

MALTA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious worship, and prohibits religious discrimination. The constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion and mandates Catholic religious teaching in state schools, from which students may opt out. In May parliament enacted legislation to allow cremation. The Maltese-Indian Community Center said the Hindu community welcomed the enactment of this legislation. By year's end, the government had not licensed any crematoria. The government again failed to make a decision on a Russian Orthodox application, pending since 2017, to build a church. The government took no action on past proposals to introduce voluntary Islamic religious education after hours in state schools. In February, under the auspices of the then president, religious groups signed a declaration of interfaith harmony and cooperation. In May President George Vella hosted an interfaith roundtable, where he pledged to maintain an open dialogue with religious groups.

According to a European Commission survey, 37 percent of residents surveyed believe discrimination based on religion or belief was widespread in the country compared with 45 percent in the previous survey in 2015; 65 percent would be comfortable with having a non-Catholic occupy the highest elected political position in the country (54 percent in 2015). Majorities of 83 percent or more said they would feel comfortable working with colleagues of different faiths (75 percent in 2015). Greek Catholics made a church available for use by a Russian Orthodox congregation, and Roman Catholic parishes made their premises available to members of various Orthodox groups.

In meetings with government officials, including in the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry for Education and Employment, the Charge d'Affaires and other U.S. embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and religious groups' efforts to establish places of worship. Embassy representatives also met with a wide range of religious representatives and discussed their efforts to establish places of worship. The embassy promoted respect for religious freedom via opinion pieces in the media and hosted a workshop with local authorities and religious leaders to increase security in houses of worship.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 453,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to a 2018 survey conducted by the newspaper *Malta Today*, 94 percent of respondents identified as Catholic, 3.9 percent as atheist, and 1.3 percent reported belonging to non-Catholic Christian denominations. Another survey conducted by *Malta Today* in 2016 reported 2.6 percent of respondents were Muslim, 1.8 percent said they only believed in God, 1.7 percent belonged to other religious groups, and 4.5 percent were atheist or agnostic. The Islamic Call Society estimates 6 to 7 percent of the population is Muslim, of whom most are Sunni, with a smaller Shia and Ahmadi presence. Additional minority religious communities constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Coptic Christians; Baptists; Evangelical Protestants; Jehovah's Witnesses; Seventh-day Adventists; Buddhists; Baha'is; members of the Greek, Russian, Ethiopian, Romanian, and Serbian Orthodox Churches; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church); and traditional African religions. According to Jewish community leaders, the Jewish population comprises an estimated 200 persons. A significant number of minority religious community members are migrants, refugees, foreign workers, or naturalized citizens.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates full freedom of conscience and religious worship, subject to restrictions in the interest of public safety, order, morality, health, or protection of the rights and freedoms of others. It prohibits discriminatory treatment based on creed. The constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion.

The law allows criticism of religious groups, but the criminal code prohibits incitement of religious hatred, with violators subject to imprisonment of six to 18 months. It also prohibits the disturbance of "any function, ceremony, or religious service of any religion tolerated by law" carried out by a minister of religion, both in places of worship and in areas accessible to the public. The penalty for violators is up to six months in prison or more if the disturbance results in "serious danger." If the disturbance involves any act amounting to a threat or violence against a person, punishment is imprisonment for a period of six months to two years.

The criminal code prohibits individuals from wearing "masks or disguises" in public, unless explicitly allowed by law; there is no specific reference – or

exception – to coverings worn for religious reasons. Violations are subject to a reprimand, a fine of 23-1,165 euros (\$26-\$1,300), or a jail sentence of up to two months.

On May 29, parliament enacted a bill legalizing cremation and making provisions for licensing, conditions for cremation, and the creation of a national cremation register listing the entities licensed to perform cremations.

The government does not require religious groups to be registered. A religious group has the option to register as a voluntary organization with the Office of the Commissioner for Voluntary Organizations. To qualify for registration, the organization must be nonprofit, autonomous, and voluntary; provide a resolution letter signed by all its committee or board members requesting registration; provide its authenticated annual accounts and annual report; and pay a 40-euro (\$45) registration fee. The law does not provide registered groups with tax deductions or exemptions, but allows them to engage in “public collections” without obtaining any further authorization. It also makes them eligible to receive grants, sponsorships, and financial aid from the government and the Voluntary Organizations Fund, an entity financed through the government and the European Union (EU). The minister of education appoints the governing council of the fund, which includes members from voluntary organizations and a government representative.

Religious groups not registered as voluntary organizations with the Office of the Commissioner for Voluntary Organizations do not receive funding from the government or the Voluntary Organizations Fund, and must obtain approval from the commissioner of police to carry out public collections. Approval is not required for collections from members or congregants. Groups that do not register as voluntary organizations otherwise have the same legal rights as registered groups.

All registered and unregistered religious groups may own property, including buildings. Groups using property for a particular purpose, including religious worship, must obtain a permit for that purpose from the Planning Authority. All religious groups may organize and run private religious schools, and their clergy may perform legally recognized marriages and other religious functions.

The constitution states the Catholic Church has “the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong.” The constitution and law make Catholic education compulsory in public schools; the state, rather than the Catholic

Church, provides the course teachers, who may be non-Catholic. Students, with parental consent if the student is under the age of 16, may opt out of these classes and instead take an ethics course, if one is available. If a school does not offer an ethics course, students may still opt out of the religion class.

Students may enroll in private religious schools. The law does not regulate religious education in private schools. The law does not allow homeschooling for religious or other reasons except for physical or mental infirmity.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The Planning Authority again failed to make a decision on a 2017 application by the Russian Orthodox Church of St. Paul the Apostle to build a new church in Kappara. According to media reports, in 2018 the Planning Authority postponed a decision for six months while it analyzed the proposal, following opposition from nearby residents and the manager of a nature reserve adjacent to the proposed site.

The government continued its practice of not enforcing the legal ban on face coverings or disguises, including those worn for religious purposes.

The Ministry for Education and Employment offered ethics as an alternative to religious lessons in an increasing number of public schools. All students in training to become primary school teachers were receiving training in the teaching of ethics. During the year, 2,686 students in public schools, and 4,031 students in all schools, accounting for 7.1 percent of all students nationwide, were enrolled in ethics classes.

Representatives of the Maltese-Indian Community Center said the Hindu community welcomed the government's enactment of the cremation law. By year's end, the government had not licensed any crematoria in the country. Representatives of the Maltese-Indian Center said they recognized construction of crematoria would take time. The representatives described the Hindu community's relations with the government as excellent.

The government again did not introduce voluntary Islamic religious education as an after-school program in state primary or secondary schools despite statements in the previous two years that it was considering doing so. In December the Ministry

of Education stated it was continuing its discussions with the Muslim community on this issue.

On February 7, in celebration of the World Interfaith Harmony Week, members of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other faith communities in the country signed a declaration of friendship and solidarity under the auspices of then president Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca. The declaration stated that religious harmony is an essential contributor to unity, and signatories resolved to nurture it through dialogue, cooperation, and mutual support when required; religious diversity is a powerful source of societal strength and enrichment; and all communities have the duty to educate children in their faith and should have access to dignified places of worship. The signatories also pledged to encourage dialogue among youth because “the strength of their friendships will be the most effective safeguard of interfaith harmony,” and called on national authorities and community leaders to combat violence, intimidation, hate speech, and extremism. Coleiro Preca, who also signed the declaration, said it was the result of successful interfaith dialogue that took place in a series of forums during her presidency. She cited in particular an interfaith meeting at the presidential palace in October 2018.

On May 8, newly elected President George Vella hosted a first interfaith roundtable at the San Anton Palace. Attendees included members of the following faith communities: Roman Catholic, Ahmadiyya Muslim, Baha’i, Buddhist, Bulgarian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo, Russian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, Church of Scotland, Evangelical Lutheran, Greek Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Methodist, Muslim, Seventh-day Adventist, and Syro-Malabar Catholic. The president invited all participants to keep a close relationship with his office, pledged to maintain an open dialogue with them, and cited the importance of strong partnership among interfaith communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU-member state on the perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 37 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Malta (compared with 45 percent in the previous survey conducted in 2015), while 53 percent said it was rare; 65 percent would be comfortable with having a person of different religious occupy the highest elected political position in the country (54 percent in 2015). In addition, 91 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a

Christian (88 percent in 2015), and 83 percent or more said they would be with an atheist, Jew, Buddhist, or Muslim (75 percent in 2015). Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 80 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 54 percent if atheist, 57 percent if Jewish, 54 percent if Buddhist, and 46 percent if Muslim.

In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU-member state. According to the survey, 68 percent of respondents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in Malta, and 55 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in the country in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 6 percent; on the internet, 13 percent; graffiti or vandalism, 4 percent; expressions of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 8 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 5 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 5 percent; in schools and universities, 6 percent; in political life, 6 percent; and in the media, 10 percent.

In Valletta, the Greek Catholic Church Our Lady of Damascus remained available for use by the congregation of the Russian Orthodox Parish of St. Paul the Apostle as the latter awaited the Planning Authority’s decision on its application to build a new church. Catholic parishes also made their premises available for the Ethiopian, Romanian, Serbian, and Russian Orthodox churches.

In May the Maltese Patriots Movement, a self-styled nationalist group that has advocated a “Christian Europe” and has opposed Islamic teaching in Catholic schools, contested European parliamentary elections for the first time. The group garnered 0.36 percent of the vote and elected no candidates to the European Parliament.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry for Education and Employment to discuss religious tolerance, efforts to establish new places of worship, and religious education in schools.

Embassy representatives engaged with religious leaders, including Catholic Archbishop Charles Scicluna; Bader Zeina of the Malta Muslim Council; Imam

Mohammed El Sadi of the Mariam Al-Batool Mosque; Co-Directors of the Chabad Jewish Center of Malta Rabbi Chaim Segal and Chaya Mushka Segal; Rev. Joseph Ellul, President of the Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue; and Rev. John Berry, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta and Secretary of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. The discussions covered efforts to establish new places of worship and to achieve consensus positions among different groups in their dialogue with the government.

On May 7, the embassy hosted a workshop to offer safety guidelines and best practices for protecting houses of worship in the country. Approximately 30 individuals attended the training, including local police and leaders from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities. Attendees voiced their interest in continuing to engage as a group on this topic.

The Charge d' Affaires wrote opinion pieces to promote respect for religious freedom, for example, highlighting on International Human Rights Day that human rights included the right to freedom of religion and belief. These articles were published in newspapers with the highest circulation in the country, including *The Times of Malta* and *The Sunday Times of Malta*.