

MARSHALL ISLANDS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides protections for religious freedom with “reasonable restrictions” to ensure public order and the rights of other individuals. The constitution provides for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and to the free exercise of religion. Ahmadi Muslims continued to report some difficulties in receiving government approval for conducting community-sponsored social welfare projects and in obtaining meetings with government officials.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community said the societal religious intolerance its members encountered stemmed from international news reports that linked Islam to terrorism. The Ahmadi leaders said they sought to present Islam as a religion of peace by having their foreign missionaries and local converts seek the general social welfare.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and religious leaders throughout the year. The Ambassador spoke at the Third Annual National Conference of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at in Majuro. The organizers said the objective of the conference was to promote a better understanding of the Ahmadis as a peaceful and contributing element of society so as to reduce societal suspicion and promote greater freedom for the community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 75,000 (July 2017 estimate). Major religious groups, according to the last census that covered religious affiliation (1999), include the United Church of Christ (formerly Congregational), with 54.8 percent of the population; the Assemblies of God, 25.8 percent; the Roman Catholic Church, 8.4 percent; Bukot nan Jesus (also known as Assembly of God Part Two), 2.8 percent; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 2.1 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Full Gospel, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Bahais, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, and atheists. Almost all those native to the country are Christian, according to government statistics. Many foreign-born residents and workers are also Christian, and the majority of non-Christians are foreign born.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as for free exercise of religion and equal protection under the law, regardless of religious beliefs. It also provides for “reasonable restrictions” imposed by law on the “time, place, or manner of conduct” – provided they are the least restrictive necessary for public peace, order, health, or security or the rights or freedoms of others, and they do not penalize conduct based on a disagreement with the ideas or beliefs expressed. The constitution states that no law or legal action shall discriminate against any person on the basis of religion.

The constitution allows the government to extend financial aid to religiously supported institutions to provide nonprofit educational, medical, or social services, on the condition that such services do not discriminate among religious groups.

There are no requirements for the registration of religious groups, but if religious groups register as a nonprofit corporation or a cooperative, they may qualify for tax exemptions. The law states that the tax on gross revenue shall not be applied to “corporations, associations, or societies organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, or educational purposes.” In addition, the goods imported into the country by “churches for their own religious, educational, or charitable purposes” are exempt from import duty.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Governmental functions, by continuing custom, often began and ended with an ordained minister or other church official delivering a Christian prayer. While there was no religious education in public schools, most extracurricular school events began and ended with an interdenominational Christian prayer delivered by a minister. According to local residents, prayers before and after events were a longstanding cultural practice and part of the widely accepted tradition of the country.

The government provided funding to 15 private religious schools during the year totaling \$295,000. All chartered private schools were eligible for funding. The

amount of funding religious schools received depended on how much was available after ensuring the basic needs of public school system were covered first. With foreign grant funding to the government decreasing, the amount of funding provided to private schools, including religious schools, likewise decreased. The distribution of allocations were based on a combination of enrollment, performance (test results), and accreditation.

Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community reported difficulties in gaining access to government officials, which they attributed to prejudice against Muslims, continued to contribute to government delays in approving certain humanitarian and social welfare projects sponsored by the Muslim community.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community representatives said societal religious intolerance they encountered – distrusting stares, difficulties in developing social networks in the community – stemmed from international news reports (since there were no indigenous Muslims and few converts) that linked Islam to terrorism. The Ahmadi leaders said they sought to dispel that notion and to present Islam as a religion of peace by having their foreign missionaries and local converts seek to contribute to the general social welfare. In covering the visit of the new imam, Sajid Iqbal, to the local radio station on December 28, *The Marshall Islands Journal* said the Ahmadiyya Muslims conducted various humanitarian services and, although they do not observe Christmas, share the joy of giving in the holiday season.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador spoke at the Third Annual National Conference of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in Majuro in May about the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, including for minority groups. A Muslim lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army gave a speech at the conference dealing with religious tolerance in a pluralistic society. In March an embassy official met with a series of religious leaders, including representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Jewish community, Protestant and Catholic churches, and the Mormons, to discuss their members' ability to freely practice their religious beliefs as part of the embassy's outreach to the country's religious groups and civil society.