

# OMAN 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

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.”

According to the Basic Law, the Sultan must be a Muslim. A royal decree issued by the Sultan on February 12 established a new mechanism for the appointment of a Crown Prince, stating that the Crown Prince must be a Muslim, sane, and a legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents. 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) continued to monitor sermons and distribute 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), 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, though they requested more space to ease overcrowding concerns. 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. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), on May 10, government-appointed Grand Mufti Ahmad al-Khalili issued a message describing the confrontations at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem between Israeli police and Palestinian demonstrators as an “attempt to desecrate” the mosque “by the enemies of God, the corrupters.”

Members of religious minorities reported conversion from Islam was viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community.

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy officers met with government officials throughout the year to discuss support for freedom of religion and the needs of minority groups. The Ambassador met with the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs in March to convey U.S. support for religious freedom. The Ambassador and embassy officers also met regularly with religious minority

leaders and faith-based community members to discuss the needs and support the worship practices of all religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.7 million (midyear 2021). The government's National Center for Statistics and Information estimates the population at 4.5 million; citizens constitute approximately 62 percent of the population. The government does not publish statistics on the percentages of citizens who practice Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia 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. A royal decree on the Basic Law, issued by the Sultan on February 12, establishes a new mechanism for the appointment of a Crown Prince. The decree states that to be eligible to govern the country, the Crown Prince must be a Muslim, sane, and a legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents.

There is no provision in 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 in prison. 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 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. No published rules, regulations, or criteria existed for new religious groups to receive ministerial approval. 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), 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 a statement of 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. According to the Personal Status Law, a mother may lose custody of a child after the child turns seven if she is not the same religion as the father.

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 enters the country.

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

## **Government Practices**

On July 23, security forces arrested internet activist Ghaith al-Shibli at his home in Sohar, according to the Gulf Center for Human Rights and social media. Al-Shibli's arrest was followed by the arrest of a number of internet activists who participated in the dialogues that al-Shibli organized on religious freedom and other topics. Other activists reportedly detained in the same crackdown included Maryam al-Nuaimi and Abdullah Hassan. Both of their Twitter accounts were suspended following their arrests.

On August 9, police arrested Talal bin Ahmed al-Salmani after he submitted a request to the director of the Bousher Police Station in the Governorate of Muscat for permission to organize a peaceful rally on August 11 calling for liquor shops to be shut down, according to human rights observers based outside the country. Authorities released al-Salmani in October, according to the state-run Oman News Agency.

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 Grand Mufti, the senior Ibadhi cleric in the country, who was appointed in 1975, remained the only cleric able to speak publicly outside the designated government parameters. Government officials made clear he did not represent the views of the government.

Religious groups, including some who were actively seeking to register with the government, continued to report opaque processes and unclear guidelines for registration. 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 and clear guidelines from MERA would

help their communities navigate the process of obtaining property for religious facilities and clarify legal provisions governing religious practices.

Some religious communities remained without a registration sponsor or permanent place of worship, including the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Sikh and Buddhist communities. MERA was working with the Church, the Sikh community, and other groups to identify suitable, permanent places of worship, a MERA official said. This process has stalled, some community leaders reported. 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. Some non-Muslim minority groups continued to report overcrowding at their places of worship and said that they requested more space to ease overcrowding concerns. According to some religious leaders, space limitations also caused overcrowding at some private homes used for non-Islamic worship. Some communities worshiped via virtual meetings or met in reduced numbers due to COVID-19 safety measures, temporarily easing space limitations. A MERA official stated the ministry was willing to work with other government ministries to secure additional, government-approved land to relieve the overcrowding that some minority groups experienced. At least one of the groups said that it had submitted requests in the past to acquire land for a house of worship, and it intended to begin actively pursuing land acquisition again. The group reported that in February MERA asked it to wait until a new cabinet was in place before inquiring about land. At year's end, the group continued to engage with officials in pursuit of the acquisition. The government paused the land distribution process, in part because of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

MERA informally approved the Protestant Church of Oman hosting of worship services conducted by religious groups lacking their own houses of worship. MERA also allowed the Sri Lankan embassy to host Buddhist religious services and ceremonies on its compound.

MERA approved religious celebrations for non-Muslim groups in commercial or public areas on a case-by-case basis as pandemic-related restrictions eased, returning to pre-pandemic practices. Hindu temples were permitted to host

modified Diwali celebrations, which they coordinated with MERA, with pandemic precautions including social distancing and takeaway food instead of eating as a group in the temple.

Authorities blocked the import of certain publications, including religious texts, without the necessary permit. Shipping companies said customs officials sometimes confiscated these materials. 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. Religious groups said that consistent with the government's censorship policy mandating prior review of any published material, they 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 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 the end of the year, Christian community leaders indicated that MERA officials were supportive in their efforts to find a location that met their needs. MERA officials stated that they had enlisted the help of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning to identify a site for this purpose.

According to members of the legal community, judges often considered the religious affiliation of parents during custody hearings.

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

According to the ADL, on May 10, government-appointed Grand Mufti Ahmad al-Khalili issued a message describing the confrontations at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem between Israeli police and Palestinian demonstrators as an “attempt to desecrate” the mosque “by the enemies of God, the corrupters.” According to the ADL report, al-Khalili said the violence was a “blatant plot against Islam” by the “dirty” and “defiling” occupation. Khalili subsequently referred to Israel as “the enemy” and called on all Muslims to “liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and cleanse it from the befoulment of the occupation.”

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

The government, through MERA, continued to publish a digital version of *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. MERA discontinued the print version of *al-Tafahum* to cut costs.

MERA hosted events marking the International Day for Tolerance on November 16-17, in coordination with the Ministry of Information. Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Salmi reaffirmed the country's commitment to peaceful coexistence, and an interfaith panel discussed moving beyond mere tolerance to embracing diversity. The event also featured the exhibitions "Message of Islam from Oman" and "Message of Peace from Oman to the World," which shared words of tolerance and acceptance from members of religious groups in the country.

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 non-Muslim religious leaders, conversion from Islam was viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community.

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 year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it hosted 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.

One Arabic-language newspaper, *Al Watan*, featured multiple cartoons critical of the Israeli government in which a man representing stereotypical anti-Semitic tropes of Jews symbolized the state of Israel.



The UAE research and consulting firm PSB took a June poll of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 in 17 Arab states and reported 20 percent of Omani respondents said their religion was the most important factor in their personal identity, which was lower than the regionwide result of 34 percent. Other choices offered by the poll as possible responses included family/tribe, nationality, Arabic heritage, political beliefs, language, and gender.

An initiative, Fak Kurba (Redeeming Anguish), by the Omani Lawyers Association's (OLA), focused on the release of prisoners jailed for noncriminal offenses, including unpaid debts. An OLA official said Fak Kurba's supporters were motivated by Islamic humanitarian principles, and the group conducted fundraising during Ramadan to free prisoners by Eid al-Fitr.

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

The Ambassador met with the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs in March to convey U.S. support for religious freedom. Embassy officers met with MERA officials throughout the year to encourage the government to continue its efforts to support the worship practices of all religious groups. Embassy officers encouraged MERA to find a solution for religious groups seeking officially sanctioned space for worship. The Ambassador and embassy officials attended MERA-hosted events marking the International Day for Tolerance on November 16-17.

The Ambassador and embassy officers also met with religious minority leaders and faith-based groups to discuss the needs of their groups and the challenges they faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Embassy officers attended religious celebrations to support religious freedom, including Diwali in November.

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.