

OMAN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion but prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the right of individuals to practice religious rites as long as doing so does not “disrupt public order or contradict morals.” According to the law, it is a criminal offense to “defame” any faith. Proselytizing in public is illegal. The government sentenced Hassan al Basham, a former diplomat, to three years in prison for blasphemy and disturbing religious values related to his comments on social media. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) monitored sermons and distributed approved texts for all imams. Non-Muslim groups reported they were able to worship freely in private homes and government-approved houses of worship, although space limitations caused overcrowding at some locations. The MERA continued to require religious groups to request approval before publishing or importing religious texts.

The Protestant-run interfaith group Al Amana Center and the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs hosted programs to introduce Protestant seminary students to Islam.

Embassy officers met with government officials to discuss the expansion of the country’s public campaign to counter violent extremism related to religion, and to encourage the government to continue to support religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.6 million (July 2016 estimate). Figures for the percentage of citizens among the total population range up to 55 percent depending upon the source of the data; according to the UN, citizens constitute 30 percent of the population. Estimates on religious adherence also vary, with the percentage of citizens who are Ibadhi Muslims (Ibadhi Islam is the historically dominant religious group in the country and distinct from Shia and Sunni Islam) put at 45 percent by many sources and at 75 percent according to government estimates. Academic sources estimate Shia Muslims comprise approximately 5 percent of citizens and live mainly in the capital area and along the northern coast, while another 5 percent are Hindus and Christians, mainly extended families of naturalized citizens of South Asian origin. According to academic sources, the remainder of the citizen population is Sunni Muslim.

According to academic sources, the majority of non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia. Noncitizen religious groups include Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahais, and Christians. Christians are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah and include Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion. 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.

The law prohibits a father who converts from Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children. There is no provision of the law specifically addressing apostasy, conversion, or renunciation of religious belief.

It is a criminal offense to “defame” any faith. The law provides for a maximum of 10 years’ imprisonment for inciting religious or sectarian strife. The law prescribes a maximum three-year sentence and fine of 500 rials (\$1,300) for anyone who “publicly blasphemes God or His prophets,” commits an affront to religious groups by spoken or written word, or breaches the peace of a lawful religious gathering. Using the internet in a way that “might prejudice public order or religious values” is also a crime, with a penalty of between one month and a year in prison, and fines 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 ministerial approval. Groups seeking registration must request meeting and worship space from one of the sponsor organizations recognized by the MERA. New non-Muslim religious groups unaffiliated with a previously recognized sponsor must gain approval from the MERA before registering. Muslim groups must register, but the government – as benefactor of the country’s mosques – serves as their sponsor. For non-Muslim groups, the ministry recognizes the Protestant Church of Oman, the Catholic Diocese of Oman, the Al Amana Center (interdenominational Christian), the Hindu Mahajan Temple, and the Anwar al-Ghubaira Trading Company in Muscat (Sikh) as official sponsors. The sponsors are responsible for recording and submitting to

the ministry the group's religious beliefs and the names of its leaders. The MERA must also grant its approval for new Muslim groups to form.

All individuals who deliver sermons in recognized religious groups must register with the MERA. The licensing process for imams prohibits unlicensed lay members from preaching sermons in mosques, and licensed imams must follow government-approved sermons. 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 land specifically donated by the sultan for the purpose of collective worship.

The law prohibits public proselytizing by all religious groups, although the government tolerates private proselytizing within legally registered houses of worship and "Islamic propagation centers."

The law states the government must approve construction and/or leasing of buildings by religious groups. In addition, new mosques must be built at least one kilometer (0.6 mile) apart from each other.

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 in comparing 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.

Civil courts adjudicate cases according to the nonsectarian civil code. The law states Shia Muslims may resolve family and personal status cases according to Shia jurisprudence outside the courts, and retain the right to transfer their cases to civil courts if they cannot find a resolution within the Shia religious tradition. The law allows non-Muslims to seek adjudication of matters pertaining to family or personal status under the religious laws of their faith or under civil law.

Citizens may sue the government for violations of their right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order; there are 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 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 the MERA for approval before the visiting clergy member's entry.

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

Government Practices

In February the Court of First Instance in Sohar convicted Hassan al Basham, a former diplomat, on charges of blasphemy and disturbing religious values related to his comments on social media. It sentenced him to three years in prison, and the Court of Appeal in Sohar upheld the sentence in June.

While no published rules, regulations, or criteria existed for the registration of a new religious group, the MERA reportedly considered the group's size, theology, belief system, and availability of other worship opportunities before granting registration, and reportedly employed the same criteria whether the group was Muslim or non-Muslim. Sources said the precise process remained vague, although there were reports of the MERA consulting with existing religious communities before ruling on the application of a new religious group. Sources also said the MERA sometimes would not reject an application, but just not issue a ruling. According to the MERA, there was no limit on the number of religious groups it could register. The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints had reportedly not received approval for registration from the MERA because it had not identified a sponsor in the Christian community.

The MERA continued to monitor sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. All imams were required to preach sermons within politically and socially acceptable parameters the government distributed monthly, with outlines of acceptable topics along with approved Friday sermons. The government continued to fund the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but not of Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders. The grand mufti remained the only imam able to speak publicly outside of the designated government parameters.

In December the public prosecutor issued a press statement warning of legal action against anyone inciting sectarian and religious strife, including through the internet.

Non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes continued to say Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious groups experienced no interference from the government in their regular private worship services despite continuing legal prohibitions on worship outside of government-approved locations. Space limitations caused overcrowding at some private homes used for non-Islamic worship.

Sources stated the government did not punish unregistered Muslim groups, such as Sufi prayer groups, who convened without authorization from the government to conduct worship. The sources said the groups were more likely to face government scrutiny for activities not related to religion and could face prosecution for unlicensed financial arrangements.

Consistent with the government's censorship policy mandating prior review of any published material, religious groups needed to obtain approval from the MERA before publishing texts within the country or disseminating religious publications outside their membership. The government also continued to require religious groups to notify the MERA before importing religious materials and submit a copy to the MERA. The ministry did not review all imported religious material for approval. Sources said non-Muslims were often able to import literature without scrutiny.

Although the Basic Law states sharia is the basis for legislation, in practice the civil code continued to precede sharia, consistent with the replacement of sharia courts by civil courts in 1999. The judicial outcomes reached under sharia jurisprudence could not contradict civil statutes.

The government, through the MERA, continued to publish *Al-Tasamoh*, a quarterly periodical whose purpose, according to the government, was to broaden dialogue within Islam and promote respectful discussion with other faiths.

The government continued to bring scholars of different faiths, including Christianity and Judaism, to speak on tolerance and interfaith understanding at the Grand Mosque. In June the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs organized an event in A'Seeb to introduce Islam to non-Muslims, according to a news release. The government continued to promote an advocacy campaign entitled "Islam in

Oman” which it said was designed to encourage tolerant, inclusive Islamic practices. The government said the project highlighted the commonalities between Islam’s branches and between Islam and other religions. An annual MERA program titled “Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence – Oman’s Message of Islam” was part of the government’s effort to enhance interfaith dialogue.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Conversion from Islam was reportedly viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community

The interfaith Al Amana Center, run by a Protestant denomination, continued to sponsor programs with a goal of interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. They hosted two ten-day immersion courses in conjunction with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs to introduce Islam to 23 Protestant seminary students from different denominations. The center also worked closely with the MERA to promote interfaith dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers met with MERA officials to encourage the government to continue its outreach efforts promoting religious tolerance, and discussed its efforts to counter violent extremism related to religion. Embassy officers met with minority religious groups and supported efforts to promote interfaith understanding across all religious groups.