

# OMAN 2015 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 places is illegal. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) monitored sermons and distributed approved texts for all Ibadhi and Sunni imams. Non-Muslim groups reported they were able to worship freely in private homes and government-approved houses of worship, although limited space continued to create crowded conditions. The MERA supported construction of a new building for the use of Orthodox Christians. The MERA continued to require religious groups to request approval before publishing or importing religious texts.

The Protestant-run interfaith group Al Amana Center sponsored exchange programs for leaders of religious communities to increase interfaith dialogue.

The Ambassador met with government officials to discuss the expansion of worship space for non-Muslim religious groups 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 3.3 million (July 2015 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 is made up of 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,

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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.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion, although it protects the right of individuals to practice other religious rites 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 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. Groups seeking registration must request meeting and worship space from one of the sponsor organizations recognized by the MERA. 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 the group’s doctrinal adherence, the names of its leaders, and the number of active members, and for submitting this information to the ministry.

New non-Muslim religious groups unaffiliated with a previously recognized sponsor must gain approval from the MERA before registering. The law does not

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specify rules, regulations, or criteria for ministerial approval. The ministry 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 allows religious groups to proselytize privately 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, 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. Religious instruction takes a historical perspective in comparing the evolution of religious thinking, and teachers are prohibited from proselytizing or favoring one Islamic group over the other. 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 which do not disrupt public order; there are no known cases of anyone pursuing this course in court.

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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 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.

### **Government Practices**

While no published rules, regulations, or criteria existed for the approval of a new religious group, the MERA reportedly considered the group's size, theology, belief system, and availability of other worship opportunities before granting approval, 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 communities before ruling on the application of a new community. Sources also said the MERA sometimes would not reject an application, but just not issue a ruling, which reportedly had occurred with at least one Christian group. According to the MERA, there was no limit on the number of religious groups it could register.

The MERA continued to monitor sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. The government continued to require all Ibadhi and Sunni imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts it distributed monthly. The government continued to fund the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but not of Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders.

Non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes continued to say Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other faiths experienced no interference from the government in their regular private worship services despite continuing legal prohibitions on worship outside of government-approved locations.

Sources said the government did not punish unregistered Muslim groups, such as Sufi prayer groups, who convened in an unofficial manner to conduct worship. The sources said the groups were more likely to face government scrutiny for nonreligious activities and could face prosecution for unlicensed financial arrangements.

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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 memberships. 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.

To address crowded conditions in some non-Muslim places of worship, the MERA continued its planning to use land donated by the sultan for construction of a new building for Orthodox Christians, with separate halls for Syrian, Coptic, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government also approved new worship space for Baptists.

Although the Basic Law states sharia is the basis for legislation, observers said in practice the civil code had subsumed sharia, consistent with the replacement of sharia courts by civil courts in 1999. Sources said civil law took ultimate precedence and judicial outcomes reached under sharia jurisprudence could not contradict civil statutes.

The government, through the MERA, continued to publish *Al Fahum*, 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. 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. A 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**

The interfaith Al Amana Center, run by a Protestant denomination, continued to sponsor exchange programs for leaders of religious communities. It worked

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closely with the MERA to promote interfaith dialogue. The center continued to receive support from the MERA for interfaith university study programs.

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

U.S. embassy officers met with MERA officials to discuss the expansion of worship space for non-Muslim religious communities. They also met with MERA in September to encourage the government to continue its support of tolerance, its outreach efforts promoting religious tolerance, and its opposition to violent extremism. Embassy officers met with minority religious groups and supported efforts to promote interfaith understanding across all religious groups.