

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees the freedom to exercise religious worship in accordance with established customs, on condition that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals. Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped without government interference, although there were some restrictions. The government regulated activities and messaging of Sunni mosques with the stated purpose of combating violent extremism. The government subjected all religious groups to general restrictions on freedom of assembly and association including for religious purposes and, in one instance, an individual was convicted and imprisoned for religious activity, although later pardoned. The constitution stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law, without discrimination between citizens on grounds of religious belief. The constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven of the constituent emirates of the federal union and defines all citizens as Muslims. The law denies Muslims the freedom to change religion. While the law permits Muslims to proselytize non-Muslims, it prohibits efforts to proselytize Muslims. The government followed a policy of tolerance towards non-Muslim religious groups, although there were some exceptions. There was no change in the overall status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the year.

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In tandem with the legal prohibition, societal pressure discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions.

U.S. embassy officials in Abu Dhabi and consulate general officials in Dubai engaged with government officials and representatives of religious communities both formally and informally to encourage greater religious tolerance and freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

An estimated 89 percent of the country's residents are noncitizens. Of the citizens, more than 85 percent are Sunni Muslim and an estimated 15 percent or fewer are Shia Muslims. Noncitizen residents predominantly come from South and Southeast Asia, although there are substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, and North America. According to the most recent Ministry of Economy census (2005), 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent

is Christian, and 15 percent is “other.” According to unofficial data, at least 15 percent of the resident population is Hindu and 5 percent is Buddhist. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Parsis, Baha’is, Sikhs, Ahmadis, Ismailis, Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, and Jews. These estimates differ from census figures because census figures do not take into account the many “temporary” visitors and workers, and also count Baha’is and Druze as Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution guarantees the freedom to exercise religious worship in accordance with established customs, on condition that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals. The constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven constituent emirates of the federal union. The constitution stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law, without discrimination between citizens on grounds of religious belief. The government defines all citizens as Muslims. The law denies Muslims the freedom to change religion. While the law permits Muslims to proselytize others, it prohibits efforts to proselytize Muslims.

The UAE’s judicial system applies two types of law, depending on the topic of the case. Courts apply Sharia (Islamic law) for most family law matters, e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and on rare occasions for criminal matters. Courts apply civil law, based on the French and Egyptian legal systems, for all other matters. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than the regular judicial system. When Islamic law courts try non-Muslims for criminal offenses, crimes are generally not punishable by Islamic law penalties. In cases punishable by an Islamic law penalty, non-Muslims generally receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge. Higher courts may overturn or modify Islamic law penalties imposed on non-Muslims.

While the government does not require formal licensing or registration requirements for non-Muslim religious groups, it monitors their growth and development through land grants. Permission to build houses of worship is granted on a case-by-case basis when congregations outgrow smaller private facilities. The government followed a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and in practice interfered very little in their religious activities.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not recognized, and no data was available detailing the (likely limited) number of conversions. The legal punishment for conversion from Islam is death, although there have been no known prosecutions or legal punishments for apostasy in court. Converts may be persuaded to return to Islam, may conceal their new faith, or may travel to another country where their conversion is recognized to avoid application of the legal penalty and the social stigma of converting from Islam to another religion.

The government annually publishes a list of foreign residents who have converted to Islam. The list varies in length from year to year, and there are no known consequences or benefits to having one's name included in the list.

Under Islamic law, Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book” (Christian or Jewish). However, Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men. Because Islam does not consider marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman as valid, both parties to such a union would be subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds such as fornication. There were no reports of such penalties applied during the year.

Sunni mosques are administered by Awqaf, or the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, and by regulation must follow government-approved sermons. Some Shia mosques follow Awqaf-approved weekly addresses, while other Shia mosques have their own sermons.

The Shia minority, concentrated in the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah, worshiped and maintained its own mosques without government restriction. The government considered all Shia mosques private, and they were able to receive funds from the government upon request.

By law, the government does not permit churches to display crosses on the outside of their premises or to erect bell towers; however, this restriction is not always enforced, and some churches display cross designs on their buildings.

The government prohibits proselytizing and the distribution of non-Islamic religious literature under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation. The law prohibits the proselytizing of a religion other than Islam. In the past, the government reportedly threatened to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of proselytizing a religion other than Islam.

The law requires Muslims and non-Muslims to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during fasting hours during the month of Ramadan out of respect for Islamic practice. Shia Muslims celebrated Ashura without restriction according to their customs.

The government does not permit instruction in any religion other than Islam in public schools; however, religious groups can conduct religious instruction for their members at their dedicated religious facilities. Private schools found to be teaching subjects that offend Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the country's ethics and beliefs face potential penalties including closure. Private parochial schools are free to teach their religion within the bounds of government guidelines and to practice religious rituals. All schools, regardless of religion, must register with the government. Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools and in private schools serving Muslim children.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet's Ascension (Lailat al-Mehraj), and Eid al-Fitr.

Government Practices

The government followed a policy of religious tolerance, and adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped without government interference. However, there were reports of abuses and restrictions of religious freedom. As the state religion, Islam was favored over other religious groups, and conversion to Islam was viewed positively.

In October an Emirati citizen who identified himself as a member of a faith not considered Islamic by the government of one of the seven emirates was imprisoned for two months while awaiting trial for violating the law prohibiting proselytism of a religion other than Islam. A Federal Court of First Instance sentenced him to two years' imprisonment. He was subsequently released after receiving a pardon. The individual alleged that he suffered verbal abuse due to his religious beliefs while incarcerated.

The government funded or subsidized almost 95 percent of Sunni mosques and employed all Sunni imams. The government considered 5 percent of Sunni mosques private, and several mosques had large private endowments. According to Awqaf, there was no formal method of granting official status to religious groups other than granting them the use of land for the construction of a building.

Several non-Muslim groups operated houses of worship where they practiced their religion freely. The government recognized several Christian denominations, having issued more than 30 land use permits to construct and operate churches.

Awqaf oversees most issues related to Islamic affairs in the country. The General Authority distributed weekly guidance to Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of religious sermons. The General Authority also ensured that clergy did not deviate frequently or significantly from approved topics in their sermons. Most imams are non-citizens, and a significant number are Egyptian or Syrian. The government appoints Sunni imams, but it does not appoint sheikhs (imams) for Shia mosques except in Dubai, where the Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department controls the appointment of clergy and their conduct in all mosques. The advisor to the president on judicial and religious affairs, as well as the chairman of Awqaf and its director general, regularly represented the country at Islamic, ecumenical, and Christian conferences and events abroad. They also met regularly with religious leaders in the country.

The government encouraged citizens to avoid extremist tendencies and ideologies. Religious authorities coordinated public awareness campaigns about the dangers of violent extremism, with ads and television commercials. During the year, the country agreed to host a regional Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). The center will open in October 2012.

Government-supported Awqaf standardized and tightly controlled religious messaging in its nearly 5,000 Sunni mosques. Awqaf regulated and monitored the selection of imams, the scripting of Friday sermons, and the issuance of religious edicts (fatwahs) to ensure that religious messaging was uniform, tolerant of other faiths and cultures, and disparaging of violent ideologies. Some Shia mosques followed the Awqaf-approved weekly address, while other Shia mosques wrote their own sermons.

Immigration authorities routinely asked foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications. There were reports that some Shia residents, fearing how their faith may be perceived by immigration authorities, declared themselves as Sunni or Christian in their residence applications. There were also reports that Jewish residents, fearing discrimination, also declared themselves as members of another faith, such as Buddhism. Ministry of Interior officials reported that the government only collected information regarding individuals' religious affiliations for demographic statistical analysis. However, there were reports of religious affiliation negatively affecting the

issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits. For example, a few Shia university students, professors, and professionals (some of Iranian heritage) were reportedly told by their institutions or firms that authorities had not granted or extended their residence permits, and they consequently had to leave the country.

Non-Muslim groups and some Muslim minority sects could own houses of worship where they could practice their religion freely by requesting a land grant and permission from the local ruler to build a compound (the title for the land remains with the ruler). Examples include an Ismaili Center in Dubai, which serves as a regional Ismaili house of worship for the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Additionally, there is a Dawoodi Bohra presence in the country, with mosques in Dubai, Sharjah, and Ajman and a facility under construction in Abu Dhabi. Those with land grants do not pay rent on the property. The Emirate of Sharjah also waived utility payments for religious buildings. There is no national standard for granting official status to religious groups or approving land grants. Rulers of the individual emirates exercised autonomy in choosing whether to grant access to land and permission to build houses of worship within their emirate. A small number of requests were pending at the end of the year; however, some have been pending for several years. Religious groups without dedicated buildings of worship often used the facilities of other religious groups, worshiped in private homes, or rented space in hotels. There were no reports of government interference in this common practice. Non-Muslim groups, as well as Shia and Muslim minority sects, reportedly provided copies of sermons and meeting agendas to local religious authorities upon request by the government.

There are at least 35 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. In some cases, chapels were clustered in close proximity to one another in locations at some distance from the residential areas in which members of these congregations live, effectively limiting attendance.

Some churches were overcrowded and conducted services or masses in open courtyards on special occasions due to limited space and the government being slow to approve new buildings. There was no government interference within church compounds. As the government does not recognize or permit conversion from Islam to another religion, churches recognized converts from all religions except Islam out of self-censorship.

There are no synagogues for the small foreign resident Jewish population; however, Jews observed holidays in private residences without interference.

There are two Hindu temples in Dubai. Although there are no Buddhist temples, the Sri Lankan embassy held monthly religious services open to the public. Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference.

Non-Muslim groups raised money from their congregations and received financial support from abroad. Due to government restrictions, some Muslim and non-Muslim groups expressed challenges in spending funds they had raised. Religious groups openly advertised religious functions in the press, such as holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events. Non-Muslim religious leaders reported that customs authorities rarely questioned the entry of religious materials such as Bibles and hymnals into the country unless the materials were printed in Arabic. Customs authorities generally permitted the entry of materials in most instances.

The country's two Internet service providers, Etisalat and Du, occasionally blocked Web sites containing religious information. These sites included information on the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, atheism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity. The law provides penalties for using the Internet to preach against Islam, inciting someone to commit sin, and using the Internet to promote a breach of public decency.

Four emirates are home to Christian primary and secondary schools, in which students are generally free to study Christianity and perform religious rituals. The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai donated land for Christian cemeteries, and Abu Dhabi also donated land for a Baha'i cemetery.

There were two operating cremation facilities, one each in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community. Newly constructed crematoriums in Al-Ain and Sharjah encountered delays in opening. A multifaith crematorium in Al Ain became operational in October. The crematoriums currently in use met present demand. Official permission must be obtained for their use in every instance, but this did not appear to create hardship. The government allowed people from all religions except Islam to use the cremation facilities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and societal pressures discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions.

On rare occasions, there were religiously intolerant editorials and opinion pieces in both the English and Arabic language electronic and print media.

Many hotels, stores, and other businesses patronized by both citizens and non-citizens were permitted to sell alcohol and pork to non-Muslims. These businesses were also able to acknowledge non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali openly. Shopping centers were festive during Christian holidays, and Christian holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books were widely available. Christmas trees and elaborate decorations, for example, were a prominent feature at major malls and hotels. The news media regularly printed reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services and Hindu festivals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

U.S. embassy officials and officials from the consulate general in Dubai discussed religious tolerance and freedom with government officials on a number of occasions. U.S. government officials encouraged the government to increase religious freedom by permitting the opening or expansion of religious facilities for the large foreign resident population.

The ambassador and other embassy officials met with the leadership of Awqaf on a regular basis to discuss religious freedom and tolerance as well as interfaith cooperation.

Additionally, embassy and consulate general officers helped protect religious freedom through informal inquiries and meetings with government officials as well as with representatives of religious groups.