

MARSHALL ISLANDS 2021 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. Governmental functions usually began and ended with a Christian prayer.

Muslims reported continued cyberbullying on social media platforms such as Facebook and harassing telephone calls to their places of worship by non-Muslim Marshallese. As in past years, Muslims reiterated their feelings of being feared by the general public and sense of mistrust on a daily basis. Female Muslims also described being shamed for wearing the hijab. Protestant parishioners reported feeling pressured to give substantial amounts of 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 Foreign Minister to affirm the importance of religious freedom and to discuss how interfaith dialogue could promote religious freedom. Embassy officials also met with officials from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Assemblies of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the United Church of Christ, and nondenominational English-speaking churches to discuss the climate of religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 79,000 (midyear 2021). The U.S. government reports that the population is more than 98 percent Christian. Major religious groups include the United Church of Christ (formerly Congregational), with 47 percent of the population; the Assemblies of God, 16.2 percent; the Roman Catholic Church, 8.5 percent; the Church of Jesus Christ, 7 percent; and Bukot nan Jesus (a religious group that split from the Assemblies of God), 5.4 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 16 percent of the population include Full Gospel, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), nondenominational Christians, Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Baha’is, 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 a religious group registers as a nonprofit corporation or a cooperative, it 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

Governmental functions, by continuing custom, usually began and ended with an ordained minister from the United Church of Christ 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 \$795,000 to private schools, including religious private schools, the same funding level as the previous year. 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, test results, and accreditation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community representatives said that disparaging remarks on their social media platforms and occasional harassing telephone calls to their places of worship, including some encouraging them to leave the country, stemmed from the misunderstandings of some that linked Islam to terrorism. They also reported difficulty finding interpreters for some events and that some in the broader community seemed to have a general fear of their mosque. In addition, Marshallese female Muslims wearing hijabs reported being confronted and criticized at community functions and accused of relinquishing their culture and identity. Ahmadi leaders said they continued their efforts to dispel preconceptions and present Islam as a religion of peace by distributing flyers and Islamic books to the community and participating in various community service events.

Protestant parishioners reported feeling pressured to give substantial amounts of 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 excommunicated, 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 would occasionally go without basic food essentials. For instance, local residents said that during December Christmas celebrations, a local church changed Christmas Day to align with farmers' copra (dried coconut kernels, from which oil is obtained) subsidy payment dates so the church could pressure the farmer parishioners to donate more into the church coffers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with the Foreign Minister to affirm the importance the United States places on religious freedom and encourage government officials to promote interfaith dialogue and policy.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met with different religious officials, including representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Assemblies of God, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the United Church of Christ, and nondenominational English-speaking churches to discuss the climate of religious tolerance.