

MALTA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious worship and prohibits religious discrimination. The constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion and mandates Catholic religious teaching in state schools, from which students may opt out.

On January 27, the Speaker of the House of Representatives led a public event at the parliament building in honor of Holocaust victims. Officials from both major political parties participated in the event together with members of the Jewish community.

There were no reports during the year of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom. On December 5, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, head of the Christian Orthodox Church, visited the country and met with the Orthodox Christian community, the Archbishop of the Maltese Catholic Church, and senior government officials, including the President.

Throughout the year, the senior U.S. embassy official participated in various activities, where she emphasized the importance of promoting and defending religious freedom for all, citing it as a vital U.S. priority. The embassy promoted the human rights and religious freedom of migrants in the country, the majority of whom were African Muslims, through supporting U.S. exchange programs and grants.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 464,186 (midyear 2022). The government's census office estimates the population at 519,562 (2021). A survey conducted by the University of Malta's Faculty of Theology in 2021 stated 88 percent of respondents identified as Catholic and 11 percent identified as having no religious belief at all. According to an estimate by the World Islamic Call Society, 6 to 7 percent of the population is Muslim, most of whom are Sunni, with a smaller Shia and Ahmadi presence. Reports on the percentage of the population that is Muslim vary from less than 1 percent to over 6 percent. More

precise and reliable estimates are not available, as religious groups are not required to register with the government and it is particularly difficult to quantify the adherents of Islam and Hinduism given the large number of those groups who are migrants in the country, both documented and undocumented. Additional religious communities with small numbers of members, many of who are migrants, refugees, foreign workers, or naturalized citizens, include Coptic Christians; Baptists; evangelical Protestants; Jehovah's Witnesses; Seventh-day Adventists; Buddhists; Baha'is; members of the Greek, Russian, Ethiopian, Romanian, and Serbian Orthodox Churches; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church); and traditional African religions. According to Jewish community leaders, the Jewish population comprises an estimated 400 persons.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious worship, subject to restrictions in the interest of public safety, order, morality, health, or protection of the rights and freedoms of others. It prohibits discriminatory treatment based on creed. The constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion.

The law allows criticism of religious groups, but the criminal code prohibits incitement of religious hatred, with violators subject to imprisonment of six to 18 months. It also prohibits the disturbance of "any function, ceremony, or religious service of any religion tolerated by law" carried out by a minister of religion, both in places of worship and in areas accessible to the public. The penalty for violators is up to six months in prison or more if the disturbance results in "serious danger." If the disturbance involves any act amounting to a threat or violence against a person, punishment is imprisonment for a period of six months to two years.

The criminal code prohibits individuals from wearing masks or disguises in public, unless explicitly allowed by law, such as in a medical context. There is no specific reference to – or exception for – coverings worn for religious reasons. Violators

are subject to a reprimand, a fine of €23 to €1,165 (\$25 – 1,200), or a jail sentence of up to two months. In practice, the government did not enforce the ban.

Cremation is legal and the law makes provisions for licensing, conditions for cremation, and the creation of a national cremation register listing the entities licensed to perform cremations.

The government does not require religious groups to be registered. Religious groups may own property, including buildings. Groups using property for a particular purpose, including religious worship, must obtain a permit for that purpose from the Planning Authority. All religious groups may organize and run private religious schools, and their clergy may perform legally recognized marriages and other religious functions.

The constitution states the Catholic Church has “the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong.” The constitution and law make Catholic education compulsory in public schools. The state, rather than the Catholic Church, provides teachers (who may be non-Catholic) for the courses. Students, with parental consent if the student is younger than age 16, may opt out of these classes and instead take an ethics course, if one is available. If a school does not offer an ethics course, students may still opt out of the religion class.

Students may enroll in private religious schools. The law does not regulate religious education in private schools. The law allows homeschooling, but instructors must have a teaching certificate.

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

Government Practices

On January 27, to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Speaker of the House of Representatives led a public event at the parliament building in honor of the Holocaust victims. Officials from both major political parties participated in the event, together with members of the Jewish community in the country.

According to the Ministry for Education and Employment, the number of public schools offering ethics as an alternative to religion classes and the number of students in both public and other schools remained similar to those of 2021. All students in training to become primary school instructors continued to receive training in the teaching of ethics.

The government did not introduce voluntary Islamic religious education as an after-school program in state primary or secondary schools despite statements in previous years that it was considering doing so. The status of the government's plans remained unclear. According to Muslim community leaders, they have a good working relationship with the government, and a policy priority of the Muslim community is for the government to introduce Islamic education in public schools.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports during the year of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

On December 5, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, head of the Christian Orthodox Church, visited the country and met with the sizeable Orthodox Christian community. He also met with Archbishop Charles Scicluna, the leader of the Maltese Catholic Church, and discussed issues of mutual interest, including reciprocal ecumenical relations, the pastoral care of members of the Orthodox Churches in Malta, the use of Catholic churches for Orthodox liturgies, migration, the environment, and the promotion of peace in the Mediterranean and beyond. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I also attended a public ecumenical service at St. John's Cathedral and met with the President, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In December, the senior U.S. embassy official participated in the annual Hanukkah celebration in Valletta, together with the President, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, and the Minister of Equality, Research, and Innovation. President George Vella delivered a message virtually that highlighted the importance of facilitating interreligious dialogue and the promotion of a culture of

tolerance and peace. In conversations with participants during this event, the senior official emphasized the importance of promoting and defending religious freedom for all.

The embassy promoted the human rights and religious freedom of migrants in the country, the majority of whom were African Muslims, through supporting U.S. exchange programs and grants. These included grants to migrant-run nongovernmental organizations that promoted the integration of migrants and refugees into Maltese society and a Fulbright specialist's work with the University of Malta's Department of Counseling on a project to promote migrants' well-being and the benefits of diversity and interfaith dialogue.