

OMAN 2018 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 other religions as long as doing so does not “disrupt public order or contradict morals.” According to the law, offending Islam or any Abrahamic religion is a criminal offense. There is no provision of the law specifically addressing apostasy, conversion, or renunciation of religious belief. In January the government issued a new penal code which significantly increased penalties for blasphemy and criminalized groups that promote a religion other than Islam. Proselytizing in public is illegal. In April Hassan Al-Basham, who had been sentenced to three years’ imprisonment in 2016 for blasphemy and disturbing religious values in his comments on social media, died in prison. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) based outside the country had previously reported he had won an appeal on medical grounds to commute his sentence, but reportedly a court later overturned it. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) monitored sermons and distributed approved texts for all imams. Religious groups continued to report problems with opaque processes and unclear guidelines for registration. Nonregistered groups, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and others, remained without permanent, independent places of worship. Non-Muslim groups said 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 or disseminating religious publications outside their membership. According to religious observers, in practice the ministry did not review all imported religious material for approval, and non-Muslims were often able to import literature without government scrutiny.

Members of religious minorities reported conversion from Islam was viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community. The Protestant-run interfaith group Al-Amana Center and the MERA continued to host programs to introduce Protestant seminary students to Islam.

At various times throughout the year, embassy officers met with government officials to encourage the government to continue to support religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. In November the Ambassador hosted a lunch for various

religious minority community leaders to express continued U.S. support for religious freedom and offer a forum for exchanging best practices.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.6 million (July 2018 estimate). Citizens constitute 55 percent of the population. The government did not publish statistics on the percentages of Omani citizens who practice Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia forms of Islam. Estimates from academic and religious community sources of 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) range between 45 percent, according to many sources, and 75 percent, according to government estimates. Academic sources estimate Shia Muslims comprise 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, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Christians. Christians are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah and include Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and Protestants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion and declares 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.

There is no provision of the law specifically addressing apostasy, conversion, or renunciation of religious belief.

In January the government passed a new penal code, which increases the maximum prison sentence for “insulting the Quran” and “offending Islam or any [Abrahamic] religion” from three to 10 years. The law also penalizes anyone who, without

obtaining prior permission, “forms, funds, [or] organizes a group...with the aim of undermining Islam...or advocating other religions” with up to seven years’ imprisonment. “Holding a meeting” outside government-approved locations to promote another religion is also criminalized with a maximum sentence of three years’ imprisonment. Under the new code, Abrahamic religions are protected from blasphemy, but the new code does not mention non-Abrahamic faiths in this context. 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 gaining 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 they 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 organization affiliated with the Reformed Church of America 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 authorizes certain “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 miles) 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 on 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 they 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 have been 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 who are not clergy 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

Hasan Al-Basham, a former diplomat who had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment in 2016 for what NGOs based outside the country reported were charges of "using the internet in what might be prejudicial to religious values" in

his comments on social media, died in prison in April. NGOs based outside the country had previously reported he had won an appeal on medical grounds to commute his sentence, but, according to the NGOs, in November 2017, a court reinstated the original verdict and authorities took Al-Basham back into custody. The semigovernmental Oman Human Rights Commission, which followed the case closely, stated he lost his appeal and was subsequently imprisoned in accordance with the law.

According to international human rights advocacy organizations, on June 13, in connection with Sultan Qaboos bin Said's Eid al-Fitr amnesty, authorities released writer and online activist Abdullah Habib. He had served three months of a six-month sentence for violating the Information Technology Crimes Act by "using internet technology . . . to prejudice public order or religious values" and the penal code for "insulting an Abrahamic religion." In April the Muscat Appeals Court suspended the remaining two and one-half years of his sentence but prohibited him from traveling outside the country during that time. According to the media advocacy group PEN America, during his imprisonment, authorities denied Habib regular access to his medication.

According to religious leaders, 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, which the government distributed monthly, with outlines of acceptable topics along with standardized and 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 government-appointed grand mufti, the senior Ibadhi cleric in the country, remained the only imam able to speak publicly outside of the designated government parameters.

Religious groups continued to report issues with opaque processes and unclear guidelines for registration. While no published rules, regulations, or criteria existed for new religious groups to receive ministerial approval, the MERA reportedly considered a 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 the MERA consulted 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 remained without a registration sponsor or a permanent place of worship, but church leaders said the government was working with the group to reach a solution. Other religious minority groups reported they did not have permanent independent places of worship as recognized groups, despite representing a significant population in Oman, primarily of expatriate workers.

Non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes continued to say the government did not interfere with Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious groups 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. According to some religious leaders, space limitations also caused overcrowding at some private homes used for non-Islamic worship.

The MERA approved major religious celebrations for non-Muslim groups in commercial or public areas on a case-by-case basis. For example, several Hindu groups held large religious celebrations in indoor and outdoor venues throughout the country. According to the media, in May during Ramadan, the MERA organized an event entitled “The Quran speaks to you” to inform non-Muslims about Islam.

Religious groups said that, consistent with the government’s censorship policy mandating prior review of any published material, religious groups continued to need MERA approval to publish texts in the country or disseminate religious publications outside their membership. Religious groups did not attempt, however, to share material with members of the public outside their places of worship. The government also continued to require religious groups to notify the MERA before importing religious materials and to submit a copy to the MERA. Religious minority leaders said that in practice the ministry did not review all imported religious material for approval and that non-Muslims were often able to import literature without government scrutiny.

The government provided land for all religious sites in the country.

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, judicial outcomes reached under sharia jurisprudence could not contradict civil statutes.

The government continued to fund the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders were privately funded.

There is no law stating religious affiliation is tied to custody, but according to legal contacts, judges often considered the religiosity of a Muslim parent during custody hearings.

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

According to religious minority leaders, the Royal Oman Police collected religious affiliation information from expatriates applying for work visas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Although not prohibited by law, according to some minority religious leaders, conversion from Islam was viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community. Several Arabic-language Omani newspapers featured cartoons depicting anti-Semitic imagery when criticizing the Israeli government. Social media commentary regarding the Israeli government, especially after the October visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Oman, sometimes took an anti-Semitic tone.

The interfaith Al-Amana Center, which was founded and supported by the Reformed Church in America, a Protestant denomination, continued to sponsor programs to promote interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. It hosted ongoing 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

In November the Ambassador hosted a lunch with leaders of religious minority communities to encourage those communities to engage with each other and to listen to each other's experiences working with the government. The Ambassador attended a Hindu religious event and engaged with Hindu community members, and hosted Jewish holiday services at his residence. Embassy officers met with minority religious groups and supported efforts to promote interfaith understanding across all religious groups.