

MARSHALL ISLANDS 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides protections for religious freedom with “reasonable restrictions” to ensure public order and the rights of other individuals. The constitution provides for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and to the free exercise of religion. Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community said authorities did not allow them to use the government conference center that other religious groups use, and said they experienced longer waits at government hospitals than others.

Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community reported societal religious intolerance, which they attributed to international news reports linking Islam to terrorism. One Ahmadi Muslim leader said leaders of local Christian congregations tried to dissuade fellow Christians from converting to Islam by saying Islam promoted violence and Muslims used bribery to entice new members or influence their congregation. There were instances of anti-Semitic graffiti in several locations in Majuro. Christian parishioners reported feeling increased pressure to give more of their income to their church or face severe penalties from church leaders, including excommunication, if donation quotas were not met.

Embassy officials met with leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ,) Assembly of God, Seventh-day Adventist, and Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. The Ambassador spoke at the Fourth Annual National Conference of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at in Majuro. The organizers said the objective of the conference was to promote a better understanding of the Ahmadis as a peaceful and contributing element of society so as to reduce societal suspicion and promote greater freedom for the community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 76,000 (July 2018 estimate). The government’s Economic Policy, Planning, and Statistics Office estimates the 2018 population at 54,510. Major religious groups, according to the last census that covered religious affiliation (1999), include the United Church of Christ (formerly Congregational), with 54.8 percent of the population; the Assemblies of God, 25.8 percent; the Roman Catholic Church, 8.4 percent; Bukot nan Jesus (also known as Assembly of God Part Two), 2.8 percent; and the Church of Jesus Christ,

2.1 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Full Gospel, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, and atheists. Almost all those native to the country are Christian, according to government statistics. Many foreign-born residents and workers are also Christian, and the majority of non-Christians are foreign born.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as for free exercise of religion and equal protection under the law, regardless of religious beliefs. It also provides for "reasonable restrictions" imposed by law on the "time, place, or manner of conduct" – provided they are the least restrictive necessary for public peace, order, health, or security or the rights or freedoms of others, and they do not penalize conduct based on a disagreement with the ideas or beliefs expressed. The constitution states no law or legal action shall discriminate against any person on the basis of religion.

The constitution allows the government to extend financial aid to religiously supported institutions to provide nonprofit educational, medical, or social services, on the condition that such services do not discriminate among religious groups.

There are no requirements for the registration of religious groups, but if religious groups register as a nonprofit corporation or a cooperative, they may qualify for tax exemptions. The law states the tax on gross revenue shall not be applied to "corporations, associations, or societies organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, or educational purposes." In addition, the goods imported into the country by "churches for their own religious, educational, or charitable purposes" are exempt from import duty.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, which established a presence in the 1990s and totals approximately 50-60 members, said its members continued to report difficulties in gaining access to government officials. They said the government

did not allow them to use the government International Conference Center for their events, whereas other religious denominations were granted permission to use the facility. Ahmadis also reported not receiving prompt medical attention during visits to government hospitals when compared to other patients.

Governmental functions, by continuing custom, usually began and ended with an ordained minister or other church official delivering a Christian prayer. While there was no religious education in public schools, most extracurricular school events began and ended with an interdenominational Christian prayer delivered by a minister. According to local residents, prayers before and after events were a longstanding cultural practice and part of the widely accepted tradition of the country.

During the year, the government provided funding totaling \$295,000 to 15 private religious schools. All chartered private schools were eligible for funding. The amount of funding religious schools received depended on how much was available after ensuring the basic needs of the public school system were covered first. The distribution of allocations was based on a combination of enrollment, performance (test results), and accreditation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community representatives said societal religious intolerance they encountered – distrusting stares, difficulties in developing social networks in the community – stemmed from international news reports that linked Islam to terrorism and the very small size of the community. The Ahmadi leaders said they continued their efforts to dispel preconceptions and present Islam as a religion of peace by having their foreign missionaries and local converts seek to contribute to the general social welfare. An imam of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community reported that during the past year they were excluded from several interfaith gatherings.

An Ahmadiyya Muslim Community imam said leaders of local Christian congregations tried to dissuade individuals from converting to Islam by saying Islam promotes violence on its members and Muslims used bribery to increase or influence their congregation.

Christian church parishioners reported feeling increased pressure to give more of their income to their church or face the threat of severe penalties from church leaders, such as being demoted from within the hierarchy of the church or

excommunication. There were reports of devout church members giving so much of their income to the church to meet the requirements and stay in good standing with the church that their families often had to go without basic food essentials.

In May anti-Semitic graffiti was painted in several locations. Swastikas were painted on the walls of the Majuro Educational Cultural Center (ECC), the University of the South Pacific campus, and Assumption Catholic School. Residents said local officials took no action to remove the graffiti from the ECC, and it was still present at the end of the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador spoke at the Fourth Annual National Conference of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in Majuro in May about the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, including for minority groups. The organizers said the objective of the conference was to promote a better understanding of the Ahmadiis as a peaceful and contributing element of society so as to reduce societal suspicion and promote greater freedom for the community. In September an embassy official met with a series of religious leaders, including representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ, Assembly of God, Seventh-day Adventist, and Ahmadiyya Muslim Community to discuss the climate of religious tolerance.