

BRUNEI 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that while the official religion is the Shafi'i school of Islam, all other religions may be practiced "in peace and harmony." The government permitted Shafi'i Muslims and members of non-Muslim religious minorities to practice their faiths, but has banned several religious groups it considers "deviant." Phase one of the Sharia Penal Code (SPC) has operated in parallel with the existing common law-based criminal justice system since 2014 and primarily involves offenses punished by fines or imprisonment, such as propagating religions other than Islam, eating in public during the fasting hours of Ramadan, cross-dressing, close proximity of unmarried people of the opposite sex, and "indecent behavior," which is defined broadly. The SPC applies to both Muslims and non-Muslims, including foreigners, with non-Muslims exempted from certain sections. During the year, phases two and three of the SPC, which would include punishments such as stoning to death for fornication, sodomy, or apostasy, and amputation of the hand for thievery, were not implemented. The government has not published the criminal procedure code that is a necessary precursor to implementation of these phases of the SPC. During the year, religious enforcement officers investigated an international franchise on suspicion of "propagating a religion other than Islam." A fatwa barring church and temple expansions or renovations remained in place; only six churches and one Chinese temple were recognized in the country. Throughout the year, the government published guidance for respecting Islam, especially during Ramadan, and stood by previous warnings that the public display of religions or cultures other than Islam, including Christmas decorations and Chinese traditional lion dances, could amount to an offense under the SPC and be prosecuted.

Some non-Muslims and Muslims faced social pressure to conform to Islamic guidelines regarding behavior. Islamic authorities organized a range of proselytizing activities and incentives to explain and propagate Islam. Anecdotal reports indicated some Muslims who wished to convert to another religion feared social retribution, such as ostracism by friends, family, and their community. In August an individual on social media called for the demolition of churches along the highway in Malaysia near the border with Brunei, accusing the churches of proselytizing Christianity to Bruneian Muslims. The posting launched a social media debate in both countries about religious freedom. According to Christian and community leaders, more Muslims were open to allowing other religious groups to celebrate their holidays than in the years since the SPC was launched.

Throughout the year, the U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. government officials including the President, Secretary of State, U.S. Trade Representative, and U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities repeatedly expressed to officials at all levels concern that full implementation of the SPC, including the severe penalties in the remaining phases, would undermine several of the country's international human rights commitments, including the freedoms of religion and of expression, and prohibitions on torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. The Ambassador and other U.S. government officials also urged the government at the highest levels to defer the implementation of phases two and three of the SPC and encouraged the government to ratify the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT); sign and ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and engage in interfaith dialogue and open academic discussions on religion and human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 437,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to a 2011 census, approximately 78.8 percent of the population is Muslim, 8.7 percent Christian, and 7.8 percent Buddhist, while the remaining 4.7 percent consists of other religions including indigenous beliefs.

There is significant variation in religious identification among ethnic groups. According to official statistics (*Brunei Darussalam Statistical Yearbook 2015*), ethnically Malay Bruneians comprise 66 percent of the population, and are presumed to be Muslim as an inherited status. The Chinese population, which is approximately 10 percent of the total population and includes both citizens and permanent residents, is 65 percent Buddhist and 20 percent Christian. Indigenous tribes such as Dusun, Bisaya, and Murut make up approximately 4 percent of the population and are roughly 50 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, and the remainder are other religious groups, including adherents of traditional practices. The remaining fifth of the population includes foreign-born workers, primarily from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Asia, and stateless residents. According to official statistics, approximately half of these temporary and permanent residents are Muslim, more than one quarter Christian, and 15 percent Buddhist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states the religion of the country shall be the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, but allows all other religions to be practiced "in peace and harmony" by the persons professing them.

The legal system is divided between civil law and sharia, which run parallel systems of both criminal and civil/family law and operate separate courts under a single judiciary department. While the civil courts are based on common law, the sharia courts follow Islamic jurisprudence, including no law of precedence. Sharia courts have jurisdiction over both criminal law and civil/family matters involving Muslims and hear cases brought under longstanding sharia legislation as well as under the SPC. In some cases non-Muslims are subject to sharia courts.

Almost all crimes included in the first phase of the SPC, currently in force, were already prohibited in the country; however, the SPC applies some laws to non-Muslims for the first time, increases penalties such as fines, and broadens some definitions. Phase one of the SPC runs in parallel with the existing common law-based criminal law system and primarily involves offenses punishable by fines or imprisonment. It expands restrictions in longstanding domestic sharia law on drinking alcohol, eating in public during the fasting hours of Ramadan, cross-dressing, close proximity between unmarried people of different genders, and propagating religions other than Islam. It includes a prohibition of "indecent behavior," which criminalizes any act that "tends to tarnish the image of Islam, deprave a person, bring bad influence, or cause anger to the person who is likely to have seen the act." The SPC applies to both Muslims and non-Muslims, including foreigners, as well as to offenses committed outside the country by citizens or permanent residents. Non-Muslims are exempted from certain sections, such as requirements for men to join Friday prayers or payments of *zakat* (obligatory annual alms-giving). It states that Muslims will be identified for purposes of the law by "general reputation."

The second phase of the SPC, which would include amputating the hands of thieves, is not scheduled to come into effect until one year after the publication of a Sharia Courts Criminal Procedure Code (CPC). The government has not published the CPC. Phase three of the SPC – which includes punishments, in certain situations, such as stoning to death for rape, adultery, or sodomy, and execution for apostasy, contempt of the Prophet Muhammad, or insult of the Quran – is

scheduled to be implemented two years after the publication of the CPC. The punishments included in phases two and three include different standards of proof than the common law-based penal code, such as requiring four pious men to witness personally an act of fornication to support a sentence of stoning. Stoning sentences, however, could be supported by a confession in lieu of evidence at the discretion of a sharia judge.

The government describes its official national philosophy as *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB), or Malay Islamic Monarchy, which the government defines as “a system that encompasses strong Malay cultural influences, stressing the importance of Islam in daily life and governance, and respect for the monarchy as represented by His Majesty the Sultan.” The government has said this system is essential to the country’s way of life and its main defense against extremism. A government body, the MIB Supreme Council, seeks to spread and strengthen the MIB philosophy and ensure MIB is enshrined in the nation’s laws and policies. MIB is a compulsory subject for students in both public and private schools, including at the university level.

The Religious Enforcement Division under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) is the lead agency in many investigations related to religious practices, but other agencies also play a role. MORA’s Religious Enforcement Division leads investigations on crimes that exist only in the SPC and other sharia legislation, such as male Muslims failing to pray on Fridays. Cases involving crimes that are not covered by sharia legislation such as human trafficking are investigated by the Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF). Cases involving crimes covered by both sharia and the existing civil code are also investigated by the RBPF and referred to the Attorney General’s Chamber (AGC). In these cases, the AGC determines in each case if a specific crime should be prosecuted and whether it should be filed in the sharia or civil court. No official guidelines for the AGC’s determination process have been published.

The government bans several religious groups it considers deviant, including the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Al-Arqam, Abdul Razak Mohammad, Al-Ma’unah, Saihoni Tasipan, Tariqat Mufarridiyyah, Silat Lintau, Qadiyaniah, the Bahai Faith, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The list is based on fatwas made by the state mufti or the Islamic Religious Council – a government body and the sultan’s highest authority on matters on Islam – and is publicly available on the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ website. The SPC also bans any practice or display of “black magic.”

The SPC includes a list of words and expressions, including the word “Allah,” reserved for use by only Muslims or in relation to Islam.

The law forbids the teaching or promotion of any religion other than Islam to Muslims or to persons of no faith. Under the first phase of the SPC, the penalty for propagating religions other than Islam is up to five years in prison, a fine of up to 20,000 Brunei dollars (BND) (\$13,840), or both. The SPC includes a provision that makes it illegal to criticize Islam, including the SPC itself, though no cases, arrests, or charges under this provision have been reported.

Muslims are legally permitted to renounce their religion until phase three of the SPC is implemented but must inform the Islamic Religious Council in writing. The law states the conversion of children is not automatic with the conversion of the parent. A person must be at least 14 years and seven months old to convert to Islam. Children are presumed to be of the same religion as their parents.

The law requires all organizations, including religious groups, to register and provide the names of their members. Applicants are subject to background checks for leaders and board members, and proposed organizations are subject to naming requirements. Registered organizations must furnish information on leadership, election of officers, members, assets, activities, and any other information requested by the registrar. Benefits of registration include the ability to operate, to reserve space in public buildings, and to apply for permission to raise funds. The registrar of societies oversees the application process, exercises discretion over applications, and is authorized to refuse approval for any reason. Organizations are prohibited from affiliation with any organization outside the country without written approval by the registrar. Unregistered organizations may face charges of unlawful assembly and may be subject to fines. Individuals who participate in or influence others to join unregistered organizations may be fined, arrested, and imprisoned. The general penalty for violating laws on the registration and activity of organizations is a fine of up to BND 10,000 (\$6,920), imprisonment for up to three years, or both.

The law states that any public assembly of five or more persons requires official approval in advance. Under longstanding emergency powers, this applies to all forms of public assembly, including religious. In practice, however, places of worship are viewed as private.

The law establishes two sets of schools: those offering the national or international curriculum and administered by the Ministry of Education (MOE), and those offering supplemental religious education (*ugama*) that are administered by MORA. MOE schools teach a course on Islamic religious knowledge, which is required for all Muslim children aged seven to 15 who reside in the country and who have at least one parent who is a citizen or permanent resident. *Ugama* instruction in the MORA schools is a seven to eight-year course that teaches the day-to-day practice of Sunni Islam according to the Shafi'i school and is mandatory for Muslim students aged seven to 14 who hold citizenship or permanent residency. *Ugama* is studied alongside the national curriculum. Alternatively, MORA also administers a set of schools taught in Arabic that offer the national curriculum combined with *ugama* religious education. Muslim parents who fail to enroll their children in *ugama* school may face a BND 5,000 (\$3,460) fine, imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year, or both. The law promulgates the officially recognized Shafi'i school and does not make accommodations for Muslims who have non-Shafi'i beliefs.

Public and private schools, including private schools run by churches, are prohibited from providing religious instruction in beliefs other than the Shafi'i school of Islam during school hours. Schools may be fined or school officials imprisoned for teaching non-Islamic religious subjects. The SPC criminalizes exposing Muslim children or the children of parents who have no religion to the beliefs and practices of any religion other than Islam. The law also requires practitioners to obtain official permission before teaching any matter relating to Islam. Churches and religious schools are permitted to offer non-Shafi'i Islam education in private settings.

Laws and regulations limit access to religious literature. The law states it is an offense for a person to import any publication deemed objectionable, which is defined in part as describing, depicting, or expressing matters of race or religion in a manner likely to cause "feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will, or hostility between different racial or religious groups." The law also bans distributing materials relating to religions other than Islam to Muslims or persons of no faith.

All parental rights are awarded to the Muslim parent if a child is born to mixed-faith parents. The non-Muslim parent is not recognized in any official document, including the child's birth certificate, unless that parent has converted to Islam. The law bans any Muslim from surrendering custody of a minor or dependent in his or her guardianship to a non-Muslim.

Under the SPC, non-Muslims may be arrested for *zina* (fornication or adultery) or *khalwat* (close proximity between the sexes), provided that the other accused party is Muslim. Foreigners are also subject to these laws.

The country is not a party to the ICCPR.

Government Practices

The government continued to enforce sharia restrictions and prosecute offenses under the SPC. It continued to apply sharia to Muslims and, for certain offenses, non-Muslims, resulting in arrests, fines, and confiscations, as well as to impose traditional Islamic social norms more broadly. These included placing limitations on businesses, activities suspected of encouraging mingling of men and women, proselytizing, and religious education.

The authorities continued to arrest and prosecute persons for offenses under both the SPC and longstanding sharia. From January to August the government reported 52 criminal cases prosecuted under sharia including not respecting the month of Ramadan, intercourse or pregnancy out of wedlock, and alcohol consumption. During the same period the government also prosecuted 55 *khalwat* cases, resulting in 46 convictions including one of a non-Muslim. Not all of those investigated or accused of sharia crimes were formally arrested. There were some reports of administrative penalties, such as travel bans or suspension from government jobs, for individuals accused but not yet convicted of *khalwat*, but application of such practices reportedly was not consistent. Implementing regulations governing sharia proceedings were not issued by year's end.

In August a local man was arrested for wearing women's clothing in a public area as part of a joint operation between religious enforcement officers and the RBPF, but was not convicted. Other arrests and prosecutions under sharia were generally not reported by local media.

The government continued to enforce restrictions on non-Muslims proselytizing to Muslims or people with no religion. During the year, religious enforcement officers investigated an accusation of "propagating a faith other than Islam" against a manager of an international franchise.

Friday sermons were uniform across all mosques with approved texts drafted by MORA and preached by registered imams. The government periodically warned the population about “outsiders” preaching non-Shafi’i versions of Islam, including both “liberal” practices and those associated with jihadism, Wahhabism, or Salafism. Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah in December warned students studying abroad not to misuse the internet and to be cautious of religious gatherings so as to not “fall into any activities that violate any laws and religion.” In February the sultan called for the strengthening of *da’wah* (dissemination of Islamic teachings) amid “uncertain times” and “social ills” affecting the country.

During the Christmas season religious leaders and government officials warned citizens that the act of publicly displaying symbols of religions other than Islam could be seen as the propagation of religions other than Islam, an offense under the SPC. In February the minister of religious affairs spoke at an education seminar in which he encouraged Muslims to be respectful and tolerant of other religions as commanded in the Quran, while also reminding them of the restriction imposed in Islam that forbids one to imitate or copy other religious practices or beliefs. There were no reports of raids or charges, although businesses and members of the Christian community reported practicing self-censorship. As with past years, the government limited traditional Lunar New Year lion dance performances to a three-day period and restricted them to the Chinese temple, Chinese school halls, and private residencies of Chinese Association members. There were no reports of charges. Members of the royal family and the minister of religious affairs publicly attended Lunar New Year celebrations and lion dance performances during the allowed period, with extensive coverage in state-influenced media.

There was no legal requirement for women to wear head coverings in public; however, religious authorities continued to reinforce social customs to encourage Muslim women to wear the *tudong* (a traditional Muslim head covering) and many women did so. Muslim civil servants were expected to join prayers in the workplace, and some employees reported being pressured by supervisors to attend. Muslim women employed by the government were expected to wear a *tudong* to work, although some chose not to with no reports of official repercussions. In government schools and institutions of higher learning, Muslim female students were required to wear a uniform that includes a head covering. Male students were expected to wear the *songkok* (a traditional hat), although this was not required in all schools. Women who were incarcerated, including non-Muslims, were required to wear a uniform that included a *tudong*.

The government continued to enforce strict customs controls on importing non-Islamic religious texts such as Bibles, as well as on Islamic religious teaching materials or scriptures intended for sale or distribution.

The MOE required courses on Islam and MIB in all schools, with non-Muslims exempted from some religious requirements. The government reported many non-Muslim children elected to take courses on Islam. MORA posted religious teachers in some embassies abroad to teach Brunei citizens in those locations. Most school textbooks were illustrated to portray Islam as the norm, and women and girls were shown wearing the *tudong*. There were no depictions of the practices of other religious groups in textbooks.

Authorities continued to prohibit non-Muslims and non-Shafi'i Muslims from receiving non-Shafi'i religious education in schools. The government tolerated non-Islamic religious education in private settings, such as at home or in approved churches. All church-associated schools were recognized by the MOE and remained open to students of any religion, although they were not permitted to teach religions other than Shafi'i Islam.

Churches confirmed that a longstanding fatwa that discourages Muslims from assisting in perpetuating non-Muslim faiths continued to inhibit expansion, renovation, or construction of new facilities. With only six approved churches in the country, facilities were often too small to accommodate their congregations without significant overflow seating outdoors. Chinese temples were also subjected to the same fatwa, with only one official Chinese temple in the country preserved as a cultural heritage. Data from 2015 indicated there were 99 registered mosques. Christian churches and associated schools were generally allowed, for safety reasons, to repair and renovate buildings on their sites, but the approval process remained lengthy and difficult and there were reports of the government stalling new construction projects for not meeting the complicated permitting process requirements. Government officials denied permission for a church to shift the location of one of its facilities. Christian worshippers reported difficulty accessing churches on some Sundays because of road closures by the government for official events, with some services being rescheduled to other times.

Throughout the year, the government enforced business hour restrictions for all businesses, requiring they close for the two hours of Friday prayers. Religious enforcement officers continued to enforce a ban on restaurants serving dine-in food during the fasting hours of Ramadan, although take-out food to be consumed in

private was permitted, and officers issued verbal warnings to restaurants and customers found in breach of the ban. According to Chinese social media, at least three restaurants were raided, with religious enforcement officers issuing warnings to those present. The government continued to enforce a ban on eating, drinking, or smoking in public during the fasting hours of Ramadan, which was applied to both Muslims and non-Muslims. The government reported 17 convictions during the year for not respecting Ramadan.

The government maintained a longstanding ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages and cigarettes, and a restriction against the import or consumption of alcoholic beverages by Muslims. Religious authorities partnered with the RBPF in conducting “anti-vice raids” in which they confiscated alcoholic beverages and nonhalal meats brought into the country without proper customs clearance. They also monitored restaurants and supermarkets to ensure conformity with halal practices. In June the sultan warned the government to avoid shortcuts in halal certification that could violate Islamic law. Religious authorities allowed non-halal restaurants and non-halal sections in supermarkets to operate without interference, but continued to hold public outreach sessions to encourage restaurants to become halal.

The government continued to favor the propagation of Shafi’i beliefs and practices, particularly through public events and the education system.

The government clarified that the use of certain words, such as “Allah” by non-Muslims, did not constitute an SPC offense when used in a nonreligious context or social activity, and there were no reports during the year of charges or prosecutions based on violations of using words or expressions in question.

Incentives offered to prospective converts to Islam and the Shafi’i school, especially those from indigenous communities in rural areas, included help with housing, welfare assistance, or funds to perform the Hajj. In April the Islamic Da’wah Center gave three Muslim convert families new homes using *zakat* funds, and in August, seven converts each received BND 14,000 (\$9,688) in funding for the Hajj as a gift from the sultan. The government gave presentations on the benefits of converting to Islam that received extensive press coverage in state-influenced media, which reported conversions to Islam increased in the first half of the year. According to government statistics, each year an average of 500 people convert to Islam. Converts included citizens and permanent residents, as well as foreigners. Official government policy supported the Islamic faith through the

national MIB philosophy as well as through government pledges to make the country a *zikir* nation (a nation that remembers and obeys Allah).

Despite the absence of a legal prohibition of Muslims marrying non-Muslims, all Muslim weddings required approval from the sharia courts, and officiants, who are imams approved by the government, required the non-Muslim party to convert prior to the marriage.

Most government meetings and ceremonies commenced with an Islamic prayer, which the government continued to state was not a legal requirement but a matter of custom.

The government required residents to carry identity cards that stated the bearer's ethnicity, which were used in part to determine whether he or she was Muslim; for example, all Malays were assumed to be Muslim. Female Muslim citizens were required to wear a *tudong* in photographs on national identity cards and passports, and non-Muslim women were required to dress conservatively. Ethnic Malays traveling in the country were generally assumed to be Muslim and required to follow certain Islamic religious practices or potentially face fines, arrest, and imprisonment. Religious authorities reportedly checked identity cards for ethnicity when conducting raids against suspected violators of sharia. Visitors to the country were asked to identify their religion on their visa applications and foreign Muslims were subject to the same laws governing local Muslims.

In February the sultan called on his officials to proceed with finalizing the CPC, the prerequisite for implementing phases two and three of the SPC. Officials continued to state the harshest punishments included in the later phases of the SPC, if implemented, would rarely if ever be applied because of the extremely high standards of proof required.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Non-Muslims and Muslims faced social pressure to conform to Islamic guidelines regarding behavior. There were fewer reports of public debate and more reports of Muslims being open to allowing other religious groups to celebrate their holidays than in the years since the SPC launched. For example, Christian leaders reported more Muslims wished Christians a "Merry Christmas" and attended holiday parties.

Some Muslims who wished to convert to another religion reportedly feared social retribution, such as ostracism by friends, family, and their community. If parents converted to Islam, there was often family and official pressure for the children to do the same. Some non-Muslims said they felt pressured in the workplace or in social groups to convert to Islam.

Residents who questioned the SPC or Islamic values on social media sometimes received online abuse and threats, and reported official monitoring. One social media user relayed how positive reactions to his postings criticizing sharia would disappear on some sites while only the negative comments remained. Some vocal activists who challenged established norms reported family and friends would pressure them to keep quiet out of fear they would attract the attention of authorities or damage the family's reputation.

In August a self-identified Bruneian made a post on social media calling for the demolition of churches in Malaysia along the highway between Brunei and the Malaysian city of Miri. The individual accused the churches of proselytizing to Muslims by displaying "provocative" words praising Jesus Christ and God on exterior walls. The post launched a social media debate in which online users also identifying as Bruneian chastised the poster, many of whom applauded the religious unity displayed in Miri.

Some Muslim women who did not cover their heads before the SPC was implemented said they started to do so because of social pressure.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

After the sultan indicated he would continue implementation of the SPC, the U.S. President, Secretary of State, and U.S. Trade Representative exchanged letters with him and Foreign Minister II Pehin Lim Jock Seng in which U.S. officials urged the government to commit, including publicly, that implementation of sharia would be consistent with international human rights obligations and standards; to ratify the UNCAT and the ICCPR; and to establish a national human rights commission.

In July the Secretary of State met with the foreign minister II in Laos to emphasize the SPC, if implemented, should be fully consistent with Brunei's international human rights commitments and obligations, including the UNCAT.

The U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities (SRMC) returned to the country in August to follow up on previous conversations and visits. He met with the sultan, the state mufti, minister of religious affairs, and other key officials. He urged the government to delay further implementation of the SPC until it could ensure that implementation would not undermine the country's international human rights commitments. The SRMC encouraged open academic discussions on religion and human rights and interfaith dialogue. The meetings received wide and positive press coverage. The SRMC followed up on these points in a meeting with the foreign minister II in September.

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials repeatedly raised concerns and suggestions about religious freedom throughout the year to government officials on all levels. U.S. officials coordinated with other governments including Australia and the United Kingdom to raise concerns about implementation of the SPC and suggested postponing implementation. U.S. embassy officials emphasized the seriousness with which the United States takes assurances from the government that the evidentiary and witness standards in the SPC would as a matter of procedure and policy be so exacting as to effectively guarantee that torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment will not be carried out in practice. The Ambassador and other U.S. government officials also raised concerns that a confession could be used in lieu of evidence, and that those accused could feel social pressure to confess. They urged officials to defer the publication of the procedural code that is a necessary precursor to the remaining phases of the SPC. Embassy officials also urged compliance with international human rights norms with religious enforcement officers and officials involved in drafting, implementing, and enforcing the SPC.

Embassy exchange programs exposed students to concepts of religious freedom in other countries and allowed them to discuss religion and religious freedom with individuals of other faiths. Events with U.S. government officials also encouraged discussion of these ideas. In August the SRMC engaged local youth in a roundtable conversation on "Being Muslim in America" and discussed the value of interfaith dialogue and interfaith action locally and around the world. The embassy also selected an official from the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports to visit the United States on a three-week exchange project on community engagement with young people to examine policies and practices used in the United States to prevent at-risk youth and individuals from engaging in violent activities and becoming attracted to extremist views.

Embassy officials met with representatives of all principal religious groups, sharia court judges, and religious enforcement officers, as well as lawyers defending individuals charged with violations of sharia.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials visited places of worship, spoke with leaders of various religious groups, and facilitated discussions on religious freedom issues, including obstacles to practicing religions and beliefs other than Shafi'i Islam and laws and policies affecting religious freedom, including provisions of sharia. The embassy hosted a holiday reception that brought together the minister of religious affairs and leaders of religious minority groups. The Ambassador emphasized religious tolerance by participating in numerous Lunar New Year celebrations and attending a Christian schoolchildren's Christmas event, while a senior embassy official represented the embassy at a Catholic Mass on Christmas Eve. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, as well as other official visitors, engaged legal, religious, and political leaders on the SPC and the country's international human rights and religious freedom commitments.