

# **MARSHALL ISLANDS 2016 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.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and religious leaders throughout the year. In October the Ambassador met with a series of religious leaders including representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, Protestant and Catholic churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Salvation Army as part of her outreach to the country’s religious groups and civil societies.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 73,000 (July 2016 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.

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

### **Government Practices**

Governmental functions, by 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 have been 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 \$495,000 through grants from the public school system. The Catholic Queen of Peace School in Ebeye received the largest increase in funding of any school from the previous year. The Assembly of God Ebeye Calvary School and the nondenominational Jabro Private School received considerably less funding than the previous year. Private religious schools in Majuro, Kwajalein, and Jaluit received government funding based largely on enrollment, but also school performance and accreditation, according to government officials.

Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community reported that some prejudice against Muslims, while much lower than what was reported immediately after the 9/11 attacks, still contributed to government delays in approving certain

humanitarian and social welfare projects sponsored by the community. Community representatives said politicians took no action on permit approvals for fear of reaction from their Christian constituents.

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

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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

The Ambassador and embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and met with many local religious group leaders and foreign missionaries including the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and Iglesia ni Cristo Churches, as well as the Salvation Army. Topics of discussion included the government's posture toward religious groups and how religious institutions could assist in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. In her October meeting with leaders of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, the Ambassador discussed the community's efforts to implement social welfare programs. Embassy officials continued to engage on the issue of stalled government approval for certain Ahmadi-sponsored projects.