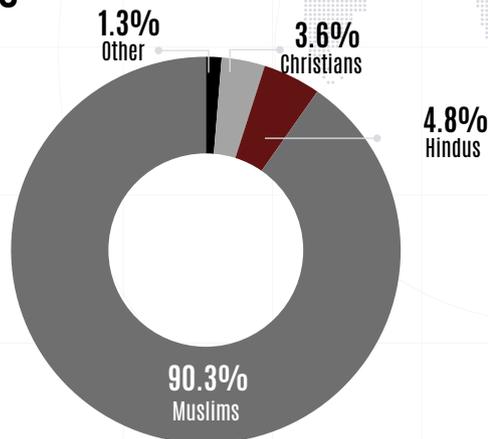




OMAN

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Oman is a sultanate located on the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. Three quarters of its population, including the ruling dynasty, are Ibadi Muslims.¹ Neither Sunni nor Shi'a, Ibadis are descendants of an early branch of Islam. Oman is the only country in the world with an Ibadi majority. The rest of the population consists of Sunnis and, to a lesser extent, Shi'as. A small number of Christian and Hindu families have been naturalised.² Hindus have lived in Oman for centuries, having settled originally in Muscat.

Non-citizen residents, mostly foreign workers, make up around 45 percent of the country's population.³ They include Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs.

About 300,000 Christians of different denominations live in Oman.⁴ There are around 90 congregations composed mostly of expatriates and foreign workers. Among non-Muslim groups, the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA)⁵ recognises the Catholic Church in Oman, Protestant Church of Oman (a partnership between the Reformed Church of America and the Anglican Church), the Al-Amana Centre (a Protestant organisa-

tion that fosters dialogue and mutual learning between Muslims and Christians),⁶ the Hindu Mahajan Temple, and the Anwar Al-Ghubaira Trading Company in Muscat (Sikh). Each religious organisation is responsible for providing MERA with the group's religious beliefs and the names of its leaders. MERA must also grant its approval for new Muslim groups to form.⁷

There are five Catholic parishes in Oman under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia (AVOSA). According to Church sources, the Catholic population numbers around 60,000.⁸

The constitution of 1996, as amended in 2011,⁹ states in Article 1: "The Sultanate of Oman is an Arab, Islamic, Independent State with full sovereignty". Article 2 declares: "The religion of the State is Islam and Islamic Shari'a is the basis for legislation." Article 28 says: "The freedom to practise religious rites according to recognised customs is protected, provided it does not violate the public order or contradict morals."

Oman has no law that criminalises apostasy from Islam. However, a father who converts from Islam loses his paternal rights over his children.

In January 2018, a new penal code was approved. It in-

cludes harsher sentences for “insulting the Quran” and “offending Islam or any [Abrahamic] religion”.¹⁰ The maximum prison sentence was increased from three to ten years. For those who “form, fund, [or] organise a group... with the aim of undermining Islam... or advocating other religions”¹¹ without prior permission, the sentence can be up to seven years. The maximum sentence for “‘holding a meeting’ outside government-approved locations to promote another religion” is three years.¹²

Unlike Abrahamic religions, the new code does not mention other faiths. It does however criminalise the use of the internet that “might prejudice public order or religious values,” and imposes a “penalty of between one month and one year in prison and a fine of not less than 1,000 Omani rials”.¹³

Shari’a (Islamic law) applies in matters of inheritance and marriage to non-Muslims (Law 32 in Personal Status of 1997).¹⁴

Imams must possess a licence and preach the sermons issued by the government.¹⁵

Although public proselytising is forbidden, certain “Islamic propagation centres” are accepted by the government.¹⁶

Non-Muslim groups may practise their religion according to their values, customs, and traditions without interference but only on land “specifically donated by the Sultan for the purpose of collective worship”.¹⁷ Religious gatherings are allowed only within government-approved places of worship.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In September 2019, the new St Francis Xavier’s Catholic Church was inaugurated in Salalah.¹⁸ The construction in less than 18 months of a new Catholic Church on a land given by the government is a very positive sign.

In January 2020 the Anti Defamation League demanded that numerous books with anti-semitic content, both in Arabic and in English, were removed from the Muscat International Book Fair.¹⁹

In August 2020, Pope Francis has extended Eastern patriarchs’ jurisdiction over the Arabian Peninsula. This decision affects six Eastern Catholic patriarchal churches (the Coptic, Maronite, Syriac, Melkite, Chaldean and Armenian Catholic churches). The Pontiff has requested

from the patriarchs to coordinate with the apostolic vicars. The Patriarch will have to obtain approval of the Vatican in order to establish new territorial jurisdictions.²⁰

Covid-19

From 16th November 2020, mosques are open again, five times a day for prayers, but will not open for Friday prayers.²¹ Only mosques that met the requirements for safe congregation, and could accommodate 400 worshippers, could reopen.²²

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Despite repercussions of regional tensions, especially Sunni-Shi’a conflicts, Oman has succeeded in maintaining a relatively neutral position. It is well known that Oman shares good relations with Iran which it has tried to maintain despite regional pressure.

After almost 50 years in power, Sultan Qaboos passed away in January 2020. In an increasingly tense regional situation, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, Sultan Qaboos’s cousin and chosen successor, reassured his people and the world that he would continue along the path set by his predecessor.²³

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