

# OMAN

## **Executive Summary**

The basic law prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the right to practice religious rites on condition that doing so does not disrupt public order and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The basic law declares that Islam is the state religion and that Sharia (Islamic law) is the basis of legislation. The government selectively enforced existing legal restrictions on the right to collective worship.

There were no significant reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy sponsored Omani citizens on interfaith exchange programs and maintained relationships with local religious leaders and communities, supporting initiatives by local interfaith organizations (speakers, student exchanges, etc.) and attending interfaith events.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The government does not keep statistics on religious affiliation, but almost all citizens are either Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims form a small but well-integrated minority of less than 5 percent of the population, concentrated in the capital area and along the northern coast. Ibadhism, a form of Islam distinct from Shiism and the “orthodox” schools of Sunnism, historically has been the country’s dominant religious group, and the sultan is a member of the Ibadhi community.

The majority of non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia, although there are small communities of naturalized ethnic Indians who are mainly Hindus and Christians. Non-Ibadhi Muslim religious communities are estimated to constitute between 25 and 50 percent of the population and include Sunni and Shia Muslims and various groups of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha’is, and Christians. Christian communities are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah and include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and various Protestant congregations. These groups tend to organize along linguistic and ethnic lines.

More than 50 different Christian groups, fellowships, and assemblies are active in the Muscat metropolitan area. There are also three officially recognized Hindu temples and two Sikh temples in Muscat, as well as additional temples located on worksites where the local religious community is large enough to support them.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The basic law protects the right to practice religious rites on condition that doing so does not disrupt public order. The basic law declares that Islam is the state religion and that Sharia is the basis of legislation. It also prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The country's civil courts adjudicate cases governed by the Personal Status and Family Legal Code. However, 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. 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.

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

According to the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA), there is no limit on the number of groups that can be registered. New religious groups unaffiliated with one of the recognized communities must gain ministerial approval before being registered. While the government has not published the rules, regulations, or criteria for approval, 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.

All religious organizations must be registered by MERA. 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 communities. 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 be registered with MERA. The formal licensing process for imams prohibits unlicensed lay members from leading prayers in mosques. Lay members of non-Muslim communities may lead worship if they are specified as leaders in their group's registration application.

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 the right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order; however, this right has never been exercised in court.

Public proselytizing by all religious groups is prohibited by law, although the government allows all religious groups to proselytize privately within legally registered houses of worship and Islamic propagation centers.

Non-Muslim communities are allowed to practice their beliefs without interference only on land specifically donated by the sultan for the purpose of collective worship. In 2006 MERA issued a legally binding circular to non-Muslim religious leaders and diplomatic missions reaffirming an individual's right to practice his or her own religious activities according to his or her values, customs, and traditions. The circular also states that gatherings of a religious nature are not allowed in private homes or in any location other than government-approved houses of worship; however, the government has not actively enforced the prohibition.

The construction and/or leasing of buildings by religious groups must be approved and/or built on land donated by the government. In addition, mosques must be built at least one kilometer (0.6 mile) apart. By law, all buildings must have access for disabled individuals. In practice, many mosques, especially in rural regions, do not have such access.

The penal code prescribes a prison sentence and fine 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. There were

no prosecutions for any of these offenses in 2010, the most recent year for which official statistics are available. There were no reports of prosecutions in 2011.

Women are permitted to wear the hijab (Islamic head scarf) in official photographs but not the niqab (Islamic veil that covers the face).

MERA requires religious groups to obtain approval before disseminating religious publications outside their membership; the government must approve any publication in the country. Religious groups are requested to notify MERA prior to importing religious materials and to submit a copy for the MERA files; however, the ministry does not review all imported religious material for approval.

The ministry prohibits foreigners on tourist visas from preaching, teaching, or leading worship. The government permits clergy from abroad to enter the country to teach or lead worship under the sponsorship of registered religious organizations, which must apply to MERA for approval at least one week in advance of the visiting clergy's entry.

Islamic studies are required 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.

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

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government selectively enforced existing legal restrictions on the right to collective worship.

Gatherings of a religious nature are not allowed in private homes or any other location except government-approved houses of worship; however, MERA enforced the prohibition on group worship in unsanctioned locations only when it received complaints. Generally churches and temples voluntarily abided by this restriction, providing space on their compounds for worship; however, the lack of space in the locations sanctioned by the government for collective worship continued to limit the number of groups that could practice their religions.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) began the registration process for recognition. At year's end, although official recognition had not yet been granted, MERA was working actively with church leaders to find a suitable location for a place of worship.

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 distributed monthly by the ministry.

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

The government promoted tolerance and interfaith understanding through continued support of an endowed professorship of Abrahamic Faiths and sponsorship of ten Omani students in a religious pluralism program at Cambridge University. The government, through MERA, continued to publish *Al Tafaham* (Understanding), a periodical devoted to broadening dialogue within Islam and promoting respectful discussion of differences with other faiths and cultures that includes articles by Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu religious scholars. The government sponsored the opening of the Center for International Dialogue in Lebanon, whose purpose is dialogue between different faiths. The government co-sponsored a program with the U.S. government at Hartford Theological Seminary to train Christian and Muslim chaplains for the U.S. military. MERA sponsored a four-day symposium on Islamic Jurisprudence, inviting over 100 Islamic scholars from all over the world and from all Islamic traditions.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no significant reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

A local interfaith group focusing on improving Muslim-Christian understanding regularly sponsored exchange programs for leaders of both religious groups, hosted scholars-in-residence, and worked closely with MERA on many of its projects.

Both state-owned and private newspapers expanded coverage of religious issues, positively addressing interfaith dialogue and encouraging tolerance among sects of Islam and between Islam and other faiths.

One local English-language newspaper published an anti-Semitic editorial during the year. The U.S. embassy communicated its concerns with the editorial board of the newspaper.

#### **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. The U.S. ambassador established relationships with leaders of religious communities in the country. Senior embassy staff maintained good working relationships with religious government entities, leaders of religious organizations, and interfaith groups, supporting initiatives by local interfaith organizations (speakers, student exchanges, etc.) and attending interfaith events. In addition, the embassy sponsored Omani citizens on interfaith exchange programs.