

# **MALTA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious worship and prohibits religious discrimination. It establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion and mandates Catholic religious education in state schools, but allows students to opt out of such classes. The government introduced a bill to rescind a law prohibiting “religious vilification” and expanded a pilot project to allow students who opt out of Catholic religious classes to elect ethics classes.

A television program sparked a debate on the appropriateness of face coverings such as the burqa. The civil liberties minister and the head of the World Islamic Call Society in the country participated in the discussion. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community sponsored its annual peace symposium, bringing together religious scholars, experts on religious freedom, and the public. Catholic and Muslim leaders celebrated interfaith unity at the 450th anniversary of the siege of the island by the Ottoman Empire against the Hospitaller Order.

In meetings with the president, prime minister, and government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs; Home Affairs and Security; Civil Liberties; Education; and Justice, as well as with civil society and religious leaders, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials encouraged religious tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 414,000 (July 2015 estimate). The National Statistics Office’s most recent report, published in 2006, indicates 91 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups together make up less than 5 percent of the population. These groups include an estimated 10,000 Muslims (according to the Islamic Call Society), most of whom are foreign citizens, Coptic Christians, Greek Orthodox, Baptists, evangelicals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, members of the Unification Church, Zen Buddhists, Bahais, and adherents of indigenous African forms of worship. There are an estimated 120 Jews, according to Jewish community leaders.

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

### **Legal Framework**

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The constitution states “all persons in Malta have full freedom of conscience and enjoy the free exercise of their respective mode of religious worship,” subject to restrictions in the interests of public safety, order, morality or decency, health, or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. It prohibits discriminatory treatment on the basis of “creed.”

The constitution establishes Catholicism as the state religion and declares the authorities of the Catholic Church have “the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong.” It makes Catholic education compulsory in public schools but allows students to opt out of these classes, with parental consent if the student is under the age of 16.

By law persons convicted of vilification of Catholicism or “any other cult tolerated by law” are liable to imprisonment for one to six months or one to three months, respectively. The government interprets “any other cult” to mean other religious groups.

The government does not require religious groups to be registered or licensed. A religious group has the option of registering as a voluntary organization with the office of the commissioner for nongovernmental organizations. To qualify, 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 euros (\$44) registration fee. The law does not provide registered groups with tax reductions or exemptions, but allows them to make collections without obtaining any further authorization. It also allows them to receive grants, sponsorships, and financial aid from the government and the Voluntary Organizations Fund, an entity financed through the government and the EU. The fund, whose governing council is appointed by the minister of education and made up of representatives from voluntary organizations and a government representative, supports enrolled voluntary organizations.

Unregistered religious groups do not receive funding from the government or the Voluntary Organizations Fund and require government approval to collect contributions from the public but otherwise have the same legal rights as registered groups.

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The criminal code prohibits individuals from wearing “masks or disguises” in public, unless explicitly allowed by law.

Religious groups may own property, including buildings and may organize and run private religious schools; their religious leaders may perform marriages and other functions.

The law, as well as the constitution, permits students to opt out of Catholic classes and does not require that these classes be taught by Catholics. Enrollment in private religious schools is permitted. The law does not regulate religious education in private schools. The law does not allow homeschooling for religious reasons.

### **Government Practices**

In July the government presented a bill in parliament to amend the criminal code to decriminalize the vilification of religion. The draft bill generated considerable public debate, which was ongoing. Catholic Archbishop Charles Scicluna told lawmakers that decriminalizing religious vilification was akin to insulting human dignity. The Catholic Church published a position paper against the bill. Parliament had not voted on the bill by year’s end.

The government did not enforce the legal ban on face coverings or disguises. In October the civil liberties minister, on a television show which focused on the legality of wearing the burqa, called on the police to enforce the law.

The government expanded a pilot program, launched in 2014, to substitute ethics classes in place of Catholic religious education for students opting out of the latter, to encompass additional grades. The government did not provide figures on how many students participated in this program.

In April President Marie Louise Coleiro Preca gave the keynote address at an Ahmadiyya Muslim community-sponsored symposium on religion, freedom, and peace and emphasized the importance of humane and respectful treatment of all persons.

In July at the opposition Nationalist Party’s iftar, party leader, Simon Busuttil remarked that cooperation between politics and religion provided opportunities to celebrate peace and overcome fear and fundamentalism.

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In November the Nationalist Party hosted an interfaith conference promoting equality, dignity, tolerance, protection of human dignity and inclusiveness. Panelists included leaders from various denominations, including the Catholic Church and the Islamic Community.

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

In October a popular weekly television program, in which the civil liberties minister made her remarks about enforcing the law on face coverings such as the burqa, sparked a debate on the issue. The country's most respected newspaper, *The Times of Malta*, published an article quoting Imam Mohammed El Saadi, head of the World Islamic Call Society in the country, who cautioned against politicizing the debate about face coverings. El Saadi said Muslim women have a constitutional right to cover part of their face.

In April the Ahmadiyya Muslim community sponsored its annual peace symposium. In addition to the president, speakers included a Catholic scholar, a representative of the Indian community, several Islamic scholars, and a lawyer specializing in religious freedom. More than 100 people attended the event. Speakers highlighted the value of interreligious tolerance in free and democratic societies.

In September the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta hosted an interfaith commemoration on the 450th anniversary of the siege of Malta by the Ottoman Empire against the Hospitaller Order. Archbishop Charles Scicluna, Grand Bailiff of the Order, and Imam El Saadi led a procession, highlighting interfaith comity.

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

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives met frequently with government officials, such as the president, prime minister, and ministers for civil liberties, education, and home affairs to emphasize the shared values of religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy representatives engaged civil society leaders, such as leaders of Drachma, a religious support group, Jesuit Refugee Services, and religious leaders, such as the Archbishop Scicluna and Imam El Saadi, representing all principal faiths in the country, to discuss respect for religious

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freedom. In January and July the Ambassador met with Archbishop Scicluna to encourage acceptance of and respect for all religious traditions.