

MARSHALL ISLANDS 2022 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 and other public functions usually began and ended with a Christian prayer. The government provided funds to religious schools, although not in the same amounts as public schools.

Muslims reported continued cyberbullying on social media platforms and harassing telephone calls to their places of worship by non-Muslims. As in past years, Muslims reiterated their feelings of being misunderstood by the general public and their 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 government officials to affirm the importance of religious freedom and to discuss how interfaith dialogue could promote religious freedom. Embassy officials met with officials from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, the Baha’i 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 religious climate, and the importance of religious freedom for all individuals and groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 79,906 (midyear 2022). According to media reports, the country’s August 2021 census showed a population of 42,594. 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 group that separated 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, while the majority of adherents of other faiths 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 the 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, 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, such prayers before and after public events were a longstanding cultural practice and part of the widely accepted tradition of the country.

All chartered private schools were eligible for government funding. The amount of funding religious schools received depended on how much was available after the government ensured the basic needs of the public school system were covered first. The distribution of any available allocations to the private schools was based on a combination of enrollment, test results, and accreditation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

While Ahmadiyya Muslim community representatives said that in-person discrimination was rare, derogatory comments on social media platforms, and occasional harassing telephone calls during their radio show and places of worship continued to affect their small community of approximately 50 members. They attributed these verbal attacks, including some comments encouraging them to leave the country, to local misinformation that linked practicing Muslims to the threat of terrorism. They also reported difficulty finding interpreters for certain events and that some in the broader community seemed to have a general mistrust and disapproval of their mosque. In addition, native Marshallese Muslim women wearing hijabs continued to report being criticized at community functions, 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 by participating in various community service events.

Leaders in both the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the Baha'i community mentioned the decline in interfaith dialogue, both in events and informally, since

2021. They also noted that outmigration of the country's population was a continuous challenge to their small communities. There were no reports of antisemitic statements or actions.

Protestant parishioners continued to report 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 their social standing. There were continued 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 not have sufficient funds to buy food and other basic essential items. For instance, knowledgeable sources reported a local pastor encouraging church members to take out bank loans to give to the church.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with government officials to affirm the importance the United States places on religious freedom and to 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 Baha'i community, the Assemblies of God, the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the United Church of Christ, and nondenominational English-speaking churches to discuss the religious climate and the importance of religious freedom for all faith groups and their adherents.