



Malta

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

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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 period covered by this report.

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 400,000. The overwhelming majority of citizens, an estimated 95 percent (2004), are Roman Catholic, and 53 percent (2005) 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. 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), Bible Baptist Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Zen Buddhism, and the Baha'i Faith are also present. There is a Jewish congregation with an estimated one hundred members. There is one mosque and a Muslim primary school. Of the estimated 3,000 Muslims, approximately 2,250 are foreigners, 600 are naturalized citizens, and 150 are native-born citizens. An estimated 2 percent of the population does not formally practice any religion.

Section II. Status of 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 Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental 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 undergone divorce proceedings in a competent court.

The Constitution provides for "All 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 Motherhood of Our Lady, the Feast of St. Paul's Shipwreck, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, the Feast of the Assumption, the Feast of The Immaculate Conception, and Christmas Day as national holidays.

All religious organizations have similar legal rights. Religious organizations can own property including buildings, and their ministers 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 period covered by this report.

In October 2007 the press reported that the Planning Authority (MEPA) asked an informal prayer center, where a group of Muslims congregated in a community without a local mosque, to close down. MEPA cited violations of the local planning code as reason for the request.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

The Catholic Church makes its presence and its 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. Practitioners of non-Catholic religious groups proselytize freely and openly.

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 private 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. Initiatives included increased outreach to the local chapter of the World Islamic Call Society and other members of the Muslim community, including Muslim students enrolled at the University of Malta. The Embassy also had regular contact with the Jewish community.

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