

# OMAN 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

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.” 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. All religious organizations must register with the government.

In August, an appeals court heard the case of four individuals charged in 2021 with using the Internet and social media to denigrate Islamic values. The court took up the case although one of the four – Maryam al-Nuami – had been pardoned by the Sultan and released in April. Her pardon amounted to a commutation of her sentence and did not shield her from subsequent prosecution on other charges. The court in August sentenced al-Nuami for a variety of related misdemeanors, but those charges were dismissed on appeal in December. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) formally approved registration for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and the Sikh community and identified suitable, permanent places of worship for both groups. Some non-Muslim groups stated they were able to worship freely in private homes and government-approved houses of worship while others said MERA worked with them to coordinate the use of shared facilities for religious services.

MERA continued to monitor sermons and distribute approved texts for all imams. One Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) said that the government monitored church services to record any political statements and Omani nationals. The NGO also said the online activities of both individual Christians and churches could be monitored by the authorities. Christian groups, however, did not report any cases of abuse or monitoring by the authorities during the year. MERA continued to require religious groups to request approval before publishing or importing religious texts or disseminating religious publications outside their membership. In February, the government and the Holy See established full diplomatic relations.

In its *World Watch List* report, Christian advocacy NGO Open Doors reported that converts to Christianity faced pressure to recant, which could include physical, mental, and emotional abuse, job loss, family expulsion, disinheritance, and losing custody of their children; many consequently kept their faith secret. Some groups in the country continued to encourage interfaith dialogue.

U.S. embassy officers met with MERA officials throughout the year to discuss the status of online blasphemy cases, registration of religious groups, and the government's efforts to accommodate the needs of religious groups, such as by providing additional worship space. The Chargé d'Affaires hosted a reception on September 25 for Christian, Hindu, and Sikh leaders to discuss the experiences of their religious communities in the country and to emphasize U.S. support for religious freedom. Embassy officers attended religious celebrations to support minority religious groups, including a Diwali event in November.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.8 million (mid-year 2023). The government's National Center for Statistics and Information estimates the population at 4.9 million, with citizens constituting approximately 59 percent of the population and foreign workers approximately 41 percent. The government does not publish statistics on the percentages of citizens who practice Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia Islam. The U.S. government estimates the population to be 95 percent Muslim: 45 percent Sunni, 45 percent Ibadhi, and 5 percent Shia. Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians combined comprise the remaining 5 percent; almost all are foreign workers.

Academic sources state most 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, several branches of Orthodoxy, and members of over 60 different Protestant denominations, including the Church of Jesus Christ. There is no remaining indigenous Jewish population.

## **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, and the Crown Prince must be a Muslim and a legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents.

There is no provision in 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 religious group is also criminalized with a maximum sentence of three years in prison. 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 that carries a penalty of between one month and one year in prison and a fine of not less than 1,000 rials (\$2,600).

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with the government. Although the law does not specify the requirements, in practice, MERA sets the rules, regulations, and criteria for religious groups to obtain ministerial approval. Groups associated with existing faiths or denominations must operate under the existing registration for their associated group.

New, non-Muslim religious groups must register with MERA under the patronage of a government-recognized sponsor. The sponsors are responsible for recording and submitting to MERA a statement of the

group's religious beliefs and the names of its leaders. Although MERA does not publish a complete list of recognized or registered religious groups, for non-Muslim groups, the ministry recognizes the Protestant Church of Oman (a partnership between the Reformed Church of America and the Anglican Church), the Catholic Church in Oman, the al-Amana Center (an interdenominational organization affiliated with the Reformed Church of America), the Hindu Mahajan Temple, and the Anwar al-Ghubaira Trading Company in Muscat (Sikh) as official sponsors.

MERA must also grant its approval for new Muslim groups to form. Muslim groups must register with MERA as well, but the government – as the benefactor of the country's mosques – serves as their sponsor.

All individuals who deliver sermons to 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 government 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 any construction or leasing of buildings by religious groups. 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 that 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.

Principles of sharia inform the civil, commercial, and criminal codes, but there are no sharia courts. Civil courts adjudicate cases according to the nonsectarian civil code. The law states that 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. According to the law, a mother may lose custody of a child after the child turns seven if the father is Muslim and she is not.

Citizens may sue the government for abuses of their right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order, but there have been no known cases of anyone pursuing this course of action.

Birth certificates issued by the government record an individual's religion. Other official identity documents do not indicate religion.

Foreigners on tourist visas who are not clergy may not preach, teach, or lead worship, even privately, unless they are sponsored by a recognized religious

group, register with MERA, and receive a government permit. 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 enters the country.

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

## **Government Practices**

On August 21, the Gulf Center for Human Rights and the Omani Association for Human Rights reported that the Sohar Court of Appeal heard the case of four activists charged in 2021 with internet crimes related to religion. The four were charged with using the internet and social media to produce content which “would prejudice religious values and public order” and with organizing meetings “for the sake of opposing the Islamic religion and defaming the foundations on which it is based.” Three of the four were originally sentenced to three years in prison, with one, Ali al-Ghafri, sentenced to five years for “insulting and offending God.” Al-Ghafri remained in prison at year’s end; one of the others was acquitted and released in 2022, and another had his lesser charge moved to a “special court” and was later released. The fourth, Maryam al-Nuami, was pardoned by the Sultan and released on April 30. Her pardon amounted to a commutation of her sentence and did not shield her from subsequent prosecution on other charges. In August, a court sentenced her for a variety of related misdemeanors, but those charges were dismissed on appeal in December.

MERA continued to provide rules, regulations, and criteria for new religious groups to receive ministerial approval, according to religious groups. MERA considered criteria such as a group's size and leadership structure but did not evaluate the specifics of a group's theology or belief systems. Religious groups said MERA consulted with existing religious communities from a similar faith tradition in an advisory role before ruling on the application of a new religious group. Representatives of religious groups said MERA officials communicated frequently with them to help navigate the registration process.

During the year, MERA formally approved registration for the Church of Jesus Christ and the Sikh community and identified suitable, permanent places of worship for both groups, according to MERA and leaders of both groups. MERA also began discussions with the Buddhist community, which remained unregistered and without a permanent place of its own for worship. The Sri Lankan embassy continued to host Buddhist religious services and ceremonies on its compound. Christian groups without their own dedicated places of worship shared existing facilities.

MERA continued to monitor sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. The government required all imams to preach sermons within what the government considered politically and socially acceptable parameters, and provided a list of acceptable topics along with standardized and approved Friday sermons for Ibadhi and Sunni imams. MERA did not monitor mosques under the purview of the Diwan (Royal Court), such as the Grand Mosque in Muscat, which were funded and overseen directly by the Diwan. There were no reports of sermons being monitored in Christian or other non-Islamic services.



Open Doors reported church services were “strictly monitored to record any political statements and if any Omani nationals were attending,” and said authorities could monitor the online activities of both individual Christians and churches. The NGO also said Christian evangelistic activities among Muslims was forbidden. Christian groups, however, did not report any cases of abuse or monitoring by the authorities during the year.

Authorities continued to block the importation of certain publications, including religious texts, that lacked the necessary permit. Some members of religious communities said shipment of their books were delayed, but there were no reports of authorities confiscating shipped materials. There were no reports of customs officials confiscating personal religious materials from travelers entering the country. The government also continued to require religious groups to notify MERA before importing religious materials and to submit a copy of the material to MERA for review. Religious minority leaders said MERA did not review all imported religious material for approval but was more likely to inspect large shipments. They said non-Muslims were often able to import small amounts of literature without government scrutiny. Religious groups continued to need MERA approval to publish religious texts in the country or disseminate religious publications outside their membership. Religious groups said they did not attempt to share material with the public outside their places of worship.

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

Some smaller Christian denominations reported overcrowding improved at their places of worship during the year after MERA allocated government owned land free of charge or identified, approved, and in some cases provided facilities for their use. In coordination with the Ministry of Housing

and Urban Planning, MERA identified additional government-approved facilities for minority religious groups to use on their own and coordinated shared use of facilities if needed. Some groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ, elected to pay for new buildings themselves to meet their needs. For groups that lacked the funds to build their own facilities, MERA located and offered existing meeting spaces at no cost.

Non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes continued to say the government generally did not interfere with their groups' informal meetings despite legal prohibitions on holding religious meetings outside of government-approved locations.

MERA approved religious celebrations for non-Muslim groups in commercial or public areas such as hotels or common event spaces on a case-by-case basis. For example, Hindu groups hosted Diwali celebrations on November 12.

MERA and several Christian leaders said they resolved the issue of cemetery space by selecting a mutually agreeable site for a second Christian cemetery in Muscat.

According to members of the legal community, judges often took into account the religious affiliation of parents during custody hearings. Members of the legal community said courts favored Muslim family members in such cases, citing that Islam was the official religion in the country.

The government-appointed Grand Mufti and senior Ibadhi cleric, Ahmad al-Khalili, remained the only cleric able to speak publicly on religious, political, and social issues outside the designated government parameters. For

example, following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, he issued a statement on social media on October 8 calling on “all Islamic countries, people, and individuals to stand by the martyrs in Gaza.” On October 11, The Grand Mufti saluted the “valiant Palestinian resistance” and said he admired their “commitment to adhere to Islamic teachings.” Al-Khalili’s posts on social media also frequently disparaged atheism and atheists. Government officials said the Grand Mufti did not always represent the government’s views.

MERA canceled its annual day-long event marking the International Day for Tolerance on November 16, in accordance with a general ban on public celebrations in view of the then ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict in Gaza.

According to religious minority leaders, the Royal Oman Police continued to collect religious affiliation information from expatriates applying for work visas. The applicants selected their preferred religious affiliation from a drop-down menu on the visa form. There were no reports of this information influencing visa decisions.

The government supported travel for religious reasons including Hajj and Umrah for Muslims, in the form of regulations for workers to receive time off, subsidized fees for Hajj agents and facilitators, and an online portal through which people arranged trips. Local media reported the government supported the pilgrimages of approximately 14,000 people during the year.

On February 23, Oman and the Holy See established full diplomatic relations, according to the Foreign Ministry. In June, the Cairo-based apostolic nuncio visited the country, conducting a full slate of government, diplomatic, and religious community meetings.

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

Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, there were reports of antisemitic caricatures appearing in local press. Cartoons in daily newspapers *Al Watan* and the *Oman Daily Observer* regularly featured Nazi symbols or antisemitic tropes, such as depicting Jews as bloodthirsty warmongers. Religious satellite TV channel Al Istiqama broadcast messages by Muslim preachers who claimed the Palestinians were a barrier against Israel's "plans to fragment the Middle East." Also, pro-Palestinian demonstrators chanted antisemitic slogans, such as "Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews!...(the) army of Muhammad will return," (referencing a 7th century battle between early Muslims and Jews) on multiple occasions in October.

In its *World Watch List* report, Open Doors said although most citizens "practiced a moderately conservative form of Islam, which tends to be more tolerant towards other beliefs," there was "almost no tolerance" for family members who converted to Christianity. The NGO said converts from Islam to Christianity faced "pressure from family and society to recant their new faith," which could include "physical, mental and emotional abuse, job loss, family expulsion, disinheritance, and losing custody of their children." Most converts therefore kept their new faith hidden, the NGO stated.

Some groups in the country continued to encourage interfaith dialogue, for example via the al-Amana Center, which its leaders said worked to create a more tolerant attitude between all faiths. Founded and supported by the Reformed Church in America (a Protestant denomination), the al-Amana Center continued to sponsor, in conjunction with MERA, interreligious programs and events including intercultural immersion and scriptural

discussions between Christians and Muslims, to further their mutual understanding.

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

Embassy officers met with MERA officials throughout the year to discuss the status of the online blasphemy cases, registration of religious groups, and the government's efforts to accommodate the needs of religious groups, such as by providing additional worship space.

On September 25, the Chargé d'Affaires hosted a reception for Christian, Hindu, and Sikh leaders to discuss the experiences of their minority religious communities in the country. In remarks to the group, the Chargé underscored the United States' longtime support for the diversity and freedom of religious practices and groups around the world.

Embassy officers attended religious celebrations to support minority religious groups, including a Diwali event on November 12.

In June, the embassy posted a video message on social media promoting tolerance and diversity, exemplified by Americans of diverse backgrounds who come together and respect various holiday traditions in the United States. Throughout the year, the embassy also highlighted its events that promoted tolerance, freedom, and religious understanding, such as a celebration in August of Onam, a Hindu harvest festival observed by some embassy staff.