

MALTA

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance by encouraging authorities to accommodate the religious needs of North African migrants and by inviting government and social leaders to cultural celebrations recognizing diverse religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The overwhelming majority of citizens, 95 percent (2004 estimate), are Roman Catholic, and 53 percent of Catholics (2005 estimate) attend Sunday services regularly. The country's principal political leaders are practicing Catholics.

Most congregants at the local Protestant churches are British retirees who live in the country or are vacationers from other countries. Also present are Coptic and Greek Orthodox Christians, the Bible Baptist Church, a union of 16 groups of evangelical churches consisting of Pentecostal and other nondenominational churches, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Zen Buddhists, Baha'is, and adherents of indigenous African forms of worship. Of an estimated 6,000 Muslims, approximately 5,250 are foreign citizens in either a regular or irregular immigration status, 600 are naturalized citizens, and 150 are native-born citizens. There is one mosque (and two informal mosques) and a Muslim school that teaches kindergarten through secondary school levels. There is a Jewish congregation with an estimated 100 members.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. Individuals are free to choose and change their religion and to manifest their religious beliefs publicly as they choose. The constitution provides that “all persons in Malta have full freedom of conscience and enjoy the free exercise of their respective mode of religious worship.” Citizens have the right to sue the government for violations of religious freedom. These protections also apply in cases of religious discrimination or persecution by private individuals or by public officials in the performance of their duties.

The constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion and declares that the authorities of the Catholic Church have “the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong.” Divorce was introduced in 2011 following a national referendum. A lawyer who had spearheaded the pro-divorce movement was initially banned from representing clients on the Church’s Ecclesiastical Tribunal. The ban was withdrawn some months later, but not until after parliament had enacted divorce legislation. The state also generally recognizes divorces of individuals domiciled in Malta who have completed divorce proceedings in a competent court abroad.

Persons convicted of vilification of the Catholic religion or “any other cult tolerated by law” are liable to imprisonment of one to six and one to three months, respectively. The phrase “any other cult” is interpreted to mean other religions, but the law is enforced in a way not to further Catholicism at the expense of other religions.

Religious education in Catholicism is mandated in the constitution and compulsory in all state schools; however, there are constitutional and legal provisions that allow a parent, guardian, or student to be exempted from the instruction. The school curriculum includes general studies in human rights, ethnic relations, and cultural diversity as part of values education to promote tolerance.

Enrollment in private religious schools is permitted. Homeschooling is allowed only in extreme cases, such as chronic illness, under the Education Act.

There are no restrictions on religious publishing or broadcasting or on religious groups owning or operating media facilities.

The law does not punish or otherwise restrict importation, possession, or distribution of religious literature, clothing, or symbols. There are no restrictions on religious clothing.

All religious organizations have similar legal rights. Religious organizations can own property, including buildings, and their religious leaders can perform marriages and other functions.

Religious groups are not required to be licensed or registered.

Religious affiliations are not designated on passports or other official documents.

There is no restriction on forming political parties based on a particular faith, religious belief or absence of belief, or interpretation of religious doctrine.

The government observes the following religious holidays as public holidays: the Motherhood of Our Lady, the Feast of Saint Paul's Shipwreck, the Feast of Saint Joseph, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, the Feast of the Assumption, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas. National holidays include the Feast of Our Lady of Victories.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Muslims are able to meet and practice their religion freely. There are informal mosques at the two "open centers" in Malta where many irregular migrants are provided housing after release from initial detention.

The government and the Catholic Church participated in a foundation that financed Catholic schools and provided free tuition for those attending those schools. During the year the state also agreed to pay for support staff, such as counselors, social workers, and psychologists, in Catholic Church schools. The government subsidized children living in church-sponsored residential homes.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Catholic Church makes its presence and influence felt in everyday life; however, non-Catholics, including converts from Catholicism, do not face legal or societal discrimination. Relations between the Catholic Church and non-Catholic religious groups are respectful and cooperative. Members of non-Catholic religious groups proselytize freely.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy's discussions with government officials and its informational programs for the public consistently emphasized basic human rights, including freedom of religion. Embassy officials encouraged authorities to continue accommodating the desire of North African migrants and asylum seekers to have religious centers in or near migrant housing facilities. The U.S. embassy also invited government officials to attend the embassy's iftar celebration.