

International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 - Qatar

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion, and national law incorporates both secular legal traditions and sharia (Islamic law). In practice, the government generally follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and rarely interferes with their worship activities. Sunni and Shia Muslims practiced freely. Practitioners of other religions generally worshipped in specially designated or private locations. The government restricted public worship by other religions, prohibited non-Muslims from proselytizing, monitored religious expression in the media and on the internet, and required formal registration of religious groups. Some found the registration process cumbersome. The law recognizes only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

There were reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including some instances of anti-Semitism in the media.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials and representatives of religious groups, and local quasi-governmental organizations to discuss religious freedom issues such as restrictions on the number, type, and location of places of worship, and the potential for the religious establishments law to deny religious freedom. The embassy organized an interfaith iftar during Ramadan, which brought together religious leaders from the Christian community, academics from Qatar University's College of Sharia and Islamic Studies, and representatives from the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is two million (July 2013 estimate). Citizens make up approximately 12.5 percent of the population. Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of citizens; Shia Muslims number between 5 and 15 percent.

Most noncitizens are Sunni or Shia Muslims, Hindus, Christians, or Buddhists. While the government does not release figures regarding religious affiliation, noncitizen estimates are available from Christian groups and local embassies. The Hindu community, almost exclusively from India and Nepal, comprises more than 30 percent of noncitizens. Roman Catholics are approximately 20 percent of the noncitizen population, while Buddhists, largely from South, Southeast, and East Asia, are approximately 7 percent of noncitizens. Groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Anglicans, Egyptian Copts, Bahais of Iranian or Lebanese origin, and members of the Greek and other Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws recognize the Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) and provide for freedom of worship. However, the law prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing and restricts public worship. Islam is the state religion, and sharia is the main source of legislation. The law does not recognize religions other than Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. Custom outweighs

government enforcement of nondiscrimination laws, and legal, cultural, and institutional discrimination exists.

Converting to another religion from Islam is considered apostasy and is a capital offense; however, since the country gained independence in 1971, there have been no recorded punishments for apostasy.

The law punishes proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam with up to 10 years in prison. Proselytizing on one's own accord for any religion other than Islam can result in a sentence of up to five years. The government's policy, however, is to deport suspected proselytizers who are foreigners without formal legal proceedings.

The law calls for two years imprisonment and a fine of QR 10,000 (\$2,746) for possession of written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity. The law imposes a prison sentence of up to seven years for defaming, desecrating, or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. The law stipulates a one-year prison term or a fine of QR 1,000 (\$275) for producing or circulating material containing slogans, images, or symbols defaming those three religions. The law also prohibits publication of texts provoking social discord or religious strife.

The Ministry of Social Affairs must approve all religious charitable activities in advance.

The government and ruling family are strongly linked to Islam. All members of the ruling family and virtually all citizens are Muslim. Most high-level government positions are reserved for citizens; therefore most government officials are Muslims. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments controls the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic education for adults and new converts. The emir participates in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally finances the Hajj (religious pilgrimage) for some citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who cannot otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

A unified civil court system has jurisdiction over both Muslims and non-Muslims. National law incorporates both secular legal traditions and sharia, with the exception of a separate limited dispute resolution system for financial service companies managed under the Qatar Financial Center. The unified court system applies sharia in family law cases, including inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody. Non-Muslims are subject to sharia in cases of child custody. In these proceedings, the testimony of men has more credence than that of women. While a non-Muslim woman is not required by law to convert to Islam when marrying a Muslim, children of such a marriage are legally Muslims. There are also certain criminal cases, such as drunkenness, in which Muslims are tried and punished under sharia. In matters involving religious issues, judges have some discretion to apply their respective interpretations for Shia and Sunni groups.

Muslim convicts may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Quran while imprisoned. A judicial panel for Shia Muslims decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other domestic matters. In other religious matters, the country's family law applies across all branches of Islam.

The government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of all religious books and materials but permits individuals and religious institutions to import holy books and other

religious items for personal or congregational use. The law designates the minister of Islamic affairs and endowments as the final authority for approving religious centers. Christian groups must register (have a minimum number of members) with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) consular affairs department for legal recognition. The government maintains an official register of approved Christian denominations and grants legal status to the Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Lebanese Maronite, Filipino Evangelical, and Indian Christian churches. Both the Lebanese Maronite and Filipino Evangelical groups, the most recently registered, have reportedly been allotted land for their buildings. The MFA is still reviewing one application, and has rejected another because the group was determined to fall outside the recognized Abrahamic faiths.

For recognition, a denomination must have at least 1,500 members in the country. The MFA requires smaller congregations to affiliate and worship under the patronage of one of the now eight recognized churches, two of which have not yet begun construction of their buildings. The government permits adherents of unrecognized religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Bahai Faith, and small Christian congregations, to worship privately in their homes and with others.

Islamic instruction is compulsory for Muslims attending state-sponsored schools. While non-Muslims may provide private religious instruction for their children, most foreign children attend secular private schools. Muslim children may attend secular and coeducational private schools.

Government Practices

In April police arrested Nepali teacher Dorje Gurung for reportedly “insulting Islam.” He was subsequently released on May 12, after the public prosecutor decided not to press charges.

New religious groups, especially small groups, continued to have difficulties in registering. Religious leaders complained the inability to register made it difficult for religious groups to conduct financial activity.

The government restricted the number and type of bank accounts churches could hold, and imposed reporting requirements on contractors doing business with the churches, as well as on donors supporting them, similar to its approach to the registration of foreign businesses.

Christian leaders reported the government continued to make significant efforts to facilitate the construction of new worship space and improve roads and other infrastructure in Mesaymir. The Mesaymir Religious Complex, widely known as “Church City,” provided worship space for thousands of Christians.

The government permitted the eight registered Christian denominations to worship at Church City, but required unregistered churches to worship under the patronage of one of the eight recognized denominations, and to function as a subgroup of that religion. For example, Protestant congregations registered as a denomination of the Anglican Church. The MFA reportedly allotted land for the Lebanese Maronite and Filipino Evangelical congregations to construct their own churches. The government’s infrastructure improvements at Church City made it easier for disabled worshippers to participate.

The MFA led a permanent intergovernmental committee charged with addressing the concerns of non-Muslim religious groups, including legal incorporation and sponsorship of religious leaders.

Clergy members reported they maintained good relations with the government during the last year.

Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and other unrecognized religious groups did not have authorized facilities in which to practice their religions. The government generally considered members of religious groups other than Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as transient members of the community not requiring permanent religious facilities or clergy; however, the government permitted these groups to worship in private homes and workplaces.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments provided thematic guidance and occasionally reviewed inputs but did not require prior approval of Friday sermons at mosques. The government reserved the right to take judicial action against individuals and facilities when the guidance was not followed, but there were no public examples of the government doing so, primarily because clerics adhered to the guidance.

The government reviewed foreign newspapers, magazines, and books for “objectionable” religious content. Journalists and publishers continued to self-censor when reporting on material potentially considered hostile to Islam.

The government restricted the peaceful expression of religious views on the internet and at times censored the internet for religious content through a proxy server that monitored and blocked web sites, email, and chat rooms using the state-owned internet service provider. For example, the government blocked sites and postings that contained content deemed anti-Islamic. It also blocked posts that called for violence against other religious groups in the country or that supported violent religious extremists or Christian proselytizers.

The government prohibited Christian congregations from advertising religious services or using religious symbols visible to the public, such as outdoor crosses.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were few manifestations of religious discrimination.

Some of the country’s privately owned Arabic-language newspapers occasionally carried cartoons depicting offensive caricatures of Jews and Jewish symbols. These occurred primarily in the daily newspapers *al-Watan*, *al-Sharq*, *al-Arab*, and *al-Raya*, and drew no government response.

The quasi-governmental Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) continued international and domestic engagement to promote interfaith dialogue. The DICID hosted its 10th annual conference on interfaith dialogue in April, bringing together over three hundred participants from seventy countries, including the Vatican’s Deputy President of the Pontifical Council and the Director of the Latin American Jewish Congress. Doha-based influential cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi boycotted the DICID conference, announcing that he refused to sit with Jewish leaders “as long as Jews rape Palestine and the Aqsa Mosque.” However, al-Qaradawi’s deputy at the International Union of Muslim Scholars, Doha-based Imam Dr. Ali al-Quradaghi, attended the conference.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and embassy officers met with government officials and representatives of religious groups, and local quasi-governmental organizations to discuss issues such as restrictions on the number, type, and location of places of worship, and the potential for the religious establishments law to deny religious freedom. The embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the government.

The embassy sponsored the visit of two American Muslim experts to promote understanding about religious diversity and religious tolerance. During their visits, both attended Friday prayers and met with the chairman of the DICID, and one of the experts also participated in an interfaith iftar with Muslim and Christian religious leaders and Islamic scholars.