Omani 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 one year in prison and a fine of not less than 1,000 Omani Rials (\$2,600).

All religious organizations must register with the government. The law does not specify rules, regulations, or criteria for ministerial approval. Groups seeking registration must request meeting and worship space from one of the sponsor organizations recognized by the MERA. New non-Muslim religious groups

unaffiliated with a previously recognized sponsor must gain approval from the MERA before it can register. Muslim groups must register, but the government – as benefactor of the country’s mosques – serves as their sponsor. For non-Muslim groups, the ministry recognizes the Protestant Church of Oman (a partnership between the Reformed Church of America and the Anglican Church), Catholic Church in Oman, Al-Amana Center (an interdenominational Christian organization that promotes Muslim-Christian understanding), Hindu Mahajan Temple, and Anwar Al-Ghubaira Trading Company in Muscat (Sikh) as official sponsors. The sponsors are responsible for recording and submitting to the ministry the group’s religious beliefs and the names of its leaders. The MERA must also grant its approval for new Muslim groups to form.

All individuals who deliver sermons in recognized religious groups must register with the MERA. The 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 law restricts collective worship by non-Muslim groups to houses of worship on land specifically donated by the sultan for the purpose of collective worship.

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

The law states the government must approve construction and/or leasing of buildings by religious groups. In addition, new mosques must be built at least one kilometer (0.6 mile) from existing mosques.

Islamic studies are mandatory for Muslim students in public schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. Non-Muslim students are exempt from this requirement if they notify school administrators they do not wish to attend such instruction. The classes take a historical perspective in comparing the evolution of Islamic religious thinking, and teachers are prohibited from proselytizing or favoring one Islamic group over another. Many private schools provide alternative religious studies courses.

Civil courts adjudicate cases according to the nonsectarian civil code. The law states Shia Muslims may resolve family and personal status cases according to Shia jurisprudence outside the courts, and retain the right to transfer their cases to

civil courts if they cannot find a resolution within the Shia religious tradition. The law allows non-Muslims to seek adjudication of matters pertaining to family or personal status under the religious laws of their faith or under civil law.

Citizens may sue the government for violations of their right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order; there are no known cases of anyone pursuing this course in court.

Birth certificates issued by the government record an individual's religion. Other official identity documents do not do so.

Foreigners on tourist visas may not preach, teach, or lead worship. Visa regulations permit foreign clergy to enter the country to teach or lead worship under the sponsorship of registered religious groups, which must apply to the MERA for approval before the visiting clergy member's entry.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

The primary issue for religious groups continued to be opaque processes and unclear guidelines. While no published rules, regulations, or criteria existed for the registration of a new religious group, the MERA reportedly considered the group's size, theology, belief system, and availability of other worship opportunities before granting registration, and reportedly employed the same criteria whether the group was Muslim or non-Muslim. Observers said the precise process remained vague, although there were reports of the MERA consulting with existing religious communities before ruling on the application of a new religious group. According to the MERA, there was no limit on the number of religious groups it could register. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) had reportedly not received approval for registration from the MERA because it had not identified a sponsor in the Christian community, but reported its representatives had met with the MERA and were working toward a solution.

The MERA continued to monitor sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. Imams were required to preach sermons within politically and socially acceptable parameters the government distributed monthly, with outlines of acceptable topics along with standardized, approved Friday sermons for Ibadhi and Sunni imams. Mosques under the purview of the Diwan (Royal Court),

such as the Grand Mosque in Muscat, were not subject to this monitoring. The grand mufti, the senior Ibadhi cleric in the country and who is appointed by the government, remained the only imam able to speak publicly outside of the designated government parameters. All religious figures requesting visas to the country must be approved by the MERA. The government continued to fund the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders are privately funded. The government provided land for all religious sites in the country.

According to NGO sources based outside of the country, Hassan Al-Basham, a former diplomat who had been sentenced to three years imprisonment in 2016 for blasphemy and criticizing the sultan, remained in prison at year's end.

Non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes continued to say Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious groups experienced no interference from the government in their regular private worship services despite continuing legal prohibitions on worship outside of government-approved locations. Non-Muslim minority groups continued to report overcrowding at their places of worship. Space limitations also caused overcrowding at some private homes used for non-Islamic worship.

Consistent with the government's censorship policy mandating prior review of any published material, religious groups needed to obtain approval from the MERA before publishing texts within the country or disseminating religious publications outside their membership. The government also continued to require religious groups to notify the MERA before importing religious materials and submit a copy to the MERA. The ministry did not review all imported religious material for approval. Sources said non-Muslims were often able to import literature without scrutiny.

Although the Basic Law states sharia is the basis for legislation, in practice the civil code continued to have precedence over sharia, consistent with the replacement of sharia courts by civil courts in 1999 with passage of the Judicial Authority Law. Under this law, the judicial outcomes reached under sharia jurisprudence could not contradict civil statutes.

The government, through the MERA, continued to publish *Al-Tafahum*, an annual periodical whose purpose, according to the government, was to broaden dialogue within Islam and promote respectful discussion with other faiths. During the year,

*Al-Tafahum* focused on jurisprudence – articles included one juxtaposing Islamic and Kantian principles, while another discussed Sufism’s role in civil law.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Conversion from Islam was reportedly viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community.

The interfaith Al-Amana Center, run by a Protestant denomination, continued to sponsor programs with a goal of interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. It hosted immersion courses in conjunction with the MERA to introduce Islam to Protestant seminary students from different denominations. The center also worked closely with the MERA to promote interfaith dialogue.

In July a video of a Sunni cleric describing Dhofar, a region in the southern part of the country, as a “Sunni country” was widely shared. Social media users largely condemned the cleric for being divisive and seeking to undermine the government, and they demanded government intervention. In August the cleric issued a video apology, encouraging persons to respect the authority of the government.

The Anti-Defamation League reported that a cartoon with anti-Semitic imagery was published on December 17 in the *Al-Watan* newspaper. According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, on July 9, *Al-Watan* published an anti-Semitic column that accused Jews of murdering children in order to use their blood as part of their religious rituals during Jewish holidays.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In January the Ambassador met with the minister of endowments and religious affairs to discuss the government’s protection of religious minorities. The Ambassador visited the largest Hindu temple, attended an Anglican Church service, and hosted Jewish holiday services at his residence.

Embassy officers met with MERA officials to encourage the government to continue its outreach efforts promoting religious tolerance, and discussed its efforts to counter violent extremism related to religion. Embassy officers also raised concerns about overcrowding at minority religion compounds and encouraged the MERA to find a solution for religious groups seeking officially sanctioned space for worship. Embassy officers met with minority religious groups and supported

efforts to promote interfaith understanding across all religious groups. In April the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia visited the country and subsequently authored an article about religious tolerance, to be published in *Al-Tafahum* (Understanding), a government-run religious periodical.