

# OMAN 2019 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 other religions as long as doing so does not “disrupt public order or contradict morals.” 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. According to social media reports, in August police detained and brought in for questioning at least five individuals who had gathered to perform Eid al-Adha prayers a day before the official date announced by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA). MERA monitored sermons and distributed 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) and others, 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, although space limitations continued to cause overcrowding at some locations. 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. In September Catholic and Muslim leaders, including a senior MERA official, attended the inauguration of a new Catholic church in Salalah. In February the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) called on the government to remove a number of anti-Semitic titles being sold through the country’s annual state-run Muscat International Book Fair.

Members of religious minorities reported conversion from Islam was viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community. At least one Arabic-language Omani newspaper featured anti-Semitic imagery in cartoons critical of the Israeli government. The Protestant-run interfaith group Al-Amana Center and the MERA continued to host programs to introduce Protestant seminary students to Islam.

At various times throughout the year, U.S. embassy officers met with government officials to encourage the government to continue to support religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with minority religious groups to assess and support the ability of their faith communities to freely practice their respective religions.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The government's National Center for Statistics and Information estimates the population at 4.7 million; citizens constitute 57 percent of the population. The government does not publish statistics on the percentages of citizens who practice Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia forms of Islam. In 2015 the Dubai-based Al Mesbar Center estimated Ibadhi Muslims at 45 percent of the citizen population, Sunnis at nearly 50 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.

There is no provision of 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 religion is also criminalized with a maximum sentence of three years' imprisonment. Under the penal code, Abrahamic religions are protected from blasphemy, but the code does not mention non-Abrahamic faiths in this

context. 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, with a penalty of between one month and one year in prison and a fine of not less than 1,000 Omani 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 can register. 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 (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 that promotes Muslim-Christian understanding), 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 the group’s religious beliefs and the names of its leaders. MERA must also grant its approval for new Muslim groups to form.

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 construction and/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 passage of the Judicial Authority Law in 1999 replaced sharia courts with civil courts. Civil courts adjudicate cases according to the nonsectarian civil code. The law states 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.

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's entry.

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

### **Government Practices**

According to social media reports, in August police detained and brought in for questioning at least five individuals after they gathered to perform Eid al-Adha prayers a day before the official date announced by MERA.

According to at least one online media outlet, in July the government-appointed grand mufti criticized Muslims who sent their daughters to study abroad for not protecting their “morals and values.”

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 government-appointed grand mufti, the senior Ibadhi cleric in the country, remained the only imam able to speak publicly outside the designated government parameters.

Religious groups reported opaque processes and unclear guidelines for registration, but none reported they were actively seeking to register with the government. 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.

The Church of Jesus Christ remained without a registration sponsor or a permanent place of worship, but Church leaders said the government was working with the group to reach a solution. Other religious minority groups 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. Non-Muslim minority groups continued to report overcrowding at their places of worship. According to some

religious leaders, space limitations also caused overcrowding at some private homes used for non-Islamic worship.

In September Catholic and Muslim leaders, including a senior MERA official who spoke at the gathering, attended the inauguration of a new Catholic church in Salalah, built on land donated by the sultan.

MERA approved major religious celebrations for non-Muslim groups in commercial or public areas on a case-by-case basis. For example, several Hindu groups held large religious celebrations in indoor and outdoor venues throughout the country, which they coordinated with MERA by submitting an annual calendar of events.

Religious groups said that, consistent with the government's censorship policy mandating prior review of any published material, religious groups 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 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.

The government provided land for all approved religious groups to build and maintain religious facilities in the country.

According to members of the legal community, judges often considered the religiosity of a Muslim parent during custody hearings, although there is no law stating that custody is tied to religious affiliation.

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

In February the ADL called on the government to remove a number of anti-Semitic titles being sold through the country's annual state-run Muscat International Book Fair. According to the ADL, the listings included more than a dozen versions of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a dozen copies of *Mein Kampf*, as well as Henry Ford's *The International Jew*. The ADL stated that the book fair also

included books deeply intolerant of other religious faiths, including Shia Islam and the Yezidi and Baha'i faiths.

The government, through MERA, continued to publish *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.

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

At least one Arabic-language Omani newspaper featured anti-Semitic imagery in cartoons critical of the Israeli government. For example, some imagery portrayed characters wearing the Star of David as violent or manipulative.

The interfaith Al-Amana Center, which was founded and supported by the Reformed Church in America, a Protestant denomination, continued to sponsor programs to promote interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. It hosted immersion courses in conjunction with the MERA to introduce Islam to Protestant seminary students from different denominations. The center also worked closely with MERA to promote interfaith dialogue.

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

Embassy officers met with MERA officials to encourage the government to continue its outreach efforts promoting religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Embassy officers also raised concerns about overcrowding at minority religion places of worship and encouraged MERA to find a solution for religious groups seeking officially sanctioned space for worship.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with minority religious groups to assess and support the ability of their faith communities to freely practice their respective religions.