



Mauritius

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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 policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 718 square miles, and its population is approximately 1.2 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, atheist, agnostic, or of another faith. There are no figures for those who practice their faith, but there are estimates that the figure is approximately 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). Sunnis account for more than 90 percent of Muslims; 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 in the major towns, which are managed by the Catholic diocese.

The north is 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 approximately 36,000, is predominantly Catholic.

The country is a small island nation, and its 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 (Mormons), 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. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion.

Religious organizations 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 an annual lump-sum payment from the Ministry of Finance based upon the number of adherents as determined by the 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. The Government is not known to have refused registration to any group.

Foreign missionary groups are allowed to operate on a case-by-case basis. Although 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 these required documents to missionaries. While there are no limits on the ability of missionaries to operate in the country, there are limits on the number of missionaries permitted to obtain the requisite visas and work permits. During the period covered by this report, the Government reportedly turned down a petition to increase the number of permits for Mormon missionaries.

National holidays are representative of the country's multi-religious, multiethnic population. Hindu (Maha Shivratri, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Divali), Tamil (Thaipusam Cavadee, and Ougadi), Christian (Christmas and All Saints Day), and Muslim (Eid-ul-Fitr) religious holy days are national holidays. There was no evidence that the observance of these holidays negatively affected any religious group.

The Ministry of Arts and Culture is responsible for promoting cultural interaction among different cultural components within the country, and in the past year ran daylong events aimed at fostering cultural (and therefore religious) understanding. The Ministry held daylong activities for Divali and Eid-ul-Fitr in the past year.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. While for political reasons in the past it has favored the population's Hindu majority with greater access to government patronage, there were no reports that this continued during the period covered by this report.

Due to the predominance of citizens with a Hindu background in the upper echelons of the civil service, some minorities, usually Creoles and Muslims, allege that a glass ceiling exists that prevents them from reaching the highest levels in the civil service. Despite this sentiment, a member of the Franco-Mauritian minority, Paul Raymond Berenger, became Prime Minister through a prearranged agreement between the parties of the governing coalition. Berenger is the first Christian Prime Minister of the country.

While some Creole political groups allege that Christian Creoles receive unjust treatment from the police, there was no evidence that this was based on religious differences. Observers believe that such incidents likely are a result largely of both 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 citizenship). Religious organizations are permitted to send new missionaries to replace them; however, 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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

At least one nongovernmental organization is engaged in programs to facilitate better understanding between religious groups. This organization has produced booklets for children explaining characteristics of the country's main religions.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

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

There are 12 Catholic secondary schools, called Catholic Colleges, which are administered by the Catholic diocese and receive grants from the Government. The Private Secondary School Authority (which is a government body under the Ministry of Education charged with oversight over the country's nongovernment schools) oversees the schools. With the government's agreement, 50 percent of the available seats in these schools were allocated to pupils according to the certificate of primary education results, and, therefore, based on merit. The remaining 50 percent were administered by the Catholic Church and therefore given to Catholic students. The President of the Hindu Teacher's Union, Suttihudeo Tengur, challenged the constitutionality of this agreement between the Government and Catholic Church. Although the Government denied knowledge of a preference for Catholic students under its seat allocation policy, the Supreme Court decided in April in favor of Tengur's claims that religious beliefs should not be taken into account when pupils are admitted to these Catholic Schools. The matter of how students will be selected for these schools in the future remained undecided at the end of the period covered by this report.

In December 2003, Cehl Meeah, the leader of the local chapter of Hezbollah, was cleared of all charges related to the 1996 killing of three rival Muslim political activists. The Director of Public Prosecutions decided there was not enough evidence to sustain charges against Meeah, and he was released.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Released on September 15, 2004

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