



Yemen (66)
2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:

Yemen

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YEMEN

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There was no change in the status of respect of religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There are very small numbers of religious minorities, and relations among religious groups generally are amicable.

The U. S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and also provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Followers of other religions are free to worship according to their beliefs and to wear religiously distinctive ornaments or dress; however, the Government forbids conversions, requires permission for the construction of new places of worship, and prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing. The Constitution states that Shari'a is the source of all legislation.

Religious Demography

Virtually all citizens are Muslims, either of the Zaydi order of Shi'a Islam or the Shafa'i order of Sunni Islam, representing approximately 35 percent and 65 percent of the total population, respectively. There are also a few thousand Ismailis, mostly in the north.

Almost all Christians are temporary foreign residents, except for a few families living in Aden that trace their origins to India. There are a few Hindus in Aden who also trace their origins to India. There are several churches and Hindu places of worship in Aden, but no non-Muslim public places of worship exist in the former North Yemen, largely

because northern Yemen does not have a history of a large, resident foreign community as in the south. However, Christian church services are held regularly without harassment in private homes or facilities such as schools, and these facilities appear adequate to accommodate the small numbers involved.

Christian missionaries operate in Yemen and most are dedicated to the provision of medical services; others are employed in teaching and social services. Invited by the Government, the Sisters of Charity run homes for the poor and disabled in Sana'a, Taiz, Hodeida, and Aden. The Government has asked the Vatican to open additional Sisters of Charity facilities. The Government issues residence visas to priests so that they may provide for the community's religious needs. There is also a German Christian charitable mission in Hodeida and a Dutch Christian medical mission in Saada. An American Baptist congregation has run a hospital in Jibla for over 30 years. The Anglican Church also runs a charitable clinic. An American nongovernmental organization (NGO), run by the Seventh-Day Adventists, works in the governorate of Hodeida.

Nearly all of the country's once sizable Jewish population has emigrated. There are no legal restrictions on the few hundred Jews who remain, although there are traditional restrictions on places of residence and choice of employment (see Section II). Approximately 500 Jews are scattered in a handful of villages between Sana'a and Saada in northern Yemen.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Under Islam the conversion of a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy, a crime punishable by death. There were no reports of cases in which the crime has been charged or prosecuted by government authorities. In January 2000, the director of the Aden office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) received a report that a Somali refugee, who allegedly had converted from Islam to Christianity after his arrival in Yemen, had been arrested for apostasy. The UNHCR's investigation found that the refugee had been detained previously by police in Aden and at the UNHCR's Al-Jahin camp. The refugee is registered with the UNHCR under a Christian name but maintains an address in Sana'a under a Muslim name. He is married to a Muslim woman and has an Islamic marriage certificate. The UNHCR believed that authorities detained the refugee on criminal rather than religious grounds. At the end of the period covered by this report, the refugee was out of police custody and living in Aden while the UNHCR explored resettlement possibilities.

There are unconfirmed reports that some police, without the authorization or knowledge of their superiors, on occasion have harassed and detained persons suspected of apostasy in order to compel them to renounce their conversions.

The Government does not allow the building of new non-Muslim public places of worship without permission; however, in 1998 the country

established diplomatic relations with the Vatican and agreed to the construction and operation of a "Christian center" in Sana'a. The Papal Nuncio, resident in Kuwait, presented his credentials to the Yemeni Government in March 2000. Yemen's ambassador to Italy was accredited to the Vatican in July 1999. President Ali Abdullah Saleh paid an official visit to the Vatican at the time of his state visit to Italy in April.

Public schools provide instruction in Islam but not in other religions. However, almost all non-Muslims are foreigners who attend private schools.

In February the Government revised its travel regulations to allow Yemeni-origin Jews on third-country passports to travel to Yemen, as well as Yemeni-origin Israelis with laissez-passer travel documents. The first such visitors arrived in March.

Private Islamic organizations may maintain ties to pan-Islamic organizations and operate schools, but the Government monitors their activities.

Following unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, owners of property previously expropriated by the Communist government of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, including religious organizations, were invited to seek restitution of their property. However, implementation of the process, including for religious institutions, has been extremely limited, and very few properties have been returned to any previous owner.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

Official government policy does not prohibit or provide punishment for the possession of non-Islamic religious literature. However, there are unconfirmed reports that foreigners, on occasion, have been harassed by police for possessing such literature. In addition, some members of the security forces occasionally censor the mail of Christian clergy who minister to the foreign community, ostensibly to prevent proselytizing.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

The country is overwhelmingly Muslim. There are very small numbers

of religious minorities, and relations among religious groups generally are amicable. There were no reported incidents of violence or discrimination between the adherents of the two main orders, Zaydi and Shafa'i Islam. Religiously motivated violence is neither incited nor tolerated by the Islamic clergy, except for a small politically motivated clerical minority, often with ties to foreign extremist elements.

The tiny number of religious minorities generally live in harmony with their Muslim neighbors. Apart from a small but undetermined number of Christians and Hindus of South Asian origin in Aden, Jews are the only indigenous religious minority. Their numbers have diminished significantly--from several tens of thousands to a few hundred--due to voluntary emigration over the last 50 years. Although the law makes no distinction, Jews traditionally are restricted to living in one section of a city or village and often are confined to a limited choice of employment, usually farming or handicrafts (primarily silver working). They are respected for their craftsmanship and their silver work is highly prized. Jews may, and do, own land. Traditionally the tribal leaders of the regions in which the Jews have resided are responsible for protecting the Jews in their areas. A failure to provide this protection is considered a serious personal dishonor.

Christian clergy who minister to the foreign community are employed in teaching, social services, and health care.

In July 1998, a gunman killed three nuns belonging to the Sisters of Charity order in Hodeidah. The Government took swift action and immediately arrested the individual. The Government determined that he was deranged and committed him to a psychiatric institution.

A hospital in Jibla operated by the Baptist Church experienced occasional threats and harassment from local extremists who feared that the hospital might be used to spread Christianity. There have been no reports of threats by extremists in several years, and the hospital enjoys widespread community support.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy maintains an active dialog on human rights issues with the Government, NGO's, and others, and discusses religious freedom issues in the overall context of the promotion of human rights. Embassy officers, including the Ambassador, meet periodically with representatives of the Jewish and Christian communities.

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