

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

The U.S. embassy continued efforts to encourage the government and the public to make religious accommodation for North African migrants. The embassy also invited government and societal leaders to cultural celebrations recognizing diverse religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a 2011 report from the National Statistics Office, the population is 416,000. The office's 2006 report indicates 91 percent is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Coptic Christians, Greek Orthodox, Baptists, evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Jews, members of the Unification Church, Zen Buddhists, Bahais, Muslims, and adherents of indigenous African forms of worship. There are an estimated 6,000 Muslims, most of whom are foreign citizens, and an estimated 100 Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. 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.

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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.”

Persons convicted of vilification of the Catholic religion or “any other cult tolerated by law” are liable to imprisonment of one to six months and one to three months, respectively. “Any other cult” is interpreted to mean other religions.

Religious education in Catholicism is mandated in the constitution and compulsory in all state schools; however, there are constitutional and legal provisions allowing a student to be exempt from the instruction at a parent or guardian’s request.

Enrollment in private religious schools is permitted. The law allows homeschooling only in rare cases, such as chronic illness.

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

The government does not require religious groups to be registered or licensed. They have the option of registering as a voluntary organization, but there are no associated benefits, such as tax reductions or exemptions, for doing so.

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.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

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.

Relations between the Catholic Church and non-Catholic religious groups were generally good. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community sponsored an annual peace

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conference to promote understanding and religious acceptance through interfaith dialogue. Other ecumenical and interfaith activities took place on a regular basis.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and other embassy officials met with government and civil society leaders, including leaders of religious groups, to discuss respect for religious freedom and encourage religious acceptance. The embassy promoted religious tolerance through Muslim community-focused events, including roundtables and an iftar dinner.