

# BRUNEI 2022 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." According to the constitution, the Sultan is the head of "the official religion" and is advised by the Islamic Religious Council "on all matters relating to the Islamic Religion." The Sultan may, after consultation with the Religious Council, make laws in respect of matters relating to the practice of Islam. 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, no capital, corporal, or death sentences were handed down or enforced during the year. The SPC 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 Minister of Religious Affairs reported in July that his ministry was only responsible for Islamic affairs. During the annual Legislative Council session in March, the Minister warned that defamatory and slanderous remarks against MORA, including those spread on social media platforms, can threaten Islamic beliefs; he said individuals responsible for making these remarks can be charged according to the law. 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. 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.

Non-Muslims and Muslims continued to face social pressure to conform to Islamic guidelines regarding behavior. Observers reported that throughout the year, a Muslim youth group was active in preaching to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community to “see the light,” leave the community, and become more pious. Reports indicated that some individuals who wished to convert to another religion feared ostracism by friends, family, and their community.

The U.S. Ambassador met with the Minister of Religious Affairs and raised the issue of representation for religious minorities and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials raised concerns regarding the effects of the SPC, the importance of ratification of the UN Convention against Torture (UNCAT), and the protection of the rights of individual members of minority religious group with government officials, including representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Attorney General’s Chambers (AGC), and the chief justice. U.S. officials continued to coordinate with other governments, including Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, regarding their shared concerns about the SPC.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 478,054 (midyear 2022). According to the government’s 2021 census (the most recent), there are 441,000 residents in the country; according to the census, 82.1 percent of the population are Muslim, 8.7 percent Christian, and 7.8 percent Buddhist, while the remaining 4.7 percent consist of other religions, including indigenous beliefs.

According to Boston University’s 2020 World Religions Database, the population includes approximately 258,000 Muslims, 59 percent of the population; 52,000

Christians, 11.9 percent of the population; 44,000 followers of Indigenous religions, 10 percent of the population; and 42,000 Buddhists, 9.7 percent of the population.

There is significant variation in religious identification among ethnic groups. According to 2021 official statistics (the most recent), ethnic Malay citizens comprise 65.7 percent of the population and are defined by law as Muslims from birth. The ethnic Chinese population, which is approximately 9.4 percent of the 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 spiritual 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 are Christian, and 15 percent are 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. According to the constitution, the Sultan is the head of "the official religion" and is advised by the Islamic Religious Council "on all matters relating to the Islamic Religion." The Sultan may, after consultation with the Religious Council, make laws in respect of matters relating to the practice of Islam.

The constitution requires that all cabinet ministers be of Malay ethnicity and Muslim except as permitted by the Sultan.

The constitution establishes the Legislative Council, appointed by the Sultan, which may propose laws on nonbudgetary matters. The constitution allows the Sultan to “make laws for the peace, order and good government of Brunei.”

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 newer SPC.

While sharia courts have long had jurisdiction in certain civil matters when at least one party is Muslim, many SPC elements apply to all persons in the country, regardless of nationality or religion; some sections of the law have specific applicability to Muslims. The sharia courts continued to prosecute criminal, divorce, and probate cases; unlike in secular courts, sharia court cases are not reported in the local media, although sharia court hearings are open to members of the public.

In cases involving offenses covered by both the SPC and secular law – such as murder, rape, and theft – an “assessment committee,” which includes a secular law prosecutor, a sharia prosecutor, a senior police officer, and a senior religious enforcement officer, determines whether the secular or sharia court system should try the case. The committee’s deliberations and the grounds for its decisions are not made public. If a dispute arises, the attorney general acts as final arbiter.

The law does not provide specifically for an independent judiciary, and both the secular and sharia courts fall administratively under the Prime Minister’s Office, run by the Sultan as Prime Minister and the crown prince as Senior Minister. In

both judicial systems, the Sultan appoints all higher-court judges, who serve at his pleasure.

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. According to the SPC, this testimony must be from an eyewitness beyond repute (someone with no reported “faults” and who has never missed a daily prayer session). The same government officials also reported that finding witnesses who meet this standard would be almost impossible. With a moratorium on the death penalty, there have been no cases to date where the piety of a witness has had to be determined. Some observers have said a person's piety would be determined by general reputation, standing in the community, and at the mosque. Other than canings, no capital punishments or amputations, corporal punishments, or death sentences were handed down or enforced 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 personally witness 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 described 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 most senior advisors on matters on Islam – and is available on MORA’s website. The SPC also bans most non-Sunni forms of Islam, as well as any practice or display of “black magic.”

The SPC includes a list of words and expressions, including the word “Allah,” that are 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.

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. The law permits civil marriage for non-Muslims.

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 the Ministry of Home Affairs, 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 (\$7,500), 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 Brunei dollars (\$15,000), or both. The SPC includes a provision that makes it illegal to criticize Islam as well as the SPC itself. The SPC includes provisions barring contempt for or insult of the Sultan, the administration of sharia, or any law related to Islam. SPC sections provide, in certain circumstances, for death sentences for apostasy from Islam, deriding Islamic scriptures, and declaring oneself as God, among other offenses.

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 SPC prohibits publication or importation of publications giving instruction about Islam contrary to sharia. It also bars the distribution to Muslims or to persons with no religion of publications related to religions other than Islam. The SPC bars the publication, broadcast, or public expression of a list of words generally associated with Islam (such as Quran) in a non-Islamic context. The SPC also prohibits religious teaching without written approval.

The law establishes two sets of schools: those offering the national or international curriculum administered by the Ministry of Education and those offering supplemental religious education (ugama) 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 Brunei dollars (\$3,700), be 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 fatwas, the State Mufti has 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**

The Minister of Religious Affairs reported in July that his ministry was responsible only for Islamic affairs. He stated the MFA was responsible for the government's relationship with religions other than Islam and for interfaith dialogues. He stated his ministry was responsible for setting government policy for the official religion, the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam.

At year's end, the government had not ratified the UNCAT, which it signed in 2015 following widespread condemnation of its implementation of the first phase of the SPC order in 2014. Observers stated senior officials from the Prime Minister's Office and the MFA continued to report the ratification process was ongoing.

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 400 residents had converted to Islam in 2022. Observers 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.

During the annual Legislative Council session in March, the Minister of Religious Affairs warned that defamatory and slanderous remarks against MORA, including those spread on social media platforms, can threaten Islamic beliefs; he stated that individuals responsible for making such remarks can be charged according to the law, but no one was charged during the year. The government continued awareness campaigns warning citizens about the misuse of and social ills

associated with social media, including the use of social media to criticize Islam, sharia, or the monarchy.

According to observers familiar with the human rights situation in the country, the government did not allow nontraditional Christian communities to register as churches.

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, driver 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, according to government officials, some chose not to without 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 Chinese 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 residencies 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. Public entertainment is generally barred on specified Islamic holidays.

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.

All public musical, cinematic, or theatrical performances require prior approval by a censorship board composed of officials from the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and MORA. In a meeting with the censorship board, MORA officials reported performances would be censored for content that was derogatory to Islam. They noted that they paid particular attention to horror movies. No movies were banned during the year, but according to local cinema goers and commentators on social media, cinema owners practiced self-censorship and chose not to attempt showing movies that might be considered objectionable.

Christian leaders continued to state that a longstanding fatwa discouraging Muslims from supporting non-Islamic faiths inhibited the expansion or renovation of existing non-Islamic facilities or the construction of new ones. 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.

One Christian community leader said that although his church has long owned a valuable lot in a highly visible area, the application to construct a church building on the property has been delayed without explanation for several years. Christian leaders report that schools associated with the Christian community urgently needed to renovate facilities to accommodate a growing student population but that permit requests have been ignored with no recourse. These schools are required to teach a secular curriculum in line with Ministry of Education standards, and more than 50 percent of their student population are Muslim. Members of the Christian community stated the government uses bureaucracy to “suffocate” religious minorities while it finances expansion of Islamic schools and calls for further proselytization of Islam throughout Brunei. Several sources reported that schools associated with Christian churches were required 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. According to members of the community, 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.

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

A MORA official reported that the ministry and the State Mufti's Office aspired to limit the number of nonhalal restaurants in the country. The official also reported that MORA is seeking to expand halal certification to include logistical companies. In September, the Sharia Affairs Department ordered all products made by Pepsi Food (China) Ltd to be isolated to the nonhalal section of supermarkets and shops. MORA reminded retailers and suppliers throughout the year to be vigilant about importing food to ensure halal and nonhalal products were not sold together, to protect the interests of the Muslim community. In September, MORA openly thanked the public in a newspaper article for sending tip-offs on restaurants and shops in breach of halal regulations. Some store owners were fined for displaying halal signs without being registered with MORA.

The government continued to offer incentives, including help with housing and welfare assistance, to prospective converts to Islam and the Shafi'i school, especially those from indigenous communities in rural areas. The government gave presentations on the benefits of converting to Islam that received extensive press coverage in state-influenced media. In December, MORA reported 400 individuals had converted to Islam from January to November a slight decrease from the previous year. 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 August, the country's largest English-language newspaper, the Borneo Bulletin, reported that the Islamic Studies Department, under MORA, delivered a nationwide program for religious and Arabic schools that included warnings against unhealthy relationships, such as same-gender sex and having sex with multiple partners. The MORA speaker stated, "Those who choose to be a part of this unhealthy or abnormal culture are disrespectful of family and religious institutions as well as our culture and customs." He said teenagers who became

immersed in abnormal culture need to return to their parents or guardians and realize that their actions are wrong and sinful.

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

According to social media accounts, although December 25 remained an official holiday on which government offices including MORA closed, MORA officials stated that 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 interpreted the SPC to prohibit public celebration of religions other than Islam, including publicly displaying Christmas decorations. Some establishments, however, openly sold Christmas decorations or advertised Christmas-themed events, and there were no reports of MORA enforcement actions against them. The government allowed Christmas decorations in private residences.

Sharia convicts were held in the same prison facilities but were separated from inmates convicted in the secular courts. Sharia convicts were subject to the same regulations as secular convicts. "Spiritual rehabilitation" programs were compulsory for Muslim inmates.

### **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 LGBTQI+ community expressed fears about openly expressing their sexual or gender identity, stating they believed it would bring shame on their families for violating religious mores.

According to the nongovernmental organization, Open Doors, while Christians generally did not face outright violence, families and communities of Christian converts often exerted great pressure on the converts to return to Islam.

Observers reported that throughout the year, a Muslim youth group was active in preaching to members of the LGBTQI+ community, urging its members to “see the light,” leave the community, and become more pious. The group posted on social media that MORA’s Department for the Propagation of Islam had established a hotline, and it called for persons to report the activities of the LGBTQI+ community and practitioners of black magic. The reported hotline did not appear on Department for Propagation’s website, and it was unclear if this was an official hotline. Because of this, members of the LGBTQI+ community reported limiting postings to their public social media to avoid being reported.

In June, church leaders told some younger members of a Christian-associated organization to exercise caution in posting social media that could seem supportive of LGBTQI+ persons or causes during Pride Month.

Members of non-Sunni religious groups again reported 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**

In meeting with the Minister of Religious Affairs and the ministry's permanent secretaries, the U.S. Ambassador called for greater openness to interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador and other embassy officials raised concerns regarding the effects of the SPC, the importance of ratification of UNCAT, and the protection of the rights of individual members of minority religious group rights, with other government officials, including representatives of the MFA, the Attorney General's Chambers, as well as the chief justice. Embassy officials met with the government censorship board to discuss its policies on public performances and movies. Meetings were also held with MORA's halal certification board in October focusing on U.S. exports to the country. U.S. officials continued to coordinate with other governments, including Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, regarding shared concerns about the SPC.

In a roundtable meeting, prominent members of the Christian community reported that the introduction of the SPC had not significantly affected religious and social practices. Some attendees mentioned that they had more religious freedom now than in the 1990's.

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 freedom of religion and belief and encouraged religious minority groups to maintain communication with the embassy.

Following a June 22 social media post by the embassy expressing support for the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons, readers' comments reflected almost universal

outrage, with most saying the embassy had insulted the host country and its sharia laws and demanding the embassy take down the post and issue an apology. Many tagged the MORA, the Prime Minister's Office, and the police in hopes of having the post removed. Other social media platforms that allowed anonymous comments showed a wider band of opinion, with one person posting "a small number of people are just outright prejudiced, and they probably have the loudest voice ever since the sharia law [sic] was implemented."