



Mauritius

International Religious Freedom Report 2002

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Tensions between the Hindu majority and Christian, Creole, and Muslim minorities persist; however, members of each group worshipped without hindrance.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 718 square miles, and its population is slightly more than 1.1 million. In the 2000 census, approximately 50 percent of the population claimed to be Hindu, 32 percent Christian, and 16 percent Muslim. Less than 1 percent claimed to be Buddhist, another faith, atheist, or agnostic. There are no figures for those who actually practice their faith, but there are estimates that the figure is around 60 percent for all religious groups.

Approximately 85 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic. The remaining 15 percent are members of the following churches: Adventist, Assembly of God, Christian Tamil, Church of England, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Sunni Muslims account for more than 90 percent of Muslims; however, there are some Shi'a Muslims. Many Buddhists also are practicing Catholics, since many citizens of Chinese ancestry have sent, and continue to send, their children to the Loreto Convent primary schools, which are managed by the Catholic diocese, in the major towns.

The north tends to be more Hindu and the south is more Catholic. There also are large populations of Hindus and Catholics in the main cities from the capital of Port Louis to the central cities of Quatre Bornes and Curepipe, and most Muslims and Christian churches are concentrated in these areas. The offshore island of Rodrigues, with a population of 36,084, predominantly is Catholic.

The country is a small island nation, and ethnic groups, known as "communal groups," are tightly knit. Inter-marriage is relatively rare, although the most recent census indicates that inter-marriage is increasing. An individual's name easily identifies his or her ethnic and religious background. There is a strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity. Citizens of Indian ethnicity usually are Hindus or Muslims. Citizens of Chinese ancestry usually practice both Buddhism and Catholicism. Creoles and citizens of European descent usually are Catholic. Although there is concern among Hindu organizations that evangelical Christian churches are converting Hindus to Christianity, the 1990 and 2000 censuses show that the proportions of membership in the various faiths have remained the same during the last 10 years.

There are foreign missionary groups active in the country, including the Baptist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. There is no state religion.

Religious organizations and faiths that were present in the country prior to independence, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-Day Adventists, Hindus, and Muslims, are recognized in a parliamentary decree. These groups also receive a lump-sum payment every year from the Ministry of Finance based upon the number of adherents, as determined by a 10-year census. Newer religious organizations (which must have a minimum of 7 members) are registered by the Registrar of Associations and are recognized as legal entities with tax-free privileges. No groups are known to have been refused registration.

Foreign missionary groups are allowed to operate on a case-by-case basis. There are no government regulations detailing the conditions of their presence or limiting their proselytizing activities. Groups must obtain both a visa and a work permit for each missionary. The Prime Minister's office is the final authority on all matters pertaining to the issuance of visas and work permits to missionaries. While there are no limits on the ability of missionaries to operate when they are in the country, there are limits on the number of missionaries permitted to obtain the requisite visas and work permits to live and work in the country. These limits are determined on a case-by-case basis.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

While the Government is secular in both name and practice, for political reasons in the past it has favored the Hindu majority of the population with greater access to government patronage; however, there were no reports that this continued in practice.

Some minorities, usually Creoles and Muslims, allege that a glass ceiling exists within the upper echelons of the civil service that prevents them from reaching the highest levels; however, citizens with a Hindu background predominate in the upper echelons of the civil service.

While some Creole political groups alleged that Christian Creoles received unjust treatment from the police, there was no evidence that this was based on religious differences in particular. Observers believe that such incidents likely are a result largely of the Creoles' position as the country's underclass, as well as ethnic differences, since the police force predominantly is Indo-Mauritian. Tensions between Creoles and police were ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

Foreign missionaries sometimes are prohibited from residing in the country beyond 5 years (which would permit them to seek Mauritian citizenship). Religious organizations are permitted to send new missionaries to replace them; however, missionary groups sometimes encounter bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining work permits and residence visas for replacements. This occasionally prevents such organizations from replacing departing missionaries in a timely fashion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Tensions between the Hindu majority and Christian, Creole, and Muslim minorities persist; however, no violent confrontations resulted during the period covered by this report.

In December 2000, police arrested and charged Cehl Meeah, the leader of the local chapter of Hezbollah, and three others for the 1996 killing of three rival Muslim political activists. His hearing began on November 6, 2001, and was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of

promoting human rights. Support for some conflict resolution activities was provided under the U.S. Democracy and Human Rights Fund.

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