



Malta

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country is an archipelago, consisting of three inhabited islands in the Mediterranean Sea, and has an area of 122 square miles. Its population is slightly more than 400,000. The overwhelming majority of citizens, 95 percent (2004 estimate), are Roman Catholic, and 53 percent (2005 estimate) attend Sunday services regularly. Almost all of the country's political leaders are practicing Roman Catholics.

Most congregants at the local Protestant churches are British retirees who live in the country or vacationers from other countries. Coptic and Greek Orthodox Christians, a union of 16 groups of evangelical churches comprising Pentecostal and other nondenominational churches, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Zen Buddhists, and Baha'is are also present. Of an estimated 3,000 Muslims, approximately 2,250 are foreigners, 600 are naturalized citizens, and 150 are native-born citizens. There is one mosque and a Muslim primary school. There is a Jewish congregation with an estimated 100 members. Approximately 2 percent of the population does not formally practice any religion.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse either by government or private actors.

The Constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion and declares that the authorities of the Catholic Church have "the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong." Divorce is not available in the country; however, the state generally recognizes divorces of individuals domiciled abroad who have completed divorce proceedings in a competent court.

The Constitution provides for "[a]ll persons in Malta" to "have full freedom of conscience and enjoy the free exercise of their respective mode of religious worship."

The Government and the Catholic Church participated in a foundation that financed Catholic schools and provided free tuition in those schools.

The Government subsidized children living in church-sponsored residential homes.

To promote tolerance, school curriculums include studies in human rights, ethnic relations, and cultural diversity as part of values education.

Religious groups are not required to be licensed or registered.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Motherhood of Our Lady, the Feast of St. Paul's Shipwreck, the Feast of St. Joseph, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, the Feast of the Assumption, the Feast of Our Lady of Victories, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas Day.

All religious organizations have similar legal rights. Religious organizations can own property, including buildings, and their religious leaders can perform marriages and other functions.

While religious instruction in Catholicism is compulsory in all state schools, both the Constitution and the Education Act establish the right not to receive this instruction if the student, parent, or guardian objects.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

Muslims are able to meet and practice their religion freely. Muslim congregants forced to close down their informal prayer center in a private apartment in 2007 continued to have access to a mosque set up by the World Islamic Call Society, which has been functioning since 1973. There is also an informal mosque inside the Marsa Open Center, where many irregular migrants are provided housing after release from the closed detention centers.

In March 2009, a man was arrested, tried, and given a suspended one-month prison sentence after he pled guilty to vilifying the Catholic religion (a crime punishable by up to six months in prison) by dressing up as Christ during the February carnival festivities in the village of Nadur. Other individuals who dressed up as the apostles were reportedly arrested but not prosecuted.

Also in March, a controversy arose over human remains found at a Roman-era catacomb complex in the city of Rabat. Because of the presence of Jewish symbols on several of the burial sites, an international Jewish nongovernmental organization wanted the remains reburied at once according to Jewish rites, while the local heritage authority required the site and all remains to be carefully catalogued and recorded prior to the reburial (to which it had agreed). As of the end of the reporting period, the disagreement had not been settled, and cataloguing of the remains was ongoing.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period.

The Catholic Church makes its presence and influence felt in everyday life; however, non-Catholics, including converts from Catholicism, do not face legal or societal discrimination. Relations between the Catholic Church and non-Catholic religious groups are respectful and cooperative. Members of non-Catholic religious groups proselytize freely.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy's discussions with government officials and its informational programs for the public consistently emphasize basic human rights, including freedom of religion.

Through a variety of public affairs programs, the Embassy continued to work with different sectors of society, including religious groups, to promote interfaith dialogue, religious freedom, and tolerance. In 2008, the ambassador delivered a lecture on Muslims in America at the Malta branch of the Islamic Call Society, hosted an Iftar at her official residence, and participated in a Passover celebration hosted by the Jewish community.