



Maldives

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

The 1997 Constitution designates Islam as the official state religion. The Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens be Muslims. Freedom of religion is restricted significantly. The law prohibits the practice of any religion other than Islam. The president is the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." Government regulations are based on Islamic law (Shari'a). Non-Muslim foreigners are allowed to practice their religion only privately. Visitors must also refrain from encouraging local citizens to practice any religion other than Islam.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Freedom of religion remained severely restricted.

According to many officials and interlocutors, most citizens regarded Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics and believed that it promotes harmony and national identity.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country is an archipelago of approximately 1,200 coral atolls and islands scattered over 500 square miles in the Indian Ocean southwest of India, with a population estimated at 350 thousand.

The population was a distinct ethnic group with historical roots in South Indian, Sinhalese, and Arab communities. The vast majority of the Muslim population practiced Sunni Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners, including more than 500 thousand tourists who visited annually (predominantly Europeans and Japanese) and approximately 31 thousand foreign workers (mainly Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Indians, and Bangladeshis), were in general allowed to practice their religions only in private. While Muslim tourists and Muslim foreign workers were allowed to attend local mosque services, most practiced Islam in private or at mosques located at the resorts where they worked and lived.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Freedom of religion is restricted significantly. The 1997 Constitution designates Islam as the official state religion, and the Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that all citizens be Muslims. The constitution also stipulates that the president must be Sunni and has the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." Non-Muslim foreign residents are allowed to practice their religions only if they do so privately and do not encourage local citizens to participate.

The Government follows civil law based on Shari'a. In the event a situation is not covered by civil law, as well as in certain cases such as divorce and adultery, Shari'a is applied.

Foreigners were not allowed to import any items deemed "contrary to Islam," including alcohol, pork products, or idols for worship. Alcoholic beverages were available to tourists on resort islands, but it remains against the law to offer alcohol to a local citizen.

Muslim holy days were generally national holidays.

Mosques were not required to register with the Government. Most mosques were also funded and maintained by the Government.

The primary responsibility of imams was to present Friday sermons. They used a set of government-approved sermons on a variety of topics and were not legally empowered to write sermons independently. No one, not even an imam, may publicly discuss Islam unless invited to do so by the Government. According to government officials, this rule was in place to maintain a moderate Islamic environment rather than a fundamentalist one.

Men who wish to act as imams must sit for public exams and present their scores and credentials to the Supreme Council for

Islamic Affairs, chaired by the chief justice. The supreme council is the body empowered to certify imams; however, if the supreme council denies certification, the petitioner can appeal to the Board of Education.

Islamic instruction was a mandatory part of the school curriculum, and the Government funded the salaries of instructors of Islam. While Islamic instruction was only one component of the curriculum used in the majority of schools, there was one school which used Arabic as its medium of instruction and focused primarily on Islam. Many people who sought further religious education obtained it in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or other Islamic countries. Schools offered religious education for women; however, there were no female imams.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom stated repeatedly that no religion other than Islam should be allowed in the country. During previous reporting periods, the Home Affairs Ministry announced special programs to safeguard and strengthen religious identity. The Government established the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs to provide guidance on religious matters. The Government also set standards for imams who conduct Friday services at mosques so that they have adequate theological qualifications and to prevent fundamentalism from gaining ground.

There were no places of worship for adherents of other religious groups. The Government prohibited the importation of icons and religious statues, but it generally permitted the importation of religious literature, such as Bibles, for personal use. The sale of religious items, such as Christmas cards, was restricted to the resort islands patronized by foreign tourists.

Parents must raise their children to be Muslim because citizens must be Muslim. Foreigners can raise their children to follow any religion as long as they practice only privately in their homes or hotel rooms and do not try to include local citizens in their worship.

The Government prohibited non-Muslim clergy and missionaries from proselytizing or conducting public worship services. Islamic proselytizing was also illegal unless the Government invited someone to discuss the religion. Conversion of a Muslim to another faith is a violation of Shari'a and may result in a loss of the convert's citizenship; however, there were no known cases of the Government discovering converts and rescinding citizenship as a result of conversion. Faith-based nongovernmental organizations were not specifically excluded by law from operating; however, in March 2006, the local press reported that the fisheries minister called on citizens to raze a marketplace structure constructed by a British firm. The organization had received funding from the UK-based charity Maldives Aid. According to the press, the minister claimed the building was donated by a "Christian missionary" group, a label Maldives Aid strongly refuted. Maldives Aid made public appeals to the people and the Government to retain the market building in order to benefit the populace. On May 3, 2006, Maldives Aid held a small ceremony to transfer the building's ownership to island residents. There was no action taken against the marketplace building by the end of the reporting period.

In the previous reporting period, when Friends of Maldives, a United Kingdom-based charity, had British school children pack buckets of school materials for children in the country, the Government inspected the packages, found Christmas stories, and removed the stories before the buckets were distributed.

The law prohibits public statements that are contrary to Islam.

The Government registered only clubs and other private associations that do not contravene Islamic or civil law.

By law the president and cabinet ministers must be Sunni Muslims. Members of the People's Majlis (parliament) must be Muslim; however, they are not required to be Sunni.

Under the country's Islamic practice, the testimony of two women is required to equal that of one man in matters involving Shari'a such as adultery, finance, and inheritance. In other cases, the testimony of men and women is equal. Shari'a also governs estate inheritance, granting male heirs twice the share of female heirs. The constitution provides that an accused person has the right to defend himself "in accordance with Shari'a."

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

Most citizens regarded Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics and believed that it promotes harmony and national identity. The president regularly encouraged all citizens to seek unity through shared religious beliefs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in the country. The U.S. ambassador in Colombo, Sri Lanka, is also accredited to the Government in Male, and Embassy Colombo officers traveled frequently to the country. The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)