



United Arab Emirates

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The Federal Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of the country.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting year, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 32,300 square miles, and its population is approximately 4.32 million. An estimated 85 percent of the population is comprised of noncitizens. Nearly all citizens are Muslims, approximately 85 percent of whom are Sunni and the remaining 15 percent are Shi'a. Foreigners are predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, although there is a substantial number from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, former Commonwealth of Independent States, and North America. Although no official figures are available, local observers estimate that approximately 55 percent of the foreign population is Muslim, 25 percent is Hindu, 10 percent is Christian, 5 percent is Buddhist, and 5 percent (most of whom reside in Dubai and Abu Dhabi) belongs to other religions, including Parsi, Baha'i, and Sikh.

In late 2001, the Ministry of Planning inquired about religious affiliation in its first federal census. According to a Ministry report compiled in 2003 using data collected during the census, 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent is Christian, and 15 percent is "other."

There are foreign missionaries operating in the country. The Government does not permit foreign missionaries to proselytize Muslims; however, they have performed humanitarian missionary work since before the country's independence in 1971. In 1960, Christian missionaries opened a maternity hospital in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi; the hospital continues to operate. Missionaries also operate a maternity hospital in the Emirate of Fujairah. An International Bible Society representative in Al-Ain distributes Bibles and other religious material to Christian religious groups throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The Government controls virtually all Sunni mosques, prohibits proselytizing, and restricts the freedom of assembly and association, thereby limiting the ability of religious groups without dedicated religious buildings to worship and conduct business. The Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven of the constituent emirates of the federal union. The Government recognizes a small number of Christian denominations through the issuance of land use permits for the construction and operation of churches. Religious groups without dedicated buildings of worship often use the facilities of other religious groups or worship in private homes. There have been no reports of government interference in this common practice.

The Government funds or subsidizes almost 95 percent of Sunni mosques and employs all Sunni imams; approximately 5 percent of Sunni mosques are entirely private, and several large mosques have large private endowments. The Government distributes guidance on religious sermons to mosques and imams, whether Sunni or Shi'a, and monitors all sermons for political

content.

The Shi'a minority, which is concentrated in the northern emirates, is free to worship and maintain its own mosques. All Shi'a mosques are considered private and receive no funds from the Government. Shi'a imams are government-appointed only in the Emirate of Dubai. Shi'a Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shi'a family law cases through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts.

The Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf operates as the central federal regulatory authority for Muslim imams and mosques. There is no such authority and no licensing or registration requirements for the recognition and regulation of non-Muslim religions.

Non-Muslim groups can own their own houses of worship, wherein they can practice their religion freely, by requesting a land grant and permission to build a compound from the local ruler (the title for the land remains with the ruler). There is no federal-level method of granting official status to religious groups or approving land grants. Rather, rulers of the individual emirates exercise autonomy in choosing whether to grant access to land and permission to build houses of worship within their emirates. Groups that do not have their own buildings must use the facilities of other religious organizations or worship in private homes. The police or other security forces do not interfere with gatherings held in private homes.

There are 24 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. There is one temple for both Sikhs and Hindus operating in a rented commercial building in Dubai. Sikhs and Hindus living in Abu Dhabi also practice their religion in private homes. Four emirates are home to Christian primary and secondary schools. The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai have donated land for Christian cemeteries, and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi has donated land for a Baha'i cemetery. There are two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the Hindu community, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai.

Non-Muslim religious groups do not receive funds from the Government; however, those with land grants are not charged rental payments, and the local rulers grant the land for some religious buildings. In addition, the Emirate of Sharjah waives utility payments for religious buildings. Non-Muslim groups raise money from among their congregants and receive financial support from abroad. Religious groups also advertise certain religious functions in the press, such as holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events.

Because the official interpretation of Islam considers Christianity to be one of the three monotheistic religions, facilities for Christian congregations are far greater in number and size than those for other non-Muslim communities, despite the fact that Christians represent less than a quarter of the non-Muslim population.

The Government supports in practice a moderate interpretation of Islam; however, as the state religion, Islam is favored over other religions and conversion to Islam is viewed favorably. A list of Muslim converts is published annually. Prisoners who convert to Islam often receive a reduction in their sentences. In Dubai, prisoners who memorize all or part of the Qur'an can receive a reduction in their sentences or a pardon, depending on the length of sentence and the number of sections memorized. Prisoners facing life sentences do not benefit from the memorization program. The ruler of the Emirate of Ajman offers a cash award for prisoners who memorize all or part of the Qur'an.

During the reporting year, the rulers of the various emirates pardoned prisoners on religious and national holidays without regard to the prisoners' religious affiliations. Those pardoned generally are serving sentences from 3 to 5 years for financial crimes, immigration violations, and other minor offenses; pardons reportedly were not extended to prisoners convicted of murder, rape, and kidnapping.

The Government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religions and, in practice, interferes very little in their religious activities.

The Government's Religious Adviser, Ali Al Hashemi, regularly represents the country at Islamic, ecumenical, and Christian conferences and events in other countries. Al Hashemi met regularly with Christian leaders in the country. On January 4, the press reported the visit of Al Hashemi to the bishop of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Abu Dhabi to express holiday greetings. On May 2, Al Hashemi and representatives from the Ministry of Justice attended the Easter celebrations of the Egyptian Coptic Church in Abu Dhabi.

The following Islamic holy days are considered national holidays: Waqfa, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet, Ascension Day, and Eid Al-Fitr. There are no reports that these holidays negatively affect other religious groups because of their religious affiliation. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims and non-Muslims alike are required by law to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking publicly during fasting hours out of respect for Islamic practice.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Federal Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf distributed weekly guidance to both Sunni imams and Shi'a sheikhs regarding subject matter, themes, and content of religious sermons and ensures that clergy do not deviate frequently or

significantly from approved topics in their sermons. All Sunni imams are employees of the Federal Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf, or of individual emirate departments. Except in Dubai, where the Department of Islamic Affairs and Endowments controls the appointment of preachers and the conduct of their work in all mosques, the Government does not appoint sheikhs for Shi'a mosques.

In 1999, land was designated in the Emirate of Ras Al-Khaimah for the construction of a new Catholic church, but at the end of the reporting period, the church had not received permission to open, although construction was completed in 2000. According to a church representative, there are legal issues arising from the church's change to its original building plans that were preventing it from opening. Parishioners continued to hold mass in the Anglican church compound.

There are no Buddhist temples; however, Buddhists, along with Hindus and Sikhs in places without temples, conduct religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. There is one temple for both Sikhs and Hindus in Dubai. There are only two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai. Official permission must be obtained for their use in every instance, posing a hardship for the large Hindu community. The Government does not allow temples to be built on work premises. In late 2004, the Sharjah municipality, on more than one occasion, dismantled temples that were built by Hindu workers in the Qusais labor compounds.

The Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing or distributing religious literature under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation for engaging in behavior offensive to Islam. While there are no specific laws against missionary activities, in the past the Government reportedly has threatened to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of missionary activities; however, there were no reports of such threats during the reporting period. On February 21, two foreign women on a mission trip with the Tom Cox World Ministries were arrested by Dubai Police while passing out Bibles and religious CDs during the Dubai Shopping Festival. They were charged with possession and distribution of religious materials (26 CDs and 19 Bibles), and being an "affront to Islam." Dubai Police released the two women within hours of their arrest but confiscated their passports. Both women were allowed to depart the country on March 3.

In December 2004, the press reported the story of a Filipino Muslim convert who was harassed and then terminated by her employer after she converted to Islam and began wearing the Muslim head cover (hijab). A citizen lawyer adopted the Filipino's case, which was not resolved by the end of the reporting period.

The media reported widely on several cases where women claimed private sector employment discrimination due to their decision to wear the Islamic headscarf, or hijab, considered a religious mandate by many Muslim women. Some people called for legal protection for female employees who wear the hijab. The Government did not publish an official position on the issue by the end of the reporting period.

According to the OpenNet Initiative's "Internet Filtering in the United Arab Emirates in 2004-2005: A Country Study," the country's sole Internet service provider, Etisalat, blocked websites containing religious information. These sites included information on the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity. The OpenNet Initiative is a partnership between several western universities with projects that study Internet filtering and surveillance practices of governments.

In March, the press reported that non-Sunni parents (such as Baha'i, Druze, and Shi'a) objected to their children taking Islamic studies classes, because the Islamic studies curriculum teaches only about Sunni Islam. A Ministry of Education official responded that Islamic studies are mandatory for Muslims, regardless of their sect. Some Baha'is and Druze have passports that identify them as Muslims, and the Ministry of Education therefore requires their children to take Islamic studies classes.

Immigration authorities routinely asked foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications; however, the Government reportedly did not analyze this information, and there have been no reports of religious affiliation affecting the issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits.

Non-Muslim religious leaders have reported that customs authorities rarely question the entry of religious materials such as Bibles and hymnals into the country, unless the materials are printed in Arabic. In the past, customs authorities have questioned the entry of religious materials that they deemed in excess of the normal requirements of existing congregations, although in most instances the items were permitted entry. Customs authorities reportedly are less likely to question the importation of Christian religious items than that of other non-Muslim religious items, although in virtually all instances importation of the material in question eventually has been permitted.

There is a dual system of Shari'a (Islamic) courts for criminal and family law matters and secular courts for civil law matters. Non-Muslims are tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts. Not all crimes are punishable by Shari'a penalties. In cases punishable by Shari'a penalty, non-Muslims may receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge, which generally are provided. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims also may be overturned or modified by a higher court.

Family law for Muslims is governed by Shari'a and the local Shari'a courts. Dubai has a special Shi'a council to act on matters pertaining to Shi'a family law. Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women "of the book," that is, Christian or Jewish women; however, Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men unless the men convert to Islam. Because Islam does not consider the marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment

on grounds of fornication. There were no reports of this occurring during the reporting period. Shari'a, according to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, also is applied in cases of divorce. Women generally are granted custody of female children until they reach the age of maturity and are granted temporary custody of male children until they reach the age of 12. If the mother is deemed unfit, custody reverts to the next able female relative on the mother's side. Shari'a, as practiced in the country, permits polygyny.

Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools (schools supported by the Federal Government for primarily citizen children) and in private schools for Muslim children. Religious instruction in non-Muslim religions is not permitted in public schools; however, religious groups may conduct religious instruction for their members on their religious compounds. According to the law, private schools found teaching subjects that contravene Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the nation's ethics and beliefs may face penalties, including closure. In September 2004, the press quoted the Minister of Justice as saying that the existing religious curriculum in the schools contains misinterpretations of some Qur'anic verses and hadiths. The Ministry of Education has begun to adopt the Ministry of Justice's recommended modifications in grades 1-3. The Minister announced that an institute for Islamic Affairs would be established in Abu Dhabi to train preachers and Islamic Affairs students on religious teachings.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting year.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

On May 11, the Religious Adviser unveiled the foundation stone of the Egyptian Coptic Church of the Reverent Antonios, accompanied by the Archbishop of the Orthodox Coptic Church in Jerusalem, the Gulf, and the Middle East. Construction of another Coptic church in Jebel Ali Free Zone started in April.

In late 2004, the Crown Prince of Dubai donated a plot of land to build St. Mary's church for the Greek Orthodox community in Dubai, which is expected to be finished by 2007.

In December 2004, the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf participated in the Christmas celebrations of the Arab Evangelical church in Abu Dhabi. Both the Assistant Under Secretary for Mosque Affairs and the Assistant Under Secretary for Islamic Affairs attended the event and called for religious tolerance.

In October 2004, the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf hosted an international conference on religion and terrorism that was designed to encourage moderation in preaching and condemn extremism and terrorism. Through this conference, the Government hoped to correct misinterpretations of Islam and demonstrate that Islam promotes peace and tolerance. The conference ended with a call for moderate Islamic preaching, increased training of imams, and reforms of the Islamic studies curriculum.

In March, the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf received Elder Zwick of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to discuss means of enhancing relationships between people of different religions and to confirm the tolerance of Islam as a religion of peace and love.

In October 2004, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, received the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East. The Crown Prince said that such visits foster friendship, tolerance, and religious dialogue.

In November 2004, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other religious communities around the country held several memorial services for the late President Sheikh Zayed and praised his promotion of religious tolerance.

In April, the Minister of Education received Bishop Bernard G. Gremoli, the ex-bishop of Abu Dhabi's Saint Joseph's Catholic Church, to whom he conveyed his condolences on the demise of Pope John Paul II. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, Minister of Information and Culture, attended the Pope's funeral in Rome. The funeral received extensive coverage in the media.

Also in April, President Sheikh Khalifa and northern emirates rulers sent cables of condolences to the Vatican on the death of Pope John Paul II. Sheikh Khalifa lauded the contributions of the Pope in enhancing tolerance between religions. In late April, the President, Dubai Ruler, and Sharjah Ruler sent cables of greetings to Pope Benedict XVI on being elected the new Pope. They expressed their wish for a fruitful dialogue between different religions and cultures to further enhance values of global peace, impartiality, and tolerance. These messages were publicized in the Arabic and English press.

In June, President Khalifa, in his capacity as Ruler of Abu Dhabi, issued a law setting up the Zayed Center for Islamic Culture to foster interreligious tolerance and co-existence and to promote a better understanding of Islam in the West.

In June, Vice President and Prime Minister Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, in his capacity as Ruler of Dubai, established a department of Islamic Affairs and Charity Work. In addition to promoting Islamic culture, including overseeing Islamic publications, the department will supervise the privately funded construction of mosques, issue rulings (fatwas) on Islamic issues, and license prayer leaders, preachers, and instructors. The new department complements the activities of the federal Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf.

In May, Sheikh Hamoud Al Hitar, a Yemeni scholar known for persuading Islamic extremists to return to mainstream Islam, visited the country to teach Muslim religious and police officials about his methods.

In January 2004, Ras Al Khaimah Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi met with officials and members of the Indian Orthodox Christian community to discuss opening a church in that emirate. At the end of the reporting period, Ras Al Khaimah had not given the Indian Orthodox church a land grant. Ras Al Khaimah has only one non-Muslim worship center, which various communities rent to conduct their services.

In 2002, the Al Ain municipal government authorized a land grant to the Anglican Church to build a church in Al Ain, but construction had not begun due to a funding shortfall.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

Non-Muslim religious leaders from inside and outside of the country regularly refer to it as one of the most liberal and broadminded countries in the region in terms of governmental and societal attitudes toward allowing all persons to practice their faiths freely. While citizens regard the country as a Muslim nation that should respect Muslim religious sensibilities on matters such as public consumption of alcohol, proper dress, and proper public comportment, society also emphasizes respect for privacy and Islamic traditions of tolerance, particularly with respect to forms of Christianity. Modest casual attire for men and women is permitted throughout the country.

Many hotels, stores, and other businesses patronized by both citizens and foreigners are permitted to sell alcohol and pork to non-Muslims and to acknowledge non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali (although such displays generally are not permitted during the month of Ramadan). Shopping centers are festive during Christian holidays, and traditional holiday foods, decorations, posters, books, and videotapes are widely available. School children gather in Dubai malls to sing Christmas carols while Santa hands out gifts. Reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services, are regularly printed in the media. The largest country carrier, Emirates Airline, brings European tourists to Dubai on "Easter-special sightseeing packages."

Citizens occasionally express concern regarding the influence on society of the cultures of the country's foreign majority. However, in general, citizens are familiar with foreign societies and believe that the best way to balance foreign influence is by supporting and strengthening indigenous cultural traditions.

There were no anti-Semitic or religiously intolerant articles or statements in the English- and Arabic-language electronic and print media. On a routine basis, all media carried articles or statements criticizing the policies and actions of the Israeli government.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Embassy officials in Abu Dhabi and Consulate General officials in Dubai have discussed religious tolerance and freedom with government officials on a number of occasions, and have encouraged the Government to increase religious freedom by permitting the opening or expansion of religious facilities for the large expatriate population. Embassy and consulate officials also help to protect religious freedom by monitoring its status through informal inquiries and meetings with government officials and representatives of Muslim, Christian, and other faiths. In May, Embassy officials met with the bishop of the Catholic Church in Abu Dhabi to discuss religious freedom and the church's mission in the country.

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