

IRELAND 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom and in practice the government generally respected religious freedom. A constitutional convention recommended removal of a blasphemy statute and its replacement with a provision making incitement to religious hatred illegal.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. This was primarily in the form of vandalism at Jewish sites, and complaints and threats against Muslim places of worship and community centers.

The U.S. embassy engaged with government officials, religious leaders, and others on topics related to religious freedom, and hosted interfaith events aimed at encouraging religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.8 million (July 2013 estimate). The most recent 2011 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, and 1 percent unspecified Christian, with 6 percent not stating a religious affiliation. There are small numbers of Presbyterians and Jews. Groups of Christians and Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa, Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East, Muslims and Hindus from South Asia, and Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe 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 generally protect religious freedom. The constitution asserts, “the State shall not ... make any discrimination on the ground of religious belief, profession or status.”

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The constitution prohibits promotion of one religious group over another, as well as discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. The law 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 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. A multi-denominational group called Educate Together has authority to operate non-religious schools. It currently has a network of 68 primary schools and will open its first second-level schools in 2014.

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. There were no reports, however, 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 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Government Practices

In November a constitutional convention addressed the blasphemy provision in the current constitution. The convention was convened in 2012 to address various

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constitutional reforms, as promised in a 2011 policy statement issued by the government. The convention voted in favor of altering and replacing the offense of blasphemy in the constitution with a new provision that would make incitement to religious hatred an offense.

Several state agencies, including the Equality Authority and the Garda (national police) Racial and Intercultural Office (GRIO), enforced equality legislation and worked on behalf of minority religious groups. The GRIO established an official program to train Garda liaison officers who then meet and engage with immigrant communities and minority religious groups on a regular basis.

In November a local newspaper reported that two types of campaign posters hung in a rural part of western Ireland contained anti-Semitic messages, including one which targeted the minister for justice, equality, and defense, the country's only Jewish cabinet member. The posters were taken down within 12 hours of discovery, and government ministers condemned the posters' messages.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because politics, ethnicity, and religion are closely intertwined, it is difficult to categorize comments or incidents uniquely as ethnic, political, or religious intolerance. In October the Church of Ireland's archbishop said, "Sectarianism itself is alive and well, not least in the Church of Ireland community," and referred to what he called a "deeply dug-in antagonism to difference on the part of those who trumpet pluralism."

In Cork, a Muslim cultural center opened in October but faced complaints from some community members concerned that it was not adhering to the approved purposes for the building (i.e., not to be used as a mosque for worship).

In June the planned central bank headquarters in Dublin was vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti. A central bank spokesperson said the Garda were contacted and the graffiti was immediately removed. This incident was covered in the media, and government officials condemned the incident.

In November mosques and Muslim cultural centers received letters containing threats. The letters were also posted on an international anti-Muslim website. The justice minister publicly condemned the hate mail and referred the matter to the commissioner of the Garda for action.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the government, religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations to discuss issues related to religious freedom. The embassy also hosted events to promote societal respect for religious freedom and interreligious understanding. For example, in November the embassy hosted a conference with religious leaders on the topic “Reconciliation: Moving Past Conflict.” The moderated panel discussion included representatives from the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Jewish community, as well as a Shia and a Sunni cleric. The audience included members from diverse religious groups, government contacts, and civil society representatives. After each of the panel members described their faith’s approach to reconciliation, audience members asked questions on topics that included pluralism, faith-based education, and the separation of church and state.