

IRELAND 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were isolated reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy promoted a number of new initiatives aimed at encouraging religious tolerance, particularly through outreach programs focused on Muslim youth and the broader Muslim community.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2011 census, the population is 4.6 million. The census indicates the population is approximately 84 percent Catholic (the lowest percentage ever reported), 3 percent Church of Ireland, 1 percent Muslim (a sharp rise over the previous five years), 1 percent Orthodox Christian, 1 percent unspecified Christian, and 6 percent not stating a religious affiliation. There are small numbers of Presbyterians and Jews. Groups of Christians and Muslims from Africa, Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East, Muslims and Hindus from South Asia, and Orthodox Christians continue to grow, especially in larger urban areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution asserts "the State shall not ... make any discrimination on the ground of religious belief, profession or status."

The constitution prohibits promotion of one religious group over another, as well as discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. The government does not restrict the teaching or practice of any faith. There is no state religion.

The constitution makes blasphemy a punishable offense, although there has been only one prosecution for blasphemy since 1855. The law makes it an offense to

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utter or publish material that is “grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion” when the intent and result is “outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion.”

There is no legal requirement for religious groups to register with the government, nor is there any formal mechanism for government recognition of a religious group.

The government permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. Most public and private primary and secondary schools are religiously based. At the primary level, 90 percent of schools are Catholic, 6 percent Church of Ireland, 2 percent multid denominational, and 1 percent other religious groups. Schools’ boards of management are governed partially by trustees who are members of religious groups. Although religious instruction is an integral part of the curriculum of most schools, parents may exempt their children from such instruction. Under the constitution, the Department of Education provides equal funding to all public schools.

Publicly funded schools run by religious groups are permitted to refuse admission to a student not of that religious group if the school can prove the refusal is essential to the maintenance of the “ethos” of the school. However, there were no reports of any children being refused admission to any school for this reason. By law, a religious school may select its staff based on their religious beliefs.

The government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Saint Patrick’s Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Christmas, and Saint Stephen’s Day.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

In a 2011 policy statement, the current coalition government included “removing blasphemy from the Constitution” as one of its intended reforms. In December the government convened a Constitutional Convention on reforms and confirmed its intention to address the blasphemy provision during the Convention’s October 2013 meeting.

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Several state agencies enforced equality legislation and worked on behalf of minority religious groups, including the Equality Authority and the Garda Racial and Intercultural Office (GRIO).

Government statements advocated religious freedom and tolerance. In September the justice minister criticized World War II-era anti-Semitic policies and atrocities, noting that Jews had not been allowed to immigrate to Ireland. The speech encouraged equal protection and tolerance of all religions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In September a Muslim woman brought a case to the Employment Appeals Tribunal, alleging wrongful termination related to her wearing a headscarf at work.

A University of Limerick survey of Muslims in 14 locations across the country found that a third of the respondents had experienced anti-Muslim hostility and a third some form of religious-based discrimination, with women significantly more affected than men.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials engaged with the government, religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations on religious freedom. During visits by a member of the U.S. Congress and the Department of State's special representative to Muslim communities, the embassy conducted outreach activities involving Muslim youth and the broader Muslim community.