

MALTA 2013 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.

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. During discussions with government officials, civil society, local community leaders, youth, and religious leaders, the Ambassador and embassy officers encouraged the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 410,000 (July 2013 estimate). The National Statistics Office's 2006 report indicates 91 percent is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups constituting less than five 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 120 Jews.

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

Catholic religious education is mandated in the constitution and compulsory in all state schools. There are constitutional and legal provisions, however, allowing a student to be exempt from the instruction at a parent’s 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.

Government Practices

There were no reports of significant government actions affecting 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 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. The governing Labor Party organized an iftar celebration during Ramadan.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and other embassy officials on numerous occasions met with government and civil society leaders, including leaders of religious groups representing all faiths in Malta, to discuss respect for religious freedom and encourage religious acceptance. The embassy promoted religious tolerance through Muslim community-focused events.