

# **MAURITIUS 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for religious freedom, including the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religious beliefs. The government grants subsidies to Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus, and Muslims, based on their relative numbers in the population. Other groups must register with the government to obtain tax-exempt status but receive no subsidies. Christians and Muslims reported they were underrepresented in the civil service and government, including at the highest levels. The government limited the number of foreign missionaries allowed to work in the country.

Tensions between Hindus, Christians and Muslims continued to exist. On September 5, the media reported two Muslim men vandalized a Hindu temple in Camp Diable, sparking riots and vandalism against mosques and Hindu temples in the southern part of the main island. The two men, together with five other men who vandalized mosques, were arrested and released on bail. At year's end the investigation was ongoing.

The embassy promoted religious tolerance and understanding through engagement with government officials and with youth, and showed support for religious diversity through attendance at religious holiday ceremonies of different faiths.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2010 local census, approximately 48 percent is Hindu, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 6 percent other Christian religious groups including Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and members of the Assemblies of God. The remaining 3 percent includes Buddhists, animists, and others. More than 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni.

On the main island, the population of the city of Port Louis is primarily Muslim and Roman Catholic, while the majority of the rest of the island's population is Hindu. The island of Rodrigues is 90 percent Catholic.

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There is a strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity. Citizens of Indian ethnicity are primarily Hindu or Muslim. Those of Chinese ancestry generally practice either Buddhism or Catholicism. Creoles and citizens of European descent are primarily Catholic.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for freedom of thought and religion, including the right of individuals to change their religion or belief, and to manifest and propagate their religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community and in private or in public. These rights may be subject to limitations to protect public order, safety, morality, or health or the rights of others. The constitution also bars oaths contrary to an individual's religious belief and, in schools, bars compulsory religious education or attendance at religious ceremonies. It gives religious groups the right to establish schools and to provide religious instruction therein to members of that group; these institutions are open to the population in general as well. Citizens can file complaints of religious discrimination with the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), and the EOC can initiate investigations on its own if it believes a citizen's rights may have been infringed. Legislative election candidates must identify themselves according to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution: Hindus, Muslims, Sino-Mauritians, or the general population.

A parliamentary decree recognizes the six religious groups that were present prior to independence: Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus, and Muslims. These groups receive annual lump sum payments from the finance ministry based on the number of adherents as determined by the voluntary self-identification of individuals in the 2010 census. The registrar of associations registers new religious groups, which must have a minimum of seven members with designated leadership responsibilities. The finance ministry grants these new groups tax-exempt privileges. Although registration of religious groups is required, the law does not prescribe any penalties for unregistered groups.

#### **Government Practices**

Some Christians and Muslims said the predominance of Hindus in the civil service resulted in "interference" in the government promotion system, and prevented Christians and Muslims from reaching higher-level positions in the

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civil service. More generally, non-Hindus often stated they were underrepresented in government. There were no reliable statistics available on the numbers of different religious groups represented in the civil service.

The government allowed foreign missionary groups to operate on a case-by-case basis. Although no regulations restricted their presence or limited proselytizing, religious groups had to obtain both a residence permit and a work permit for each foreign missionary. The prime minister's office was the final authority on issuance of these required documents. While there were no explicit restrictions, there were reportedly unofficial limits on the overall number of missionaries per religious group issued the requisite visas and work permits. The government granted residence permits to missionaries for a maximum of three years with no extensions.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There continued to be tensions between Hindus and Christians, and Hindus and Muslims.

On September 5, the media reported that two Muslim men vandalized a Hindu temple in Camp Diable, sparking riots and vandalism against mosques and Hindu temples in the southern part of the main island. Divinity statues were destroyed in Hindu temples and, in reprisal, the doors and windows of two mosques were smashed. Police arrested seven men who allegedly vandalized two mosques. The president and the prime minister quickly called on the population to remain calm and prevent the situation from escalating. The two men who allegedly vandalized the Hindu temple in Camp Diable were arrested and released on bail. At year's end the investigation was ongoing.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives continued to pursue outreach and engage the government on religious freedom issues, advocating continued respect for religious diversity and tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar with Muslim and non-Muslim youth during which she delivered remarks highlighting the importance of religious tolerance, and embassy representatives regularly attended religious ceremonies and celebrations of various religious groups to support religious diversity.