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Jordan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for the freedom to practice the rites of one's religion and faith in accordance with the customs that are observed in the Kingdom, unless they violate public order or morality. According to the constitution, Islam is the state religion; religious practices that conflict with the official interpretation of Shari'a are prohibited.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. In January 2006, a Shari'a court received a complaint for apostasy against a convert from Islam to Christianity. The plaintiff subsequently dropped the charges but the defendant has not yet received an official guarantee that no new charges will be filed. In 2005 an appellate court upheld the Amman Shari'a Court's 2004 conviction of a convert from Islam to Christianity for apostasy. Members of unrecognized religious groups and converts from Islam face legal discrimination and bureaucratic difficulties in personal status cases. Converts from Islam additionally risk the loss of civil rights. Shari'a courts have the authority to prosecute proselytizers.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups contributed to religious freedom. Relations between Muslims and Christians generally are good; however, adherents of unrecognized religions and Muslims who convert to other faiths face societal discrimination.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall policy to promote human rights, interfaith dialogue, and understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 55,436 square miles and a population of 5.9 million. More than 95 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Official government figures estimate that Christians make up 4 percent of the population; however, government and Christian officials privately estimate the figure to be closer to 3 percent. It is estimated there are at least twenty thousand Druze, a small number of Shi'a Muslims, and fewer than 400 Baha'is. There are no statistics available regarding the number of persons who are not adherents of any religious faith.

Officially recognized Christian denominations include the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Assyrian, Coptic, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, United Pentecostal, and Presbyterian churches. Other Christian groups, including the Baptists, the Free Evangelicals, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assembly of God, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance, are registered with the Ministry of Interior as "societies" but not as churches. There are a number of Chaldean and Syriac Christians and Shi'a among the estimated 500 thousand to 600 thousand Iraqis in the country, many of whom are undocumented or on visitor permits.

With few exceptions, there are no major geographic concentrations of religious minorities. The cities of Husn, in the north, and Fuheis, near Amman, are predominantly Christian. Madaba and Karak, both south of Amman, also have significant Christian populations. The northern part of the city of Azraq has a sizeable Druze population, as does Umm Al-Jamal in the governorate of Mafrq. There also are Druze populations in Amman and Zarka and a smaller number in Irbid and Aqaba. There are a number of non-indigenous Shi'a living in the Jordan Valley and the south. Druzes are registered as "Muslims" and, as they have their own court in Al Azraq, can administer their own personal status matters.

Foreign missionaries operating in the country include representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Campus Crusade for Christ, Samaritan's Purse, The Evangelical Alliance Mission, Life Agape, Intervarsity, Navigators, Christar, Arab World Ministries, Operation Mobilization, Southern Baptist International Mission Board, the Conservative Baptists, Frontiers, Brother Andrew, the Jesuits, Christian Brothers, Rosary Sisters, Benedictines, Anglican Church Mission Society, the Society of Friends (Quakers), Comboni Sisters, Little Sisters of Jesus, the Religious of Nazareth, Sisters of St. Dorothy, the Daughters of Mary the Helper (Salesian Sisters), the Little Sisters of Nazareth, the Little Family of the Annunciation, Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, Basiliennes Chouerites, Focolare Sisters, Franciscans (OFM), Sons of Divine Providence (Don Orione Fathers), Association Fraternal International, Institute of the Incarnate Word, Franciscans of the Cross, Dominican Sisters of St.

Catherine, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Franciscan Missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Daughters of Mary of the Enclosed Garden, Theresian Institute, and the Missionaries of Charity.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom to practice the rites of one's religion and faith in accordance with the customs that are observed in the Kingdom, unless they violate public order or morality. According to the constitution, Islam is the state religion; religious practices that conflict with the official interpretation of Shari'a are prohibited.

The constitution, in Articles 103-106, provides that matters concerning the personal status of Muslims are the exclusive jurisdiction of Shari'a courts, which apply Shari'a law in their proceedings. Personal status includes religion, marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. Personal status law follows the guidelines of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, which is applied to cases that are not explicitly addressed by civil status legislation. Matters of personal status of non-Muslims are the jurisdiction of Tribunals of Religious Communities, according to Article 108.

Churches and other religious institutions that wish to receive official recognition must apply to the Prime Ministry for registration. Recognized non-Muslim religious institutions do not receive subsidies; they are financially and administratively independent of the Government and are tax-exempt. Some churches were registered with the Ministry of Interior as "societies" rather than churches.

While Christianity is a recognized religion and non-Muslim citizens may profess and practice the Christian faith, churches must be accorded legal recognition through administrative procedures in order to own land and administer sacraments, including marriage. The prime minister unofficially confers with an interfaith council of clergy representing officially registered local churches on all matters relating to the Christian community, including the registration of new churches. The Government refers to the following criteria when considering official recognition of Christian churches: the faith must not contradict the nature of the constitution, public ethics, customs, or traditions; it must be recognized by the Middle East Council of Churches; the faith must not oppose the national religion; and the group must include some citizen adherents. Groups that the Government deems to engage in practices that violate the law and the nature of society or threaten the stability of public order are prohibited; however, there were no reports that any religious groups were banned.

Public schools provide mandatory religious instruction for all Muslim students. Christian and Baha'i students are not required to attend courses that teach Islam. In 1996 the late King Hussein and the Ministry of Education approved a plan to provide religious instruction for Christian students in public schools. In 1998 the Government launched an experimental program in four districts to incorporate Christian education in the public school curriculum for Christian students only, and on condition that the school's Christian population meet a size requirement. However, this program has not been implemented because the Christian denominations have not agreed upon a common curriculum. The constitution provides that congregations have the right to establish schools for the education of their own communities "provided that they comply with the general provisions of the law and are subject to government control in matters relating to their curriculums and orientation."

There are two major government-sponsored institutions that promote interfaith understanding: the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies and the Royal Academy for Islamic Civilization Research (the Al al-Bayt Foundation). The last time the Government held an international Christian conference in government facilities was in 2002.

On January 23, 2006 a Royal Decree was issued to recognize "Copts" as a religious community. In December 2005 the Government approved a request by the Coptic Orthodox bishop in Amman for the establishment of a church court for the Coptic community. Although the court has not yet been established, the Coptic priest has authority to settle all personal status issues for members.

In August 2005 a member of the royal family, Prince Hamza, hosted a conference that promoted interfaith dialogue among religious communities. The conference included religious leaders from numerous countries and focused on Islam as a faith with democratic principals. In November 2004, supported by the Government, the Grand Mufti issued a proclamation, known as the "Amman Message" stating that the "true nature" of Islam is one of moderation and tolerance. He encouraged the "silent majority" to promote Islam as a faith capable of building bridges of understanding between all nations.

The Islamic feasts of Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet's Ascension, and the Islamic New Year, are celebrated as national holidays. Christmas and the Gregorian calendar New Year also are national holidays. Easter is a government-recognized holiday and Christians may request leave for other Christian feasts approved by the local Council of Bishops.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There were no reports that the practice of any faith was prohibited; however, the Government does not officially recognize all religious groups. Some religious groups, while allowed to meet and practice their faith, faced societal and official discrimination. In addition, not all Christian denominations have applied for or been accorded legal recognition.

The Government does not recognize the Druze or Baha'i faiths as religions but does not prohibit their practice. The Druze face official discrimination but do not complain of social discrimination. Baha'is face both official and social discrimination. On national identity cards, which normally identify the bearer's religious community, the Government records Druzes as Muslims, and indicates no religion for Baha'is. The Baha'i community does not have its own court to adjudicate personal status and family matters; such cases are heard in Shari'a courts. The Government does not officially recognize the Druze temple in Azraq, and four social halls belonging to the Druze are registered as "societies." The Government does not permit Baha'is to register schools or places of worship. Employment applications for government positions occasionally contain questions about an applicant's religion. Additionally, the constitution stipulates that the prime minister must be a Muslim citizen. Christians serve regularly as cabinet ministers. Of the 110 seats of the lower house of Parliament, 9 are reserved for Christians. No seats are reserved for adherents of other religious groups. No seats are reserved for Druzes, but they are permitted to hold office under their Government classification as Muslims.

The Government does not recognize Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Christ, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but each is allowed to conduct religious services without interference.

The Government does not interfere with public worship by the country's Christian minority.

The Government recognizes Judaism as a religion; however there are reportedly no Jordanian citizens who are Jewish. The Government does not impose restrictions on Jews, and they are permitted to own property and conduct business in the country.

Because Shari'a law governs the personal status of Muslims, converting from Islam to Christianity and proselytism of Muslims are not allowed. Muslims who convert to another religion face societal and governmental discrimination. The Government does not recognize the legality of such conversions. Under Shari'a, converts are regarded as apostates and may be denied their civil and property rights. In the past, this principle has not been applied, but during the last reporting period a convert to Christianity was found guilty of apostasy and stripped of many of his civil rights. The Government maintains it neither encourages nor prohibits apostasy. The Government does not recognize converts from Islam as falling under the jurisdiction of their new religious community's laws in matters of personal status; converts are still considered Muslims. Converts to Islam fall under the jurisdiction of Shari'a courts. Shari'a, in theory, provides for the death penalty for Muslims who apostatize; however, such punishment has never been applied in the country.

There is no statute that expressly forbids proselytism of Muslims; however Government policy requires that foreign missionary groups refrain from public proselytism. In August 2005 two foreign missionaries were expelled from the country after a member of parliament complained to the minister of the interior that they were proselytizing among children without the permission of the parents. In the past, the Government has taken action against some non-Orthodox Christian missionaries in response to Orthodox Christians who complained that missionary activities disrupt the peace and cohesion of society.

Despite past difficulty in obtaining legal status, the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), a Christian training school for pastors and missionaries, was registered with the Government and operates as a cultural center. JETS is permitted to appoint faculty and administration, but as a consequence the Government denies accreditation as an academic institution. Students and faculty from abroad wishing to attend JETS were sometimes able to live temporarily in the country by using tourist visas; however, because of the lack of accreditation, visas were sometimes not granted. Many students overstayed their visas and upon departure from the country were required to pay two dollars for each day they spent without a visa. JETS is forbidden by the Government to accept Muslim students. During the reporting period, JETS denied the request of a Muslim former member of parliament to attend classes due to the Government's policy against Muslims studying at the center. In the past, seven foreign students who had converted from Islam to Christianity were forced out of the program and required to leave the country. The Government authorized JETS to own property, and in August 2003 the organization broke ground on a new facility. During the reporting year, the Government confiscated a shipment of approximately one hundred books ordered by JETS. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened and secured the release of the books to JETS.

Parliamentary elections law historically has under-represented urban areas that are centers of support for Islamist candidates.

The Political Parties Law prohibits houses of worship from being used for political activity. The law was designed primarily to prevent Government opponents from preaching politically-oriented sermons in mosques.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Trusts manages Islamic institutions and the construction of mosques. It also appoints imams, provides mosque staff salaries, manages Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidizes certain activities sponsored by mosques. The Government monitors sermons at mosques and requires that preachers refrain

from political commentary that could instigate social or political unrest.

In January and February 2006, Jihad Al-Momani, former chief editor of the weekly newspaper Shihaan, and Hussein Al-Khalidi, of the weekly Al Mihar, were arrested, released, and then re-arrested for printing controversial cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Although released, the two journalists each face charges of "defaming the Prophet Muhammad" which is punishable by up to three months imprisonment; and additional charges of "insulting God" which carries a maximum sentence of three years. Both men have pleaded "not guilty" to the charges stating that their intent was to garner support for the movement against the Danish paper that originally published the cartoons. On May 30, 2006 the two men received the minimum sentence of two months prison, but were immediately released on bail with the possibility that the sentences will be commuted to fines of approximately \$170 (JD 120) each.

According to the constitution, religious community trusts ("awqaf") and matters of personal status such as religion, marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance fall within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Shari'a courts for Muslims and separate non-Muslim tribunals for each religious community recognized by the Government. There is no provision for civil marriage or divorce. The head of the department that manages Shari'a court affairs (a cabinet-level position) appoints Shari'a judges, while each recognized non-Muslim religious community selects the structure and members of its own tribunal. All judicial nominations are approved by the prime minister and commissioned officially by royal decree. The Protestant denominations registered as "societies" come under the jurisdiction of one of the recognized Protestant church tribunals. There are no tribunals assigned for atheists or adherents of unrecognized religions such as the Druze and the Baha'i. Such individuals must request one of the recognized courts to hear their personal status cases.

Shari'a is applied in all matters relating to family law involving Muslims or the children of a Muslim father, and all citizens, including non-Muslims, are subject to Islamic legal provisions regarding inheritance. According to the law, all minor children of male citizens who convert to Islam are considered to be Muslim. Adult children of a male Christian who has converted to Islam become ineligible to inherit from their father if they do not also convert to Islam. In cases in which a Muslim converts to Christianity the conversion is not recognized legally by the authorities, and the individual continues to be treated as a Muslim in matters of family and property law.

In 2002, the Shari'a and civil court systems adjudicated a dispute concerning custody of two minors, raised as Christians, whose father allegedly converted to Islam shortly before his death. The widow contended that her husband's signature on the conversion certificate was a forgery. The courts assigned legal custody to the Christian widow's brother, who is a convert to Islam. However, the children remained in the mother's physical custody pending the result of a counter suit she filed against her brother, alleging disinterest in the children and misuse of the children's trust funds. In April 2005, a court ruled in the mother's favor and assigned her legal custody of the children. In May 2005, the widow's brother appealed against the ruling, but an appellate court rejected the petition.

Some Christians are unable to divorce under the legal system because they are subject to their denomination's religious court system, which does not allow divorce. Such individuals sometimes convert to another Christian denomination or to the Islamic faith to divorce legally.

Druzes, Baha'is, and members of other unrecognized religious groups do not have their religious affiliations correctly noted on their national identity cards or "family books" (the family book is a national registration record that is issued to the head of every family and that serves as proof of citizenship). Atheists must associate themselves with a recognized religion for purposes of official identification.

The Government traditionally reserves some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians (4 percent); however, all senior command positions have been held by Muslims. Division-level commanders and above are required to lead Islamic prayer on certain occasions. There is no Christian clergy in the military.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On January 20, 2006 a Shari'a court received an apostasy complaint against Mahmoud Abdel Rahman Mohammad Eleker, a convert from Islam to Christianity. On April 14, 2006 the complainant, the convert's brother-in-law, dropped the charges after the convert's wife renounced in the presence of a lawyer any claims she might have to an inheritance from her own parents. However, Eleker must still appear before a court in order to receive an official guarantee that no new charges will be filed. Eleker and his pastor postponed the date of this appearance until the end of July, having heard rumors of an upcoming change in the apostasy law which might help his case. The case was still pending at the end of the reporting period.

On September 13, 2004, on the order of a Shari'a court, a convert from Islam to Christianity was arrested and held overnight on charges of apostasy. On November 23, 2004 a Shari'a court found the defendant guilty of apostasy. The ruling was upheld on January 25, 2005 by a Shari'a appeals court. The verdict declared the convert to be a ward of the state, stripped him of his civil rights, and annulled his marriage. It further declared him to be without any religious identity. It stated that he lost all rights to inheritance and may not remarry his (now former) wife unless he returns to Islam, and forbade his being considered an adherent of any other religion. The verdict implies the possibility that legal and physical custody of his child could be assigned to someone else. The convert reportedly left the country with his

family and is not believed to have returned.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners who remained in custody at the end of the period covered by this report.

Forced Religious Conversion

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. However, according to the law, the father of any child, whether Muslim or Christian, may restrict the child's travel.

Anti-Semitism

Editorial cartoons, articles and opinion pieces critical of Israel and Israeli politics were frequently published in the local press. Anti-Semitic pieces occurred with much less frequency, and were usually the expressions of political columnists; they did not prompt a response from the Government.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Baha'is faced some societal discrimination.

The majority of the population views religion as central to one's personal identity. Muslims who convert to other religions often face social ostracism, threats, and abuse from their families and Muslim religious leaders. Parents usually strongly discourage young adults from pursuing interfaith romantic relationships, because they may lead to conversion. Such relationships may lead to ostracism and, in some cases, violence against the couple or feuds between members of the couple's families. When such situations arise, families may approach local government officials for resolution. In the past, there were reports that in some cases local government officials encouraged Christian women involved in relationships with Muslim men to convert to Islam to defuse potential family or tribal conflict and keep the peace; however, during the period covered by this report, there were no known cases in which local officials encouraged conversion from Christianity to Islam.

During the reporting period, local newspapers occasionally published articles critical of Christian evangelical organizations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government actively promotes religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom and other human rights issues with government authorities on a number of occasions via formal inquiry and discussion. Embassy officers met frequently with members of the various religious and missionary communities in the country, as well as with private religious organizations.

In October 2005, the embassy funded an interfaith conference to commemorate the first anniversary of the Amman Message. The conference, titled "The Amman Message in Action" was organized by the Jordan Interfaith Coexistence Research Center and brought together experts, professors, and clerics from the three monotheistic faiths from Jordan, the Middle East, and the United States. The conference produced an interfaith endorsement of the principles of the Amman Message, and culminated in an interfaith celebration of the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

From September 10 to October 1, 2005, the embassy also sponsored the participation of Shari'a judges in an international visitor program designed to expose these religious scholars to the diversity, religious tolerance and freedom of U.S. society, including meeting religious leaders from several religious groups and U.S. officials who raised religious freedom concerns. From November 21 to December 9, 2005, the Grand Mufti of Jordan traveled to the United States on an International Visitor exchange for the same purpose.

In September 2005, embassy officers met with moderate Islamic political leaders dedicated to tolerance and religious dialogue. The U.S. Department of State continued its multi-phase exchange program to bring U.S. religious leaders to the country and Jordanian imams and other religious leaders to the United States for outreach activities aimed at grassroots communities and youth.

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