

# **MALTA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion. It makes Catholic religious education compulsory in state schools. The government amended the law on marriage to recognize the supremacy of the state, rather than ecclesiastical authorities and tribunals, to decide annulment cases.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community and other religious groups continued to sponsor events to promote religious acceptance and interfaith dialogue.

In meetings with the government, civil society, and religious leaders, the U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials encouraged religious tolerance. The embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance, and encouraged religious accommodation, particularly for North African migrants, at an iftar hosted by the Ambassador and a human rights awareness training seminar organized with the government's detention service.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 413,000 (July 2014 estimate). The National Statistics Office's most recent report, published in 2006, indicates 91 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups make up less than 5 percent of the population and 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 120 Jews.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states "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

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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 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 or one to three months, respectively. The government interprets “any other cult” to mean other religious groups.

The government does not require religious groups to be registered or licensed. A religious group has the option of registering as a voluntary organization with the Office of the Commissioner for non-governmental organizations. The law does not provide these groups with tax reductions or exemptions, but allows registered organizations to make collections without obtaining any further authorization and to receive grants, sponsorships, and financial aid from the government and the Voluntary Organizations Fund.

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

The constitution makes Catholic religious education compulsory in all state schools. While the law does not specify classes must be taught by teachers who are members of the Catholic Church, the constitution states such a requirement would not contravene its provisions on discrimination. There are constitutional and legal provisions allowing a student to be exempted from the instruction at a parent’s or guardian’s request.

Enrollment in private religious schools is permitted. The law does not regulate religious education in private schools. The law allows homeschooling only in rare cases, such as chronic illness.

On June 24, authorities amended the law on marriage to recognize the supremacy of the state over ecclesiastical authorities in deciding court cases involving marriage, divorce, and annulment.

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### Government Practices

On August 24, the courts imposed a two-year suspended sentence and a 150 euro (\$182) fine on a woman after she pled guilty to charges of vilification of religion, along with public drunkenness and indecency, for dancing next to a religious procession in her bikini.

In July at the governing Labor Party's iftar celebration, the prime minister spoke about the government's commitment to continue with the integration process of the North African Muslim community and to assist the Mariam Al-Batool Islamic School.

In September the government launched a pilot project to substitute ethics classes in place of Catholic religious education for students opting out of these classes.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In July a private sports club did not allow a Muslim woman to use its pool because she wore a "burkini," a type of swimwear for women covering the whole body, except the face, hands, and feet. The club refunded her membership fee. There are no restrictions on styles of swimwear at public beaches.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community continued to sponsor an annual peace conference to promote understanding and religious acceptance through interfaith dialogue. Other ecumenical and interfaith activities took place on a regular basis. Both major political parties organized iftar celebrations during Ramadan to highlight shared values of social justice and to the honor religious diversity of the country's citizens.

To mark World Refugee Day on June 20, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and other religious denominations participated in an interfaith commemoration at the World Islamic Call Society's mosque in Corradino, together with the imam and members of the Islamic community.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

On numerous occasions the Ambassador and other embassy officers met with government officials, civil society leaders, and religious leaders representing all

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principal faiths in the country to discuss respect for religious freedom and encourage religious acceptance.

The embassy promoted religious tolerance through Muslim community-focused events. The Ambassador hosted an iftar for members of the Muslim community, Catholic Church leaders working with North African migrants, and local dignitaries. The Ambassador and Imam Mohammad Elsadi highlighted the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence and emphasized the common values of all religions.

The embassy continued efforts to encourage religious accommodation for North African migrants. In July the embassy and the government's detention service co-organized a two-day training seminar focused on human rights awareness and religious accommodation for North African migrants. Representatives from the U.S. government shared their expertise with more than 20 detention services personnel.