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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Malta

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 the classes. In July the government postponed making a decision for six months on a Russian Orthodox application to build a new church. The government continued to expand its ethics program as an alternative to Catholic instruction in public schools and appointed an education officer specifically for ethics education.

The self-styled nationalist Maltese Patriots Movement advocated a “Christian Europe,” and opposed Islamic teaching in Catholic schools and the existence of unofficial Muslim prayer rooms. The Catholic Church offered premises for worship to a Russian Orthodox parish while it awaited a government decision on its application to build a new church.

In meetings with government officials at two ministries and with religious leaders, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and religious groups’ efforts to establish places of worship. During an iftar for members of the Muslim community and others and attended by two government ministers, the Ambassador stressed the importance of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 449,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to an April survey conducted by the newspaper *Malta Today*, which the newspaper said had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.2 percent, 94 percent of respondents identified as Catholic, 3.9 percent as atheist, and 1.3 percent reported belonging to non-Catholic Christian denominations. An earlier survey conducted by *Malta Today* in 2016 showed 6 percent to be members of other religious groups, and 4.5 percent atheist or agnostic. The Islamic Call Society estimates 6-7 percent of the population is Muslim, mostly consisting of foreigners. Most Muslims are Sunni; there is a minority Shia presence and a smaller numbers of Ahmadis. Smaller religious groups include Coptic Christians, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Baptists, evangelical Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Zen Buddhists, Baha’is, and adherents of indigenous African religions. There are an estimated 120 Jews, according to Jewish community leaders.

Members of minority religious groups are largely migrants and refugees, foreign workers, and foreign investors who have become 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 interests 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 Catholicism as the state religion and states the Catholic Church has “the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong.”

The criminal code prohibits the disturbance of “any function, ceremony, or religious service of any religion tolerated by law,” and carried out by a minister of religion, both in places of worship or in areas accessible to the public. The penalty for violators is up to six months in prison. The punishment may increase 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.

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 (\$46) 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. 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 and law make Catholic education compulsory in public schools, although non-Catholic teachers may teach the course. 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 law allows criticism of religious groups but prohibits incitement of religious hatred; violators are subject to imprisonment for a term of six to 18 months.

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

Government Practices

In July, according to media reports, the Planning Authority postponed making a decision for six months on an application the Russian Orthodox Parish of St. Paul the Apostle submitted in 2017 to build a new church in Kappara. According to the *Times of Malta* newspaper, the Planning Authority needed more time to analyze the proposal, which generated opposition from nearby residents and from Nature Trust Malta, the manager of the Wied Ghollieqa 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 government did not introduce voluntary Islamic religious education as an after-school program in state primary or secondary schools. In 2017, there were reports the government was advancing plans to introduce such classes in state schools, and Education and Employment Minister Evarist Bartolo said at that time there should be no problem in providing voluntary, accredited Islamic religious classes in schools. In October the Ministry of Education and Employment stated it was continuing discussions with Muslim leaders on the possible introduction of Islamic classes; it did not release details or a timeline for the program's implementation. The government said it also continued to explore similar programs for other religious groups.

The Ministry of Education and Employment continued to expand a pilot program to offer ethics education in state schools as an alternative to Catholic religious classes. According to the ministry, 10.2 percent of students opted for ethics education in schools that offered it. The ministry attributed this increased enrollment to the growing number of non-Catholic foreign students. During the 2017-18 school year, 1,520 primary and secondary level students, approximately 4.8 percent of the student body in state schools, enrolled in ethics classes, compared with 1,073 students in the previous year. For the first time, the government appointed an education officer specifically for ethics education, and recognized the subject in assessing qualifications for the Secondary Education Certificate, a credential gained by students following exams at the end of their compulsory secondary education. During the 2017-18 school year, post-secondary educational institutions also began accepting ethics education as an academic subject for students in their academic programs.

In June the opposition Nationalist Party organized an iftar for members of the Muslim community at its party headquarters. In remarks at the iftar, Nationalist Party leader Adrian Delia appealed for religions to unite, rather than divide, people.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Maltese Patriots Movement, a self-styled nationalist group and political party that did not hold political office at any level, said it intended to promote a “fair, safe, and Christian Europe.” The group opposed migration, the teaching of Islam in Catholic schools, and the existence of unofficial Muslim prayer rooms. The Maltese Patriots said they intended to contest European Parliament elections in 2019.

Catholic parishes made their premises available for the Russian Orthodox Parish of St. Paul the Apostle to use while the latter congregation awaited the Planning Authority’s decision on its application to build a church.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives met with government officials in the Ministries of European Affairs and Equality and Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion. The embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and raised issues of concern to religious minorities, including their efforts to establish new places of worship.

Embassy representatives engaged various religious leaders, including Catholic Archbishop Charles Scicluna and Muslim leaders Bader Zeina of the Malta Muslim Council, Imam Laiq Ahmed Latif, President of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, and Imam Mohammed El Sadi of the Mariam Al-Batool Mosque, to discuss respect for religious freedom and issues affecting congregants, such as religious education in schools, and a shortage of places of worship for members of religious minorities.

In June the Ambassador hosted an iftar for members of the Muslim community and others, including two ministers and other government officials, nongovernmental and international organizations, and members of the diplomatic corps. During opening remarks, the Ambassador highlighted the importance of religious tolerance in free and open societies. The embassy also donated books to the library at the Mariam al-Batool primary school at the Islamic Center.

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