

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Malta

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.

Despite statements in 2017 and subsequently that it was considering introducing voluntary Islamic religious education in public schools, the government had not introduced such an option as of year's end. Members of the Muslim community said that such religious education was a priority.

In January, President George Vella hosted a Holocaust memorial commemoration ceremony in which he said the Remembrance Day should be an occasion for everyone to denounce all political and military activity aimed at subjugating, humiliating, or segregating human beings based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, or race. To commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, the Network for World Awareness of Multicultural Integration (NWAMI) launched a student art competition on the causes and impact of intolerance and hate.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through its support of a U.S. citizen participating in a U.S. exchange program at the University of Malta to promote religious diversity and interfaith dialogue.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 467,000 (midyear 2023). The government's census office estimates the population at 542,000 (2022). The results of a 2021 Census of Population and Housing for over 15-year-olds, published in February, show that 72 percent of residents identify themselves as Roman Catholic, 3.3 percent as Muslim, 3.1 percent as Orthodox Christian, 1.2 as Hindu, 1 percent as Anglican, 0.8 percent as Protestant, 0.4 percent as Buddhist, 0.2 percent as Jewish, 0.1 percent as members of other religious groups, and 4.7 percent as having no religious affiliation.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for 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, such as in a medical context. There is no specific reference to – or exception for – coverings worn for religious reasons. Violators are subject to a reprimand, a fine of €23 to €1,165 (\$25 to \$1,300), or a jail sentence of up to two months. In practice, the government has not enforced the ban.

The government does not require religious groups to be registered and tax exemptions are available to registered and nonregistered religious groups. 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 teachers (who may be non-Catholic) for the courses. Students, with parental consent if the student is younger than age 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 allows homeschooling, but instructors must have a teaching certificate.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In February, Matthew Grech, Mario Camilleri, and Rita Bonnici faced charges for promoting conversion from homosexuality in violation of legislation prohibiting advertising of such practices after Grech appeared on a one-hour news show hosted by Camilleri and Bonnici. Grech, a member of the evangelical Christian group River of Love, based his defense on his Christian beliefs. The trial began in June and the case remained pending at year’s end.

According to the Ministry for Education and Employment, the number of public schools offering ethics as an alternative to religion classes and the number of students in both public and other schools remained similar to those of 2022. All students in training to become primary school instructors continued to receive training in the teaching of ethics.

At year’s end, the government had not yet introduced voluntary Islamic religious education as an after-school program in state primary or secondary schools despite statements dating back to 2017 that it was considering doing so. Discussions continued with the Muslim community on implementation of an educational program. According to Muslim community leaders, it remained a policy priority of the community for the government to introduce Islamic education options in public schools.

In January, the Office of the President and the Embassy of Germany hosted a Holocaust memorial commemoration ceremony, which included Minister for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade Ian Borg. During the ceremony, President Vella warned against the use of dehumanizing language and said that Remembrance Day should be an occasion to denounce all political and military

activity aimed at subjugating, humiliating, or segregating human beings based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, or race. In May, the University of Malta in coordination with the Tayar Foundation for Jewish Heritage in Malta hosted a month-long exhibition exploring the history of the Holocaust.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

To commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, NWAMI launched a student art competition entitled “What does the Holocaust mean to you in 2023?” Students were invited to reflect on the causes and impact of intolerance and hate speech and express those reflections in the form of a painting or drawing.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy used exchange programs and grants to support religious freedom for migrants in the country, the majority of whom were African Muslims. These included an exchange program where a U.S. citizen worked with the University of Malta’s Department of Counseling on a project to promote the benefits of religious diversity and interfaith dialogue.