

OMAN 2020 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 other Abrahamic religion is a criminal offense. There is no provision of the law specifically addressing apostasy, conversion, or renunciation of religious belief. Proselytizing in public is illegal. All religious organizations must register with the government. 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. MERA continued to require religious groups to request approval before publishing or importing religious texts or disseminating religious publications outside their membership, although the ministry did not review all imported religious material. In February, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) again called on the government to remove a number of anti-Semitic titles being sold through the country’s annual state-run Muscat International Book Fair.

Members of religious minorities reported conversion from Islam was viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community. In January, *al-Bawaba*, a regional news website, reported that activist Majda al-Balushi, who now lives in the United States, had received “massive backlash” on social media after she announced her conversion from Islam to Christianity, including criticism from some of her fellow citizens.

At various times throughout the year, the Ambassador and U.S. embassy officers met with government officials and religious minority leaders to discuss the needs and support the worship practices of all religious groups. In October, the Ambassador hosted a roundtable discussion with religious minority leaders to communicate U.S. support for religious freedom and to assess the ability of their faith communities to freely practice their respective beliefs in Oman.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The government's National Center for Statistics and Information estimates the population at 4.5 million; citizens constitute 61 percent of the population (data as of December). The government does not publish statistics on the percentages of citizens who practice Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia forms of Islam. In 2015 the Dubai-based al-Mesbar Center estimated Sunni Muslims at nearly 50 percent of the citizen population, Ibadhi Muslims at 45 percent, and Shia Muslims, Hindus, and Christians at a combined 5 percent.

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 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.

The penal code sets the maximum prison sentence for "insulting the Quran," "offending Islam or any [Abrahamic] religion," or "promoting religious and sectarian tensions" at 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 religious group is also criminalized with a maximum sentence of three-years' imprisonment. The law allows authorities to prosecute individuals for any message sent via any medium that "violates public order and morals." Using the internet in a way that "might prejudice public order or religious values" is a

crime that carries 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 MERA. New non-Muslim religious groups unaffiliated with a previously recognized sponsor must gain approval from MERA before they may register. Muslim groups must register, but the government – as benefactor of the country’s mosques – serves as their sponsor. MERA must also grant its approval for new Muslim groups to form. 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.

All individuals who deliver sermons in recognized religious groups must register with MERA. The licensing process for imams prohibits unlicensed lay members from preaching sermons in mosques, and licensed imams must deliver sermons within politically and socially acceptable parameters. 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 the construction 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.

The Basic Law states sharia is the basis for legislation. Principles of sharia inform the civil, commercial, and criminal codes, but there are no sharia courts. Civil courts adjudicate cases according to the nonsectarian civil code. The law states that Shia Muslims, whose jurisprudence in these matters differs from that of Sunni and Ibadhi 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 abuses 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 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

According to an NGO report, Zaher al-Abri, an Islamic scholar who serves on the government-appointed Council of State, said in a televised interview that women should wear the hijab and only expose their palms and faces in public. He also said that cosmetics lack divine sanction.

According to religious leaders, MERA continued to monitor sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. The government required all imams, regardless of their branch of Islam, to preach sermons within what the

government considered politically and socially acceptable parameters. These parameters, which the government outlined monthly, included the distribution of a list 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 the designated government parameters. In November, the Grand Mufti criticized on Twitter the Pope's comments expressing support for civil unions for lesbian and gay couples, describing this concept as "shameful and fallen."

Religious groups continued to report opaque processes and unclear guidelines for registration, but none reported they were actively seeking to register with the government. While no published rules, regulations, or criteria existed for new religious groups to receive ministerial approval, MERA reportedly considered a group's size, theology, belief system, leadership structure, and the availability of other worship opportunities before granting registration. MERA reportedly employed the same criteria whether the group was Muslim or non-Muslim. Observers said details of the process remained vague, although there were reports MERA consulted with existing religious communities before ruling on the application of a new religious group. According to MERA, there was no limit on the number of religious groups it could register. Representatives of some religious groups said that additional communication from MERA would help their communities navigate the process for obtaining property for religious facilities or clarify legal provisions governing religious practices.

The Church of Jesus Christ remained without a registration sponsor or a permanent place of worship. MERA was working with the Church, the Sikh community, and other groups to identify suitable, permanent places of worship, a MERA official said. Other religious minority groups, such as the Buddhist community, reported they did not have permanent independent places of worship as recognized groups, even though they represented a significant population in the country, 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. MERA was willing to work with other government ministries to secure additional, government-approved land to relieve the overcrowding that some minority groups were experiencing, a MERA official said. Although at least one of the groups said that it had submitted requests in the past to acquire land for a house of worship, these groups stated that they were not actively pursuing land with MERA during the year, in part because of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

MERA approved major religious celebrations for non-Muslim groups in commercial or public areas on a case-by-case basis. For example, in the past several Hindu groups held large religious celebrations in indoor and outdoor venues throughout the country, which they coordinated with MERA by submitting an annual calendar of events. Pandemic precautions precluded such large celebrations during the year.

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 stated they 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 MERA before importing religious materials and to submit a copy to MERA. Religious minority leaders said the ministry did not review all imported religious material for approval, and non-Muslims were often able to import literature without government scrutiny.

The government provided land for all approved religious groups to build and maintain religious facilities in the country. Christian community leaders and MERA said that they were coordinating to establish a second Christian cemetery, since the first was reaching capacity. As of December, MERA officials stated that they had enlisted the help of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning to identify land for this site.

According to members of the legal community, judges often considered the religiosity of a Muslim parent during custody hearings, although there is no law stating that custody is tied to religious affiliation.

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

In February, the ADL again called on the government to remove a number of anti-Semitic titles being sold through the country's annual state-run Muscat International Book Fair. According to the ADL, the listings included "numerous copies" of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *Mein Kampf*, and Henry Ford's *The International Jew*, as well as "over a dozen" additional anti-Semitic books.

In November, the MFA's Chief of Global Affairs participated in a two-hour virtual meeting with American Jewish Committee (AJC) officials as part of the country's outreach to representatives of non-Muslim religious groups.

The government, through MERA, continued to publish *al-Tafahum* (Understanding), a quarterly 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. In January, *al-Bawaba*, a regional news website, reported that activist Majda al-Balushi had received "massive backlash" on social media after she announced her conversion from Islam to Christianity, including criticism from some of her fellow citizens. *Al-Bawaba* stated that in a now deleted tweet, al-Balushi said, "I am very fortunate to be in America, because if I were in Oman, they would kill me and imprison me as soon as I criticized or left Islam."

The interfaith al-Amana Center, which was founded and is supported by the Reformed Church in America, a Protestant denomination, continued to sponsor programs to promote interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it shifted to hosting virtual programs in conjunction with MERA to introduce Islam to Protestant seminary students from different denominations. The center also worked closely with MERA to promote interfaith dialogue.

In a poll of 200 of the country's citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 conducted by a Dubai-based public relations firm and involving a team of international

experts, only 12 percent agreed that religion is “the most important” factor to their personal identity, among the lowest in the broader Middle East.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October, the Ambassador hosted a roundtable discussion with religious minority leaders to communicate U.S. support for religious freedom and to assess the ability of their faith communities to freely practice their respective beliefs in the country.

In December, the embassy posted a video message on social media promoting tolerance and diversity, exemplified by Americans of diverse backgrounds who come together and respect various holiday traditions in the United States.

Embassy officers met with MERA officials to encourage the government to continue its efforts to support the worship practices of all religious groups. Embassy officers raised concerns about overcrowding at minority religious groups’ places of worship and encouraged MERA to find a solution for religious groups seeking officially sanctioned space for worship. Embassy officers also met with religious minority leaders to discuss the needs of their religious groups and the challenges they faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The embassy also promoted religious freedom through its online presence by posting a message to social media on the 22nd anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act.