

MAURITIUS 2021 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 recognizes seven groups as religions: Hindus, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). Other religious groups must register as associations. Following the government's announcement of COVID-19 restrictions that limited places of worship to 10 persons but allowed 50 persons in the same places for weddings and funerals, taking effect on November 12, three prominent Catholic priests released videos on social media that criticized the measures as incoherent. The government again failed to act during the year on the Assemblies of God request, first made approximately 20 years ago, to be recognized as a religion rather than an association.

The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 religious groups, said that, overall, religious communities coexisted peacefully. However, police said tensions between Hindus and Muslims continued. A passenger on a motorcycle shot and killed a prominent Hindu figure whom police suspected had been targeted because he had participated in the beating of a man who had converted to Islam from Hinduism. The Council of Religions traditionally hosted regular interfaith religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities, but COVID-19 restrictions again forced the cancelation of most events.

In February, the Charge d'Affaires attended a symposium entitled "Interfaith Dialogue on the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ persons in Mauritius." The Charge also took part in a diplomatic event hosted by the Muslim Ladies Council.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2011 census, approximately 48 percent of the population is Hindu, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 6 percent non-Catholic Christian, including Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, evangelical Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and members of the Assemblies of God. The latter state

they are the second-largest Christian group after Catholics, with approximately 50,000 members. The remaining 3 percent includes Buddhists, Baha'is, animists, and individuals who report no religious affiliation. More than 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni. There are approximately 100 Jews, according to the Jewish community president.

According to the 2011 census, the population of Port Louis is primarily Muslim and Catholic, while the remainder of the island's population is predominantly Hindu. The island of Rodrigues, which contains approximately 3 percent of the country's population, 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 those 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 provide religious instruction to members of that group. These schools are open to the general population as well. Citizens may file religious discrimination complaints with the Equal Opportunities Commission, which may open an investigation if it determines a citizen's rights may have been infringed.

The constitution states that legislative candidates must identify themselves as belonging to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution: Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian, or general population.

The criminal code prohibits inciting racial or religious hatred through words, actions, or publication.

Parliamentary decrees recognize the six main religious groups present prior to independence in 1968 – Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Seventh-day Adventists – and the Church of Jesus Christ, which was recognized in 1985. These groups receive annual lump sum payments from the finance ministry based on the number of members who identified as such during the last census. The registrar of associations registers other religious groups, which must have a minimum of seven members with designated leadership responsibilities. The finance ministry may grant these other 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 residence and work permits for each foreign missionary. The Prime Minister’s Office is the final authority on the issuance of these documents. 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 secondary levels. The Catholic catechism is taught in all Catholic schools, and, on demand, in public schools, generally by lay members of the staff. Students may opt out. Catholic schools offer civic education classes for non-Catholic students. Nonreligious classes about Islam and Hinduism are offered in private and public high schools. Religious classes in those faiths take place outside the school system.

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

Government Practices

Following the government’s announcement of COVID-19 restrictions that limited places of worship to 10 persons but allowed 50 persons in the same places for weddings and funerals, which took effect on November 12, three prominent Catholic priests released videos on social media that criticized the measures as incoherent. The government extended the measures in December to January 15, 2022.

The government again did not take action to recognize the Assemblies of God as a religion. The denomination began petitioning the government for such recognition approximately 20 years ago, but as of year’s end the group was still considered an association. As a consequence of being considered an association, according to a pastor from the Assemblies of God, newborns could not be registered as

Assemblies of God members and the group's pastors had limited access to hospitals and prisons. The government continued not to offer a reason for not legally recognizing a religious group since 1985, when it gave such recognition to the Church of Jesus Christ. Consequently, other religious groups continued to have status only as associations. Religious and civil society sources said they suspected that the government did not want to add to the list of recognized religions because it would reduce the number of citizens considered Hindu.

Some Christians and Muslims continued to state the predominance of Hindus in the civil service favored Hindus in government recruitment and promotion, preventing Christians and Muslims from reaching higher level positions in the civil service. In general, and dating back years, non-Hindus have stated they were underrepresented in government. There were no reliable statistics available on the number of members of different religious groups represented in the civil service. According to the Truth and Justice Commission's 2011 report, however, civil service employment did not represent national ethnoreligious diversity, and observers believed its conclusion remained valid.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 religious groups, said that, overall, religious communities coexisted peacefully. However, police said there continued to be low level tensions between Hindus and Muslims. On January 20, a passenger on a motorcycle shot and killed a prominent Hindu figure, Manan Fakhoo. Police said they suspected the killers targeted Fakhoo because he had participated in the beating of a man who had converted to Islam from Hinduism and later posted a video on social media disparaging Hinduism. Police arrested eight persons connected to the shooting and multiple persons connected to the beating. Both investigations were underway at year's end.

A court case against two Muslim men accused of vandalizing a Hindu temple remained pending since 2015. There were no developments in a separate case from 2015 that involved five Hindu men who had responded to the vandalism of the temple by vandalizing a mosque in the south of the island.

The Council of Religions traditionally hosted regular interfaith religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities, but COVID-19 restrictions again forced

the cancellation of most events. The council held some online events during the year, but its activity was limited.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In February, the Charge d’Affaires attended a symposium entitled “Interfaith Dialogue on the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ persons in Mauritius.” The Charge also took part in a diplomatic event hosted by the Muslim Ladies Council.