

MARSHALL ISLANDS 2019 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. Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community continued to state that authorities did not allow them to use the government conference center used by other religious groups and said they experienced longer waits at government hospitals than others.

Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community reported societal religious intolerance, which they attributed to international news reports linking Islam to terrorism. They added that local Christian congregations said that Islam promoted violence. Christian parishioners reported feeling increased pressure to give more of their income to their church or face severe penalties from church leaders, including excommunication, if donation quotas were not met.

U.S. embassy officials met with the acting secretary for foreign affairs to raise the issue of alleged discrimination against the Ahmadiyya community and to emphasize how interfaith dialogue could promote religious freedom. Embassy officials also met with leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ,) Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and the Baha’i community. An embassy officer attended the Fifth Annual National Conference of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at in Majuro.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 77,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). The Pew Foundation reported in its most recent report on the Marshall Islands (2010) that the population was more than 97 percent Christian. Major religious groups, according to the most recent 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, 2.1 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Full Gospel, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Baha’is, 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 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 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 a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, totaling approximately 40-50 members, said its members continued to report difficulties in gaining access to government officials. They said the government did not allow them to use the government International Conference Center for their events, whereas other religious denominations were granted permission to use the facility. Specifically, the community was denied the use of the International Conference Center for the Fifth

Annual National Convention of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Ahmadis also reported not receiving prompt medical attention during visits to government hospitals when compared to other patients, which they attributed to the misunderstanding that their religion promoted violence.

Governmental functions, by continuing custom, usually 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.

During the year, the government provided funding totaling \$500,000 to private schools, including religious private schools. All chartered private schools were eligible for government funding. The amount of funding religious schools received depended on how much was available after ensuring the basic needs of the public school system were covered first. The distribution of allocations was based on a combination of enrollment, performance (test results), and accreditation.

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 that linked Islam to terrorism and the very small size of the community. They reported that they were unsuccessful at attempts to convert a former University of South Pacific facility into a medical clinic and school to provide medical outreach to the larger community. They also reported difficulty finding instructors to teach summer college courses at their mosque because of what they said was fear of being associated with Islam. The Ahmadi leaders said they continued their efforts to dispel preconceptions and present Islam as a religion of peace by having their foreign missionaries and local converts participate in Red Cross medical training, community clean-up efforts, and the government's mass casualty training exercise. An Ahmadi leader reported that community members continued to be excluded from several interfaith gatherings.

Ahmadi community members continued to assert that leaders of local Christian congregations accused Islam of being a violent religion. The organizers of the

Fifth Annual National Conference of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in Majuro in June said the objective of the conference was to promote a better understanding of the Ahmadi community as being peaceful and making contributions to society.

Christian church parishioners reported feeling increased pressure to give more of their income to their church or face the threat of severe penalties from church leaders, such as being demoted within the hierarchy of the church or excommunication, which would have significant impact on social standing. There were reports of devout church members giving so much of their income to the church to meet the requirements and stay in good standing with the church that their families often had to go without basic food essentials.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with the acting secretary of foreign affairs to affirm the importance the United States places on religious freedom and encourage government officials to promote interfaith dialogue and policy.

An embassy officer attended the Fifth Annual National Conference of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in Majuro in June. In September and October an embassy official met with a series of religious leaders, including representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, and the Baha'i Community, to discuss the climate of religious tolerance.