

# **MAURITIUS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religious beliefs. The government grants subsidies to six religious groups: Hindus, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Seventh-day Adventists, based on their relative numbers in the population. Other groups must register with the government to obtain tax-exempt status but receive no subsidies. Christians and Muslims continued to state they were underrepresented in the civil service and elsewhere in the government, including at the highest levels. The government continued to limit the number of foreign missionaries allowed to work in the country.

Tensions between Hindus and Muslims continued. On October 30, unknown individuals vandalized five Hindu temples and other places of worship in the east and the center of the island. There were no developments in the December 2016 case in which unknown individuals vandalized a Tamil temple in Port Louis. The authorities completed investigation in the 2015 case in which two Muslim men vandalized a Hindu temple, which was followed by five Hindu men vandalizing a mosque in the south of the island, and authorities sent the case to a court for prosecution. The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 different faiths and denominations, hosted regular religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities.

The embassy promoted religious tolerance and understanding through engagement with government officials. Embassy officials met with religious leaders, including the Council of Religions. The Charge d'Affaires hosted a dinner for Muslim civil society and religious leaders to highlight religious tolerance and emphasize ways to continue to foster interreligious tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2010 local census, approximately 48 percent is Hindu, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 6 percent non-Catholic Christian religious groups including Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, evangelical Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses,

members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and members of the Assemblies of God. The remaining 3 percent includes Buddhists, animists, individuals who reported no religious affiliation, and others. More than 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni.

According to the 2010 local census, on the main island, the population of Port Louis is primarily Muslim and Catholic, while most of the remainder of the island's population is Hindu. The island of Rodrigues is approximately 90 percent Catholic.

There is a strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity. Citizens of Indian ethnicity are primarily Hindu or Muslim. Those of Chinese ancestry generally practice Buddhism, Anglicanism, or Catholicism. Creoles (persons of African descent) and citizens of European descent are primarily Catholic.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for freedom of thought and religion, including the right of individuals to change manifest, and propagate their religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community, in private or in public. These rights may be subject to limitations to protect public order, safety, morality, health, or the rights of others. The constitution also bars requiring oaths contrary to an individual's religious belief and bars compulsory religious education or attendance at religious ceremonies in schools. It gives religious groups the right to establish schools and to provide religious instruction therein to members of that group; these institutions are open to the population in general as well. Citizens can file complaints of religious discrimination with the Equal Opportunities Commission, which can initiate investigations if it believes a citizen's rights may have been infringed. Legislative election candidates must identify themselves as belonging to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution: Hindus, Muslims, Sino-Mauritians, or the general population.

A parliamentary decree recognizes the six religious groups that were the main ones present prior to independence: Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Seventh-day Adventists. These groups receive annual lump sum payments from the finance ministry based on the number of their adherents as determined by the voluntary self-identification of individuals in the 2010 census.

The registrar of associations registers new religious groups, which must have a minimum of seven members with designated leadership responsibilities. The finance ministry grants these new groups tax-exempt privileges. Although registration of religious groups is required, the law does not prescribe penalties for unregistered groups.

Religious groups must obtain both a residence permit and a work permit for each foreign missionary. The Prime Minister's Office is the final authority on the issuance of these documents. While there are no explicit restrictions, there are unofficial limits on the overall number of missionaries per religious group who are issued the requisite visas and work permits. The government grants residence permits to missionaries for a maximum of three years with no extensions.

Religious education is allowed in public and private schools, at both the primary and high school levels. Students are permitted to opt out, and civic education classes are provided for non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

Some Christians and Muslims continued to state that the predominance of Hindus in the civil service resulted in "interference" in the government promotion system and prevented Christians and Muslims from reaching higher-level positions in the civil service. More generally, non-Hindus often stated they were underrepresented in government. There were no reliable statistics available on the numbers of members of different religious groups represented in the civil service; however, the Truth and Justice Commission had stated in its latest report in 2011 that employment in the civil service did not represent national ethnoreligious diversity.

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

There continued to be tension between Hindus and Muslims. Police investigations revealed, however, that some alleged cases of interreligious violence were in fact cases of retaliation stemming from domestic or personal issues.

On October 30, private radio station Top FM reported that unknown individuals vandalized five Hindu temples and other places of worship the previous night. The vandals destroyed deity statuettes and smeared blood on the places of worship. At year's end, police had made no arrests.

The police investigation into the November 2016 incident in which unknown individuals vandalized two mosques and a predominantly Muslim cemetery in the Savanne District remained open at year's end.

The police investigation into the December 2016 incident in which unknown individuals vandalized a Tamil temple in Port Louis remained open at year's end, with no arrests made.

Authorities completed their investigation of the 2015 case in which two Muslim men vandalized a Hindu temple, and they sent the case to the Savanne court for prosecution. This was followed by retaliation by five Hindu men who vandalized a mosque in the south of the island.

The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 religious groups, hosted regular religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities. In October the council started the distribution of booklets entitled "Peace and Interfaith Dialogue" to local schools and institutions.

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

Embassy representatives continued to engage the government on religious freedom issues, advocating continued respect for religious diversity and tolerance. Embassy representatives met with law enforcement officials to discuss religious tensions related to incidents of vandalism. The Charge d'Affaires hosted an annual dinner for Muslim civil society members and religious leaders to highlight religious tolerance and ways to continue to foster it.