

OMAN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the right of individuals to practice religious rites on the condition that doing so does not disrupt public order. It declares Islam the state religion and sharia the basis of legislation, although legislation is largely based on civil code and civil courts replaced sharia courts in 1999. Proselytizing is illegal, and foreign missionaries convicted of it can be deported. All religious groups must register with the government. The law restricts collective worship by non-Muslim groups to land specifically donated by the sultan for the purpose of collective worship, which limits the number of groups that are able to practice their religion. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) agreed to donate land and support construction of a new building for Orthodox Christians, with separate halls for various Orthodox groups.

The Al Amana Center, a local, Christian interfaith group focusing on improving Muslim-Christian understanding, regularly sponsored exchange programs for leaders of Christian and Muslim communities, hosted scholars-in-residence, and worked closely with the MERA on many of its projects.

The Ambassador maintained relationships with leaders of religious groups and encouraged the tolerant interfaith policies of the government. U.S. embassy officers regularly met with officials at the MERA to discuss the expansion of worship space for non-Muslim religious groups. Embassy officers spoke regularly with minority religious groups, and attended government and community interfaith events.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 3.2 million (July 2014 estimate). Citizens constitute 55 percent of the total population. An estimated 75 percent of citizens, including Sultan Qaboos and members of the royal family, are Ibadhi Muslims (Ibadhi Islam is distinct from Shia and Sunni Islam and is the historically dominant religious group). Shia Muslims comprise less than 5 percent of citizens, and live mainly in the capital area and along the northern coast. A few extended families of naturalized ethnic Indians are mainly Hindu or Christian. The remainder of the citizen population is Sunni Muslim.

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The majority of non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia. Non-citizen religious groups include Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahais, and Christians. Christian groups are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah and include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant congregations. These groups tend to organize along linguistic and ethnic lines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the right of individuals to practice religious rites on condition that doing so does not disrupt public order. The Basic Law declares Islam is the state religion and that sharia is the basis of legislation, although legislation is largely based on civil code and civil courts replaced sharia courts in 1999.

Apostasy is not a criminal or civil offense, but the Personal Status and Family Legal Code prohibits a father who converts from Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children.

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 also 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. According to the MERA, there is no limit on the number of religious groups that can be registered. New religious groups unaffiliated with a previously recognized group must gain ministerial approval before registering. While no published rules, regulations, or criteria for approval exist, the ministry generally considers the group’s size, theology, belief system, and availability of other worship opportunities before granting approval. The ministry employs similar criteria before granting approval for new Muslim groups to form.

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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 the official sponsors for non-Muslim religious groups. Groups seeking registration must request meeting and worship space from one of these sponsor organizations, which are responsible for recording the group's doctrinal adherence, the names of its leaders, and the number of active members, and for submitting this information to the ministry.

Leaders of all religious groups must register with the MERA. The formal 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 ministry prohibits foreigners on tourist visas from preaching, teaching, or leading worship. The government, however, permits clergy from abroad 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's entry.

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

The country's civil courts adjudicate cases governed by the Personal Status and Family Legal Code. The code exempts non-Muslims from its provisions in matters pertaining to family or personal status, allowing them to seek adjudication under the religious laws of their faith or civil law. Shia Muslims may resolve family and personal status cases according to Shia jurisprudence outside the courts, and retain the right to transfer their case to a civil court if they cannot find a resolution within the Shia religious tradition.

The law restricts collective worship by non-Muslim groups to land specifically donated by the Sultan for the purpose of collective worship. The government does not permit gatherings for religious purposes in any location other than government-approved houses of worship.

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

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Although the government records religion on birth certificates, it is not printed on other official identity documents.

Citizens have the right to sue the government for violations of their right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order; however, this right has never been exercised in court.

Islamic studies are mandatory for Muslim students in public school grades K-12. Non-Muslim students are exempt from this requirement, and many private schools provide alternative religious studies courses.

Government Practices

Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped with limited government interference, although there were some restrictions on worship space, registration, and official recognition. Non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes did not report any interference in their regular private worship services despite legal prohibitions on worship outside of government-approved locations. The lack of space in government-approved locations continued to create crowded conditions in some non-Muslim places of worship. The MERA sought to address space and resource constraints faced by non-Muslim communities by using land donated by the Sultan to support construction of a new building for Orthodox Christians, with separate halls for Syrian, Coptic, Greek, and Roman Orthodox Christians.

The MERA monitored sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. The government required all Ibadhi and Sunni imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts it distributed monthly.

The MERA required religious groups to obtain approval before publishing texts within the country or disseminating religious publications outside their memberships. The government required religious groups to notify the MERA before importing religious materials and submit a copy for the MERA files; however, the ministry did not review all imported religious material for approval.

The government funded the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but not of Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders.

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In January a senior MERA official gave congratulatory remarks at the opening of a new Protestant church in Muscat, in which he highlighted the country's laws that protect freedoms of assembly and worship. Hundreds of people attended the consecration ceremony with police directing traffic into the parking lot of the church compound.

The government continued to support an endowed professorship of Abrahamic Faiths and sponsorship of 10 Omani students and 15 international Christian and Jewish students in a religious pluralism program at Cambridge University. The government, through the MERA, continued to publish *Al Tasamoh*, a quarterly periodical devoted to broadening dialogue within Islam and promoting respectful discussion of differences with other faiths and cultures. It included articles by Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu religious scholars.

The government brought scholars of different faiths, including Christianity and Judaism, to speak on tolerance and interfaith understanding at the Grand Mosque. These lectures were given in English and Arabic. MERA officials in June hosted an interfaith group of students and staff of U.S. universities participating in the Ibrahim Family Foundation's Ibrahim Leadership & Dialogue Project in New York. The group visited Oman to learn about the religious and political issues affecting the region.

The MERA hosted the 28th Conference of the Academy of Latinity, "Shared Values in a World of Cultural Pluralism," in November. This conference focused on ways to strengthen international religious dialogue, how to coexist with religious differences highlighted by globalization, shared religious values, and social inclusion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Al Amana Center, a local interfaith group focusing on improving interfaith understanding, regularly sponsored exchange programs for leaders of various religious communities, hosted scholars-in-residence, and worked closely with the MERA on many of its projects that promoted interfaith dialogue, including a three-week Cambridge Scriptural Reasoning Seminar held in August. The Center received support from the MERA and hosted visiting university students from a number of faiths for semester long interfaith study programs for accredited university semester hours.

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In January leaders of a variety of religious groups, including Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, and the Reform Church of America, attended the opening of a new Protestant church in Muscat.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers regularly met with MERA officials to discuss the expansion of worship space for non-Muslim religious communities. The Ambassador maintained relationships with leaders of interfaith groups and hosted religious leaders for an interfaith dialogue in December. Embassy officers spoke regularly with minority religious groups, and attended government and community interfaith events. In support of efforts to promote interfaith understanding, embassy staff developed relationships with the major Christian groups in Muscat, as well as the Al Amana Center. The embassy hosted an iftar, which included Muslims from Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia groups, during which embassy officers discussed the environment of religious tolerance in the country. The embassy also sponsored a participant in an interfaith dialogue exchange program to the United States. The Ambassador and embassy officers supported government efforts to facilitate non-Muslim religious practice by attending the official opening ceremony of a newly constructed Christian church.