



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Malta

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion.

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.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

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, consisting of three inhabited islands in the Mediterranean Sea, and has an area of 122 square miles. Its population was approximately 400 thousand. The overwhelming majority of citizens (approximately 95 percent as of 2004) were Roman Catholic, and approximately 63 percent (2004 estimates) attended services regularly. All or almost all of the country's political leaders were practicing Roman Catholics. The country joined the European Union in 2004, and the Government supported the failed effort to include a reference to "Europe's Christian heritage" in the European Constitution.

Most congregants at the local Protestant churches were not Maltese but rather some of the many British retirees who live in the country or vacationers from many other nations. Of the Protestant churches in the country, the Church of England had a congregation of about 270 members; the united congregations of the Presbyterian and Methodist Church numbered 120; and the Evangelical Church of Germany had approximately 70 members. There was also a union of sixteen groups of Evangelical churches with approximately 500 members in all, which included the Pentecostal and other nondenominational churches. There were approximately 680 Jehovah's Witnesses, 115 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and 30 members of the Bible Baptist Church. There was a Jewish congregation with approximately one hundred members. Zen Buddhism had approximately ten adherents and the Baha'i Faith had approximately thirty members. There was one Islamic mosque and a Muslim primary school. Of the estimated 3,000 Muslims in the country, approximately 2,250 were foreigners, 600 were naturalized citizens, and 150 were native-born citizens. An estimated 2 percent of the population did not formally practice any religion, including those who were professed atheists.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. 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 from individuals domiciled abroad who have undergone divorce proceedings in a competent court.

The Government and the Catholic Church participated in a foundation which financed Catholic schools and provided free tuition in those schools. The foundation was established in 1991 as a result of the transfer from the church to the state of properties not set aside for pastoral use under the 1991 Ecclesiastical Entities Act.

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

There was one Muslim private school with approximately 120 students. In 2005, work began on a projected 500-grave Muslim cemetery.

There are six holy days that are also national holidays: The Motherhood of Our Lady, St. Paul's Shipwreck, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Assumption, and Christmas Day. These holidays did not negatively affect any religious groups.

Since 1991, all religious organizations have had similar legal rights. Religious organizations can own property such as buildings, and their

ministers can perform marriages and other functions. While religious instruction in Catholicism is compulsory in all state schools, the constitution establishes the right not to receive this instruction if the student or parent or guardian objects, and this right is respected in practice.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. The Roman 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 characterized by respect and cooperation. Proselytism by practitioners of non-Catholic faiths is conducted freely and openly. To promote tolerance, school curricula include studies in human rights, ethnic relations, and cultural diversity as a part of values education for students. Religious groups are not required to be licensed or registered.

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. The embassy advocates continued observance of basic human rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Both the embassy's private discussions with government officials and its informational programs for the public consistently emphasize these points.

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. Among the embassy's initiatives during the period covered by this report was increased outreach to the local chapter of the World Islamic Call Society and other members of the Muslim community and Muslim students enrolled at the University of Malta. The embassy also had regular contact with the country's small Jewish community.

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