

# BRUNEI 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states that while the official religion is the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, all other religions may be practiced "in peace and harmony." The government enforces the Sharia Penal Code (SPC), which states offenses such as apostasy and blasphemy are punishable by corporal and capital punishment, including stoning to death, amputation of hands or feet, or caning. Apart from caning, however, no capital or corporal punishments have been handed down or enforced since 1957. A 2019 de facto moratorium on the death penalty remained in place. The SPC, in force in parallel with the common law-based secular penal code, applies to both Muslims and non-Muslims, including foreigners, with non-Muslims exempted from certain sections. Under the SPC, the Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF) and Religious Enforcement Division officers under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) cooperate on investigations of crimes covered by both secular law and sharia. The government permitted members of non-Muslim religious minorities to practice their faiths but continued its official ban of religious groups it considers "deviant," including the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Baha'i Faith, and Jehovah's Witnesses. All places of worship were closed in August due to a COVID-19 outbreak, but MORA and Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) did not officially inform non-Islamic places of worship of the closure. The government did not ratify the United Nations Convention against Torture (UNCAT), but the Foreign Minister reported the ratification process was ongoing. Non-Muslims and members of Muslim minorities again reported no significant changes with respect to the practice of minority religions since the full implementation of the SPC in 2019 but noted that the law continued to impose restrictions on the ability of non-Muslims to proselytize. Custom and Excise officers confiscated a Bible mailed to a foreign worker by his wife for personal use in October. Custom officials reported the worker could reclaim the Bible because it was for personal use, but the process required a claimant to seek written approval from RBPF, the Internal Security Department, and MORA's Islamic Learning Center before it could be returned.

Non-Muslims and Muslims continued to face social pressure to conform to Islamic guidelines regarding behavior. Following the death in May of Cardinal Cornelius Sim, the country's first Roman Catholic cardinal, many individuals from various faith backgrounds used online forums to praise the Cardinal's work. Legislative council member Khairunnisa binti Haji Ash-ari faced social media criticism after she reintroduced a 2012 proposal for MOHA to open village head positions to

women in the March annual parliamentary sessions. Many social media users stated women should be ineligible for these positions due to Islamic responsibilities mixed in with the village head's otherwise administrative role. Social media users expressed anger concerning the acquittal of a religion teacher on sexual abuse charges, saying the government gave him preferential treatment due to his association with MORA. Reports indicated that some individuals who wished to convert to another religion feared ostracism by friends, family, and their community.

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officers engaged throughout the year with senior government officials regarding the effects of the SPC on religious freedom, the ratification of UNCAT, and the protection of minority religious rights. The Charge d'Affaires also encouraged MORA to support religious freedom by resuming interfaith dialogues with religious minorities. U.S. officials continued to coordinate with other governments, including Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, regarding shared concerns about the SPC. Embassy officials visited places of worship and spoke with leaders of various religious groups to discuss the concerns of religious minorities regarding the implications of the SPC for non-Muslims and the limitations placed on the open practice of religions other than Islam. Embassy officials emphasized U.S. support for religious freedom and encouraged religious minority groups to maintain communication with the embassy.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 471,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2011 census (the most recent), 78.8 percent of the population is Muslim, 8.7 percent Christian, and 7.8 percent Buddhist, while the remaining 4.7 percent consists of other religions, including indigenous beliefs.

There is significant variation in religious identification among ethnic groups. According to 2019 official statistics (the most recent), ethnic Malay citizens comprise 66 percent of the population and are defined by law as Muslims from birth. The ethnic Chinese population, which is approximately 10 percent of the total population and includes both citizens and stateless permanent residents, is 65 percent Buddhist and 20 percent Christian. Indigenous tribes, such as the Dusun, Bisaya, Murut, and Iban, make up approximately 4 percent of the population and are estimated to be 50 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, and the remainder followers of other religious groups, including adherents of traditional practices. The remaining 18 percent of the population includes foreign-born workers,

primarily from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and other South Asian countries. According to official statistics, approximately half of these temporary and permanent residents are Muslim, more than one-quarter Christian, and 15 percent Buddhist.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states the religion of the country shall be the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam but allows all other religions to be practiced "in peace and harmony" by the persons professing them.

The legal system is divided between secular law and sharia, which have parallel systems of both criminal and civil/family law and operate separate courts under a single judiciary department. The civil courts are based on common law. The sharia courts follow the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence, in which there is no concept of legal precedent and judges are not bound by the decisions of a higher court. Sharia courts have jurisdiction over both criminal law and civil/family matters involving Muslims and hear cases brought under longstanding sharia legislation as well as under the SPC.

The SPC spells out provisions for corporal and capital punishment for murder, theft, adultery, rape, sodomy, apostasy, blasphemy, and other acts deemed crimes under sharia. Depending on the type and specifics of the offense, these punishments include fines, imprisonment, whipping, caning, amputation of hands or feet, or death (including by stoning). The SPC identifies murder, adultery, rape, sodomy, apostasy, and blasphemy as capital offenses, although the law requires either a confession or the testimony of multiple pious Muslim male eyewitnesses to support a death sentence. Apart from caning, however, no capital or corporal punishments have been handed down or enforced since 1957. A de facto moratorium on the death penalty, announced by Sultan Hassanal Bolkihah in 2019, remained in effect during the year.

Most SPC sections apply to both Muslims and non-Muslims, including foreigners, and they also are applicable to offenses committed outside the country by citizens or permanent residents. Non-Muslims are exempt from certain sections, such as requirements for men to join Friday prayers and pay *zakat* (obligatory annual almsgiving). The SPC states that Muslims will be identified for purposes of the law by "general reputation," but without further definition.

The SPC incorporates longstanding Sharia-based domestic laws that prohibit drinking alcohol, propagating religions other than Islam, eating in public during the fasting hours of Ramadan, cross-dressing, and close physical proximity between unmarried persons of the opposite sex. It prohibits “indecent behavior,” including pregnancies out of wedlock, and criminalizes any act that “tends to tarnish the image of Islam, deprave a person, bring bad influence, or cause anger to the person who is likely to have seen the act.”

Punishments included under the SPC have different standards of proof from the common law-based penal code, such as requiring four pious men to witness personally an act of fornication to support a sentence of stoning. Stoning sentences, however, may be supported by a confession in lieu of witness testimony at the discretion of a sharia judge. If neither qualifying testimony nor a confession is available, the possible sentences are limited to caning, imprisonment, or fines.

The government describes its official national philosophy as Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), or Malay Islamic Monarchy, which it defines as “a system that encompasses strong Malay cultural influences, stressing the importance of Islam in daily life and governance, and respect for the monarchy as represented by His Majesty the Sultan.” The government has said this system is essential to the country’s way of life and is its main defense against “extremism.” The government-run MIB Supreme Council seeks to spread and strengthen MIB philosophy and ensure MIB is enshrined in the nation’s laws and policies. MIB is a compulsory subject for students in both public and private schools, including at the university level.

MORA’s Religious Enforcement Division leads investigations of crimes that exist only in the SPC and other sharia legislation, such as male Muslims failing to pray on Fridays. The RBPF investigates cases involving crimes not covered by sharia legislation, such as human trafficking. RBPF and Religious Enforcement Division officers cooperate on investigations of crimes covered by both the secular and sharia laws. In such cases, an “assessment committee” composed of secular and sharia prosecutors and secular and sharia law enforcement officers decides which court system will try the case. The deliberations of the assessment committee to determine whether specific cases will proceed through secular or sharia court are not public, and the government does not make public the committee’s bases for its decisions.

The government bans religious groups it considers “deviant,” including the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, al-Arqam, Abdul Razak Mohammad, al-Ma’unah, Saihoni Tasipan, Tariqat Mufarridiyyah, Silat Lintau, Qadiyaniah, the Baha’i Faith, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The list is based on fatwas proclaimed by the state mufti or the Islamic Religious Council – a government body and the sultan’s highest authority on matters on Islam – and is available on MORA’s website. The SPC also bans most non-Sunni forms of Islam and any practice or display of “black magic.”

The SPC includes a list of words and expressions, including the word “Allah,” reserved for use by only Muslims or in relation to Islam. MORA officials state that the use of certain words such as “Allah” by non-Muslims does not constitute an SPC offense when used in a nonreligious context or social activity.

Under the SPC, Muslims are not permitted to renounce or change their religion. Non-Muslims must be at least 14 years and seven months old to convert or renounce their religion. If either parent converts to Islam, their children younger than 14 years and seven months automatically become Muslim.

The law requires all organizations, including religious groups, to register and provide the names of their members. Applicants are subject to background checks of leaders and board members, and proposed organizations are subject to naming requirements. Registered organizations must furnish information on leadership, election of officers, members, assets, activities, and any other information the registrar requests. Benefits of registration include the ability to operate, reserve space in public buildings, and apply for permission to raise funds. The Registrar of Societies, under MOHA, oversees the application process, exercises discretion over applications, and is authorized to refuse approval for any reason.

Organizations are prohibited from affiliation with any organization outside the country without written approval by the registrar. Unregistered organizations may face charges of unlawful assembly and may be subject to fines. Individuals who participate in or influence others to join unregistered organizations may be fined, arrested, and imprisoned. The penalty for violating laws on the registration and activity of organizations is a fine of up to 10,000 Brunei dollars (BND) (\$7,400), imprisonment for up to three years, or both.

The law states that any public assembly of five or more persons requires official approval in advance. Under longstanding emergency powers, this applies to all forms of public assembly, including religious assembly. In practice, however,

places of worship are viewed as private places in which gatherings do not require approval.

The law forbids the teaching or promotion of any religion other than Islam to Muslims or to persons of no faith. Under the SPC, the penalty for propagating religions other than Islam is up to five years in prison, a fine of up to 20,000 BND (\$14,800), or both. The SPC includes a provision that makes it illegal to criticize Islam as well as the SPC itself.

Laws and regulations limit access to religious literature. The law states it is an offense for a person to import any publication deemed objectionable, which is defined in part as describing, depicting, or expressing matters of race or religion in a manner likely to cause “feelings of enmity, hatred, ill will, or hostility between different racial or religious groups.” The law also bans distributing materials relating to religions other than Islam to Muslims or persons of no faith. All religious texts are listed as restricted items for import and require a government import permit before shipment.

The law establishes two sets of schools: those offering the national or international curriculum that are administered by the Ministry of Education, and those offering supplemental religious education (*ugama*) that are administered by MORA.

Ministry of Education schools teach a course on Islamic religious knowledge that is required for all Muslim children between the ages of seven and 15 who reside in the country and who have at least one parent who is a citizen or permanent resident. Non-Muslims are exempted from all religious study requirements and receive teaching on moral behavior. Non-Muslim students are still required to take MIB classes.

Ugama instruction in MORA schools is a seven-to-eight-year course that teaches the day-to-day practice of Sunni Islam according to the Shafi’i school. Under a 2012 government order, ugama instruction is mandatory for Muslim students between the age of seven and 14 who hold citizenship or permanent residency; many students attend ugama schools in the afternoon after Ministry of Education schools have adjourned. Parents may be fined up to 5,000 BND (\$3,700), imprisoned for a term not exceeding one year, or both, for failure to comply with the order. The law does not make accommodations for Muslims who have non-Shafi’i beliefs. MORA also administers a set of schools taught in Arabic that offer the national curriculum combined with ugama religious education.

Public and private schools, including private schools run by churches, are prohibited from providing religious instruction on beliefs other than the Shafi'i school of Islam. Under the SPC, schools may be fined or school officials imprisoned for teaching non-Islamic religious subjects. The SPC criminalizes exposing Muslim children or the children of parents who have no religious affiliation to the beliefs and practices of any religion other than Islam. The law requires that any person wishing to teach on matters relating to Islam must obtain official permission. Churches and religious schools are permitted to offer private religious education in private settings, such as someone's home.

All parental rights are awarded to the Muslim parent if a child is born to one Muslim and one non-Muslim parent. The non-Muslim parent is not recognized in any official document, including the child's birth certificate, unless that parent has converted to Islam. The law bans any Muslim from surrendering custody of a minor or dependent in his or her guardianship to a non-Muslim.

Under the SPC, non-Muslims may be arrested for *zina* (fornication or adultery) or *khalwat* (close physical proximity between two unmarried individuals of opposite sexes), provided that the other accused party is Muslim. Foreigners are also subject to these laws.

A regulation requires businesses that produce, supply, and serve food and beverages to obtain a halal certificate or apply for an exemption if serving non-Muslims.

MORA has declared circumcision for Muslim girls (*sunat*) a religious rite obligatory under Islam and describes it as the removal of the hood of the clitoris (Type I per World Health Organization classification). The government has stated it does not consider this practice to be female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and has expressed support for the World Health Organization's call for the elimination of FGM/C. In his 2017 fatwas, the State Mufti declared that both male and female circumcision are required and specified that female circumcision involves a "small cut above the vagina."

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

## **Government Practices**

In response to a COVID-19 outbreak, the Minister of Religious Affairs announced all mosques and other places of worship would close on August 7 until at least 70 percent of the population was fully vaccinated. As a result, many religious services moved online. Unlike for the closures mandated in 2020, MOHA and MORA did not inform members of minority religious groups about the rules for closing and reopening of churches and places of worship, and instead, they had to rely on press conferences and news articles for details.

By year's end the government still had not ratified the UNCAT, which it signed in 2015 following widespread condemnation of the government's implementation of the first phase of the SPC order in 2014. Foreign Minister Dato Erywan stated, however, that the government was in the ratification process.

Legal sources reported that sharia courts continued to prosecute criminal, divorce and probate cases until August 7, when the country locked down to contain a second wave of COVID-19. Prior to the COVID outbreak, local media outlets reported on cases heard in the sharia and civil courts, but coverage of sharia court hearings ceased during the lockdown while reporting on civil court proceedings continued.

The government did not issue official or public condolences or acknowledge the death in May of the country's first Catholic cardinal, Cornelius Sim. Cardinal Sim had led interfaith dialogues and gatherings of interdenominational faith leaders from churches throughout the country and frequently acted as the Christian community's liaison with the government.

Non-Muslims and members of Muslim minority groups reported no significant changes with respect to the practice of minority religions since the full implementation of the SPC in 2019, but they said the law continued to prohibit the ability of non-Muslims to proselytize Muslims or other non-Muslims. MORA announced 414 residents had converted to Islam in 2020, 94 of whom belonged to the Iban indigenous community who inhabit rural areas, areas where the sultan had called on MORA to do more to increase the spread of Islam. One non-Muslim said that some Muslims viewed COVID-19 as a curse from God which led to an increase in efforts to convert Christians to Islam, but also said that members of the Christian community in general believed they were under less scrutiny and pressure compared to when the SPC was introduced in 2019. The said the SPC's blasphemy provisions could be used to constrain non-Muslim groups' activities but expressed more concern about subtle government pressure than about the possibility of harsh punishments under the SPC.



The government continued to periodically warn the population about the preaching of non-Shafi'i versions of Islam, including both "liberal" practices and those associated with jihadism, Wahhabism, or Salafism.

MORA awarded contracts worth more than 13.5 million BND (\$9.99 million) to local companies to build three new mosques in a virtual signing ceremony in October, adding to more than 99 registered mosques according to 2015 government data. Under the contracts, construction of the mosques would take two years and were projected to serve more than 6,000 congregants. The mosque construction fund was partially financed by monthly salary deductions from Muslim government workers, except those who took the necessary steps to opt out of automatic salary deductions.

MORA continued to provide all mosques with approved sermons for Friday services. The government required that registered imams deliver the sermons and forbade deviance from the approved text.

There was no legal requirement for women to wear head coverings in public; however, religious authorities continued to reinforce social customs to encourage Muslim women to wear a head covering (known locally as a *tudong*), and many women did so. When applying for passports, drivers' licenses, and national identity cards, Muslim females were required to wear a *tudong*. Muslim women employed by the government were expected to wear a *tudong* to work, although some chose not to with no reports of official repercussions. In government schools and institutions of higher learning, Muslim female students were required to wear a uniform that includes a head covering. Male students were expected to wear the *songkok* (a traditional hat), although this was not required in all schools. Women who were incarcerated, including non-Muslims, were required to wear a uniform that included a *tudong*.

As in past years, the government limited traditional Lunar New Year lion dance performances to a three-day period and restricted them to the country's sole Chinese Buddhist temple, Chinese school halls, and private residences of Chinese Association members (comprised of the members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and several other Chinese business associations). Members of the royal family publicly attended Lunar New Year celebrations and lion dance performances during the allowed period, with extensive coverage in state-influenced media.

The government continued to enforce strict customs controls on importing non-Islamic religious texts such as Bibles, as well as on Islamic instructional materials or scriptures intended for sale or distribution. Authorities generally continued to ban the import of non-Islamic religious texts, and the censorship board continued to review Islamic texts to ensure they did not contain text that deviated from the Shafi'i school of Islam. Customs officials continued to check personal packages entering the country to ensure they did not contain anything of a non-Shafi'i Islamic or perceived sexual nature, such as magazines showing women in swimsuits.

Custom and Excise officers confiscated a Bible mailed to a foreign worker by his wife for personal use in October. Custom officials reported the worker could reclaim the Bible because it was for personal use, but the process required the claimant to obtain prior written approval from the RBPF, the Internal Security Department, and MORA's Islamic Learning Center.

Christian leaders continued to state that a longstanding fatwa discouraging Muslims from supporting non-Islamic faiths inhibited the expansion, renovation, or construction of new non-Islamic facilities; in accordance with the fatwa, government officials slowed or did not process building plans and permits for churches. Christian religious groups said that authorities generally only permitted churches and associated schools to repair and renovate buildings on their sites if required for safety. The process for obtaining approval to renovate church buildings and associated school buildings remained lengthy and difficult, and there were continuing reports of the government stalling new construction projects for not meeting the complicated requirements. With only six approved churches in the country, the last built in the 1960s before the country gained independence, facilities were often too small to accommodate their congregations without significant overflow seating outdoors. Several sources reported that schools associated with Christian churches had to pay government business taxes despite being nonprofit organizations. They said this measure was not applied to other nonprofit private schools with no religious affiliation. The Chinese temple was also subject to the same fatwa. Christian worshippers continued to report difficulty accessing churches on many Sundays because of road closures by the government for official events, with some services being rescheduled.

The government reported that many non-Muslim children elected to take courses on Islam. Reportedly, those applying for government-funded scholarships believed having such courses on their transcripts could be advantageous. Most school textbooks were illustrated to portray Islam as the norm, and women and girls were

shown wearing the tudong. There were no depictions of the practices of other religious groups in textbooks.

Authorities continued to prohibit non-Muslims and non-Shafi'i Muslims from receiving non-Shafi'i religious education in schools. All church-associated schools were recognized by the Ministry of Education and remained open to students of any religion, although they were not permitted to offer religious instruction other than for Shafi'i Islam.

The Minister of Religious Affairs reported the ministry was researching and evaluating school schedules for religious schools in response to public online criticism regarding difficulties Muslim parents faced in sending children to MORA religious schools. Parents said children were forced to change school uniforms and eat lunch in the car while traveling from nonreligious schools in the morning to attend religious classes in the evening. Parents also reported they were often late to work after lunch due to religious school schedules.

Throughout the year, the government continued to enforce restrictions requiring all businesses to close for the two hours of Friday prayers.

Religious authorities again allowed nonhalal restaurants and nonhalal sections in supermarkets to operate without interference, but they continued to hold public outreach sessions to encourage restaurants to become halal.

The government continued to offer incentives to prospective converts to Islam and the Shafi'i school, especially those from indigenous communities in rural areas, including help with housing and welfare assistance. The government allocated travel funding so that those who could not participate in the Hajj due to COVID-19 travel restrictions during the year could do so in the future. The government gave presentations on the benefits of converting to Islam that received extensive press coverage in state-influenced media. According to government statistics, 414 individuals converted to Islam during the year, compared with 293 in 2020. Converts included citizens and permanent residents as well as foreigners. Government policy supported Islam through the national MIB philosophy as well as through government pledges to make the country a *zikir* nation (one that remembers and obeys Allah).

In a January roundtable meeting with members of LGBTQ community, participants discussed what they stated were societal pressures stemming from the

country's deep-seated Islamic culture and discussed MORA's "raid" of a private party during which members of their community were targeted.

Despite the absence of a legal prohibition of Muslims marrying non-Muslims, all Islamic weddings continued to require sharia court approval, and officiants, who were required to be imams approved by the government, also required the non-Muslim party to convert prior to the marriage.

Most government meetings and ceremonies commenced with an Islamic prayer, which the government continued to state was not a legal requirement but a matter of custom.

The government continued to require residents to carry identity cards that stated the bearer's ethnicity and were used in part to determine whether he or she were Muslim; for example, all ethnic Malays, including those traveling in the country, were assumed to be Muslim. Malays were required to follow certain Islamic religious practices or potentially face fines, arrest, and imprisonment. Visitors to the country were asked to identify their religion on their visa applications.

Social media users criticized MORA's December 22 instructions requiring shops to remove Christmas images and products one month after many stores had already started Christmas promotions. California-based Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf was among establishments the MORA official visited, prompting some social media users to call for greater religious tolerance. Although December 25 remained an official holiday on which government offices closed, including MORA, according to the social media accounts MORA officials stated the enforcement measures were needed to "control the act of celebrating Christmas excessively and openly, which could damage the faith of the Muslim community." The government allowed Christmas decorations in private residences.

MORA faced online criticism after it punished a local nonhalal restaurant catering to non-Muslim customers for violating laws prohibiting dine-in service during Ramadan fasting hours. While similar incidents and the ensuing online criticism had occurred in previous years, comments were more numerous and personal during the year in the wake of the MORA Minister's son receiving a five-year prison sentence for embezzlement and corruption.

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

Non-Muslims and Muslims face social pressure to conform to Islamic behavioral guidelines. Some male Muslims reportedly felt pressure from family and friends to attend Friday prayers even though they did not hold strong religious beliefs. Members of the LGBTQ community expressed fears about openly expressing their sexual or gender identity, saying they believed it would bring shame on their families for violating religious mores.

Following the death of Cardinal Sim in May, individuals from a variety of faith backgrounds made numerous comments in online forums praising the Cardinal for his efforts to serve the people of the country, according to local press.

Legislative council member Khairunnisa binti Haji Ash-ari faced social media backlash when she reintroduced a 2012 proposal for MOHA to open village head positions to women in the March annual parliamentary sessions. In her speech she pointed out that women held positions of significant leadership in the government and private sector, and there should be no issue in electing a village head regardless of gender. Many social media users did not agree, using Instagram to state women should be ineligible due to the Islamic responsibilities mixed in with the village head's otherwise administrative role. The Minister of Home Affairs said the matter would be taken into consideration but by year's end had taken no action. One local online newspaper, *The Scoop*, turned off comments due to "abusive and derogatory" language and remarks containing misogyny, racism, and prejudice.

Social media users expressed anger after a court acquitted a religious teacher charged with sexual abuse. Comments on Reddit, Borneo Bulletin's Instagram, and Media Permata's Instagram drew comparisons and contrasts with another sexual assault case reported on the same day in which a court handed down a lengthy sentence to the defendant. Many commentators said the justice system in the country was flawed because it accorded leniency to the rich and powerful, and stated the court gave the acquitted teacher preferential treatment due to his association with MORA. They also questioned the need for six witnesses in prosecuting the religious teacher's case, while this was not required in the other case.

There were again reports that some individuals who wished to convert to another religion continued to fear social retribution, such as ostracism by friends, family, and their community. If parents converted to Islam, there was often family and official pressure for the children to do the same if they were not young enough to have been automatically converted with their parents. Some non-Muslims said

they continued to feel pressured in the workplace or in social groups to convert to Islam. While the SPC outlined harsh punishments for Muslims converting to another religion, there were no known cases during the year of the government having applied those penalties. Non-Muslims reported, however, that government officials monitored their religious services and events to ensure that no Muslims attended and that there was no anti-Islamic content.

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

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials raised U.S. concerns regarding the effects of the SPC, the importance of ratification of UNCAT, and the protection of minority religious group rights with government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Attorney General’s Chambers, and the Chief Justice of Brunei. The Charge d’Affaires also encouraged MORA to support religious freedom by resuming interfaith dialogues with religious minorities. U.S. officials continued to coordinate with other governments, including Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, regarding shared concerns about the SPC.

Embassy officials visited places of worship and met with religious leaders to discuss the concerns of religious minorities regarding the implications of the SPC for the non-Muslim community and the limitations placed on the open practice of other religions. Embassy officials emphasized U.S. support for religious freedom and encouraged religious minority groups to maintain communication with the embassy.