

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the official religion. It guarantees freedom of worship as long as this does not conflict with public policy or morals, and states all persons are equal before the law. The law prohibits blasphemy, proselytizing by non-Muslims, and conversion from Islam. A new antidiscrimination law includes prohibitions on religious discrimination, but also criminalizes acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religions. The government reportedly arrested and prosecuted citizens it considered extremist. According to media accounts, the government revoked residency permits for more than 100 noncitizen Shia Muslims, mostly of Iranian and Syrian nationality, during the year, primarily out of security concerns. Sources reported at least one case of an expatriate Christian deported for discussing his faith with other persons. Some prison sentences reportedly were reduced if a non-Muslim converted to Islam. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf) continued to provide guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques. Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths said they could worship in private without government interference but faced restrictions on practicing their religion in public. Government-controlled internet service providers blocked access to websites critical of Islam or supportive of views the government considered extremist. The government issued statements to promote religious tolerance and to counter what it termed extremism. Christian churches and Hindu and Sikh temples serving the noncitizen population operated on land donated by the ruling families, who donated additional land to build more churches and a Hindu temple. Noncitizen religious groups said the capacity was still insufficient, however, to meet demand. Other minority religious groups conducted religious ceremonies in private homes.

According to non-Islamic religious groups, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although societal attitudes and behavior discouraged conversion from Islam, while encouraging conversion to Islam. Observers reported anti-Semitic materials continued to be available for purchase at some book fairs. There were continued reports of users posting anti-Semitic remarks on some social media sites.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy and consulate officers met with government officials to discuss countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives, and the government's efforts to promote moderate Islam and support religious tolerance.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.765 million (July 2015 estimate), based on the results of the 2005 census. The UN estimates the total population is 9.2 million (July 2015 estimate). The latest estimate from the country's National Bureau of Statistics (2009) is 8.2 million. There has been no nationwide population census since 2005.

Approximately 11 percent of the resident population are citizens, of whom more than 85 percent are Sunni Muslims, according to media reports. The vast majority of the remainder are Shia Muslims. Shia Muslims are concentrated in the Emirate of Dubai. The Dubai Islamic Affairs and Charitable Affairs Department reports fewer than 7 percent of citizens living in Dubai are Shia.

Of the estimated 89 percent of residents who are noncitizens, the majority come from South and Southeast Asia, although there are substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, and North America. Dubai Islamic Affairs estimates 50 percent of noncitizen residents in Dubai are Muslim. Although no official statistics are available for the breakdown between Sunni and Shia Muslims among noncitizen residents, media estimates suggest less than 20 percent of the noncitizen Muslim population is Shia.

Of the total population (both citizen and noncitizen), the 2005 census found 76 percent to be Muslim, 9 percent Christian, and 15 percent from other religious groups comprising mainly Hindus and Buddhists, but also including Parsis, Bahais, Druze, Sikhs, Ahmadi Muslims, Ismaili Muslims, Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, and Jews. These latter groups together constitute less than 5 percent of the total population, and are made up almost entirely of noncitizens.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution designates Islam as the official religion. It guarantees the freedom to exercise religious worship "in accordance with established customs," provided this "does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals." The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law, and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religious belief.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The law does not directly prohibit apostasy, however the penal code defers to sharia on matters defined as crimes in Islamic doctrine, which in many interpretations prohibits apostasy.

The law prohibits blasphemy, defined as any act insulting God, religions, prophets, messengers, holy books, or houses of worship. Offenders are subject to imprisonment for five or more years and fines from 250,000 dirhams (AED) (\$68,000) to two million AED (\$545,000); noncitizens may be deported.

The law provides for imprisonment of up to five years for preaching against Islam or proselytizing Muslims. The law also prohibits “abusing” a holy shrine or ritual of any religion, insulting any religion, inciting someone to commit sin or contravene national values, labeling someone an infidel or unbeliever, and forming groups or holding meetings with the purpose of provoking religious hatred. Offenders are subject to fines up to two million AED (\$545,000) and imprisonment generally ranging from five to 10 or more years for these offenses. Older provisions of the law, specifying a different range of punishments, are also applicable to these offenses.

The law prohibits black magic, sorcery, and incantations, which are punishable by a prison term ranging from six months to three years and deportation for noncitizens.

The law prohibits activities the government deems support political or extremist interpretations of Islam. These include the use of the internet or any other electronic means to promote views the government believes insult religions, promote sectarianism, damage national unity or the reputation of the state, or harm public order and public morals. Punishments include imprisonment and fines from 500,000 AED (\$136,000) to 1 million AED (\$272,000). Calling for a change in the ruling system of the state or opposing its “basic principles” is punishable by up to life imprisonment. The law prohibits membership in groups the government designates as terrorist organizations with penalties up to life imprisonment and capital punishment.

In August the government enacted a law prohibiting multiple forms of discrimination, including religious discrimination, and criminalizing acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religion through any form of expression. It also criminalizes the broadcasting, publication and

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

transmission of such material by any means, including audio/visual or printed media, or via the internet, and prohibits conferences or meetings which the government deems promote discrimination, discord or hatred.

The law requires Muslims and non-Muslims to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during fasting hours in the month of Ramadan.

The law prohibits the distribution of religious literature the government determines is contradictory towards Islam, as well as literature it deems to be blasphemous or offensive towards religions.

The law prohibits churches from erecting bell towers or displaying crosses on the outside of their premises, although they may place signs on their properties indicating they are churches.

Land purchases and ownership are limited by law to citizens (or companies majority-owned by citizens).

Islamic studies are mandatory in all public schools and are compulsory for Muslim children in private schools; the government does not provide instruction in any religion other than Islam in public schools. In private schools, non-Muslim students are not required to attend Islamic study classes. In the few Christian-affiliated schools, there are restrictions on teaching or practicing Christianity in the classroom.

Private schools deemed to be teaching subjects' offensive to Islam, defamatory of any religion, or contravening the country's ethics and beliefs face potential penalties, including closure. All private schools, regardless of religious affiliation, must register with the government. Private schools are required to have a license from the Ministry of Education and their curriculum must be consistent with a plan of operation submitted to and approved by the ministry. Oversight of the schools is a responsibility of the individual emirates' governments.

According to the constitution, sharia is the principal source of legislation, although the judicial system applies two types of law, depending on the case. Sharia forms the basis for judicial decisions on most family law matters, e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and on certain criminal matters. Civil law provides the basis for decisions on all other matters. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than through the regular judicial system.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

When Islamic law courts try non-Muslims for criminal offenses, judges have the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties. Higher courts may overturn or modify sharia penalties.

Under the sharia judicial system Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book,” meaning those who are either Christian or Jewish. Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men. Non-Muslim men and Muslim women who marry are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of engaging in extra-marital sex, which carries a minimum sentence of one year in jail, as the marriage is considered invalid. In the event of a divorce between a Muslim father and non-Muslim mother, the law grants child custody to the Muslim father. Non-Muslim wives of citizens are also ineligible for naturalization, and may not inherit their husbands’ property unless named as a beneficiary in his will. In the absence of a will filed with the government, the assets of foreigners who die are subject to sharia law.

Government Practices

The government reportedly arrested and prosecuted citizens it considered extremist and revoked residency permits for more than a hundred noncitizen Shia Muslims, reportedly because of security concerns. In at least one case, authorities deported an expatriate Christian for talking about his faith with other persons. Some prison sentences reportedly were reduced if a non-Muslim converted to Islam. Awqaf continued to provide guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques. Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths said they could generally worship in private without government interference but faced restrictions on practicing their religion in public. A number of non-Muslim groups used worship space on land donated by the ruling families, although the groups said capacity was insufficient to meet the demand created by the large expatriate population. Government-owned internet service providers blocked web sites critical of Islam or supportive of views the government considered extremist. Government leaders issued statements condemning extremist activities.

The government maintained a list of what it designated as terrorist organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood and organizations related to it. The government arrested and prosecuted citizens it suspected of subscribing to practices and ideologies it considered extremist. For example, in August the government put on trial 41 individuals belonging to a group allegedly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, on charges related to terrorist activity. Seven were acquitted and the

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

remainder convicted on charges of possession illegal weapons or ammunition or providing financial support to al Qaeda or Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Human rights activists reported many detainees arrested by the government on the grounds they were members of banned Islamist groups were people who were not violent or were members of groups that had disavowed violence. The activists stated the government detained some individuals on the basis of tweets in support of certain groups rather than advocacy of violence.

The authorities reportedly deported an expatriate Christian they accused of discussing his faith with local citizens.

According to media and other reports, the government revoked residency permits for more than a hundred noncitizen Shia Muslims during the year. Observers suggested the government action was motivated primarily by security concerns.

Within prisons, the authorities required Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services, and non-Muslims reported some pressure to attend ostensibly nonmandatory lectures and classes about Islam. In some of the emirates, Christian pastors and priests were not able to visit Christian prisoners.

The government supported Islamic institutions and programs facilitating conversion to Islam. Some prison sentences reportedly were reduced if a non-Muslim converted to Islam.

There was no data available on the number of conversions taking place during the year. As was true in past years, there were also no reports of prosecutions or legal punishments for apostasy.

Representatives from non-Muslim faiths said registration procedures and requirements for minority religious groups remained unclear. The government did not require non-Islamic religious groups to register, but according to some observers, the lack of a clear legal designation resulted in an ambiguous legal status for many groups and created difficulties in carrying out certain operational functions. Although the government permitted non-Muslim groups to raise money from their congregations and from abroad, some groups were reportedly unable to open bank accounts due to the lack of a clear legal category to which to assign the organization. This reportedly created practical barriers to collecting funds, paying

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

salaries, purchasing insurance, or renting space, and made it difficult to maintain financial controls and accountability.

According to Awqaf, the government continued to fund 95 percent of the approximately 5,000 Sunni mosques, and retained all Sunni imams as government employees. The government considered the remaining 5 percent of Sunni mosques to be private.

Awqaf continued to oversee the administration of Sunni mosques and provided guidance to Shia mosques. On its website, Awqaf stated its goals included instilling “moderation in Islam through religious guidance.” It continued to distribute weekly guidance to Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of the weekly Friday Islamic sermons; published a Friday sermon script every week; and posted the guidance online on Awqaf’s website. Awqaf applied a three-tier system in which junior imams followed the Awqaf Friday sermon script closely; midlevel imams prepared sermons according to the topic or subject matter selected by Awqaf authorities; and senior imams had the flexibility to choose their own subject and content for their Friday sermons. Awqaf officials also reviewed religious materials such as books and DVDs.

Awqaf continued to appoint Sunni imams, except in Dubai, but did not appoint sheikhs (religious leaders) for Shia mosques. Dubai’s Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (emirate-level Awqaf) controlled the appointment of Sunni clergy and their conduct during worship in Dubai mosques. All of the imams in Dubai’s 2000 Sunni mosques were government employees and included both citizens and noncitizens.

Some Shia sheikhs followed Awqaf-approved weekly addresses, while other Shia sheikhs wrote their own sermons. Shia Muslims had their own council, the Jaafari Waqf Charity Council, to manage Shia affairs. Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. The government considered all Shia mosques to be private, and they were able to receive funds from the government upon request. The government permitted Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private, but not in public. The government allowed Shia mosques to broadcast the Shia version of the call to prayer from their minarets.

Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths, including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, said they could worship and practice without government interference within designated compounds or buildings, or in private facilities or

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

homes. The government restricted their ability to worship, preach, or pray in public, however. Two Hindu temples and one Sikh temple operated in Dubai. There were no Buddhist temples, but the Sri Lankan embassy held monthly religious services open to the public.

There were no synagogues for the expatriate resident Jewish population, but regular communal worship took place on the Sabbath and holidays at a private home in Dubai.

The government allowed some religious groups, particularly Christians and Hindus, to advertise religious functions in the press, including holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events. The government also allowed businesses to advertise, sell merchandise, and host events for non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali.

The government required all conference organizers, including religious groups, to register conferences and events, including disclosing speaker topics, and in some cases denied permits or canceled events. For example, in one reported case, authorities did not grant a permit for an interfaith theological conference that had been held in previous years.

The government limited the publication and distribution of religious literature to what it considered to be moderate interpretations of Islam and placed restrictions on non-Muslim religious publications such as material which could be seen as proselytizing or promoting another religion over Islam. The government prohibited the publication and distribution of literature it believed promoted extremist Islam and overtly political Islam.

The country's two primary internet service providers, which are both majority owned by the government, blocked certain web sites critical of Islam or supportive of religious views the government considered extremist. The service providers blocked other sites on religion-related topics, including some with information on Judaism, Christianity, atheism, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity.

Customs authorities continued to review the content of religious materials imported into the country, and sometimes barred passengers deemed to be carrying items intended for "sorcery" from entering. Specific items airport inspectors reportedly confiscated included amulets, bags containing fish skeletons, animal

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

bones, and sealed containers filled with blood. According to media reports, the government continued to arrest individuals or denied them entry to the country for the practice of sorcery, usually in connection with allegations of financial fraud. For example, in February authorities convicted three Sudanese of fraud for attempting to sell potions they claimed would increase wealth. The men allegedly said they had magic powers and the ability to create money from stars. In May Abu Dhabi police conducted a campaign against witchcraft and sorcery, saying it was part of its efforts to combat hoaxes and increase security awareness.

Noncitizens relied on grants and permission from local rulers to build houses of worship. This was true for many minority religious groups, whose membership mostly consisted of noncitizens. For these groups, land titles remained in the respective ruler's name. Some observers stated local rulers were more likely to grant land to groups representing monotheistic religions. There were approximately 40 Christian churches built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they were located, including houses of worship for the Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Anglican and other denominations.

The government continued to grant permission to build houses of worship on a case-by-case basis. Noncitizen groups said the construction of new houses of worship had not kept up with the growth of the country's large noncitizen population. Many existing churches faced overcrowding and many congregations lacked their own space. Some smaller congregations shared space with churches that had been given land by rulers or met in private locations. Noncitizen groups with land grants did not pay rent on the property. Several emirates also waived utility payments for religious buildings.

The government reportedly did not always enforce the law against bell towers and crosses on churches and some churches displayed crosses on their buildings.

In June the Roman Catholic Church in Abu Dhabi opened a second church in the large industrial neighborhood of Musaffah, where many migrant laborers lived and worked and where several new churches had been built in recent years. In August during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government announced it would grant land to build a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi.

The government continued to provide land for non-Muslim cemeteries. There were cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai, and Sharjah. The Hindu community reported these

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

were sufficient to meet present demand. The government required residents and nonresidents to obtain official permission for the use of cremation facilities in every instance, and authorities routinely granted such permission. The government allowed people from all religious groups except Islam to use the cremation facilities.

In Islamic court cases involving non-Muslim defendants, judges had the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties, and sources said the judges generally imposed civil penalties.

Immigration authorities continued to ask foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications. School applications also asked for family religious affiliation. According to Ministry of Interior officials, the government collected this information for demographic statistical analysis only.

Government leaders issued public statements condemning what the government considered to be extremist activities on multiple occasions, arguing they represented an incorrect interpretation of Islam. For example, addressing the UN General Assembly the foreign minister stated his country condemned the “brutal methods used by these groups and organizations in the name of Islam.”

Some Muslim and non-Muslim groups reported their ability to engage in nonreligious charitable activities such as providing meals or social services was also circumscribed because of government restrictions on charitable activities and giving, and they had difficulty spending the funds they raised.

In April the government hosted a second annual conference in Abu Dhabi focusing on peaceful coexistence in Muslim societies. The event brought over 350 Islamic scholars, intellectuals, researchers and observers together to discuss Islam, the challenges of promoting peace within Muslim societies, and solutions for promoting stable multi-cultural societies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to religious groups, there was a high degree of acceptance and tolerance within society, including among both citizens and noncitizens, for minority religious beliefs. News editorials and statements from national and religious leaders emphasized religious tolerance. Many civil society institutions such as

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

schools and clubs, reported no tension among individuals from different religious groups.

According to non-Islamic groups, there was societal pressure discouraging conversion away from Islam and encouraging conversion to Islam. For example, some non-Muslim women reportedly faced pressure from family and friends to convert to Islam upon marriage to a Muslim. Some social media commentary criticized conversion from Islam and there were some reports of job promotions offered for conversion to Islam.

During the month of Ramadan, local papers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively. Television stations frequently broadcast Islamic programming, including sermons; they did not feature similar content for other religions.

Observers reported anti-Semitic materials were available for purchase at some book fairs. There were continued reports of users posting anti-Semitic remarks on some social media sites.

According to observers, holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books continued to be widely available during Christian holidays, and Christmas trees and elaborate decorations remained prominent features at major malls and hotels. The news media continued to print reports of religious holiday celebrations, including religious activities such as Christmas celebrations and Hindu festivals such as Diwali.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy and consulate officers met with governmental officials to discuss bilateral, international and governmental CVE efforts, promote moderate Islam, and support religious tolerance. Embassy and consulate officers also met with representatives of different faiths during the course of the year. Topics discussed included the implementation of new laws, general regulatory and legal practices, and the local experiences of different religious groups.