

MAURITIUS

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were allegations of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government reached out to religious communities through public diplomacy programs. Members of the U.S. diplomatic mission are invited to and frequently attend ceremonies and celebrations of all religions and beliefs. The U.S. government also engaged the government on religious freedom issues and advocated continued respect for diversity.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2000 census, 48 percent of the population is Hindu, 24 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 9 percent belongs to other Christian denominations. The remaining 2 percent of the population includes Buddhists, animists, and others. Roman Catholics make up 73 percent of the Christian population, while the remaining 27 percent are members of the following groups: Seventh-day Adventist, Assemblies of God, Church of England, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Sunnis account for more than 90 percent of Muslims.

On the main island, the northern portion is primarily Hindu, while the central area is mainly Catholic. There are large populations of Muslims and Catholics in the cities of Port Louis, Quatre Bornes, and Curepipe. The island of Rodrigues is 92 percent Catholic.

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 Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

A parliamentary decree recognizes religious organizations that were present prior to independence, including the Catholic Church, Church of England, Presbyterian Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus, and Muslims. These groups receive an annual lump sum payment from the Ministry of Finance based on the number of their adherents as determined by the census. The registrar of associations registers new religious organizations, which must have a minimum of seven members, and the Ministry of Finance grants them tax-exempt privileges. The government reportedly did not refuse registration to any group.

The government allows foreign missionary groups to operate on a case-by-case basis. Although no regulations restrict their presence or limit proselytizing activities, religious groups must obtain both a residence permit and a work permit for each missionary. The prime minister's office is the final authority on issuance of these required documents. While there are no explicit limits on the ability of missionaries to operate, there are limits on the number of missionaries permitted to obtain the requisite visas and work permits. The government grants residence permits to missionaries for a maximum of three years with no extensions.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Thaipooam Cavadee, Maha Shivaratree, Ougadi, Ganesh Chaturthi, Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, Assumption of Mary, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Due to the predominance of Hindu citizens in the upper echelons of the civil service, some minorities, mainly Christians and Muslims, alleged that interference in the government promotion system prevented them from reaching higher-level positions in the civil service. More generally, non-Hindus often claimed underrepresentation in government.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were allegations of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On February 21, police arrested four Muslim men who allegedly vandalized a tent and ripped down a banner in Quinze Cantons during a Hindu pilgrimage known as Maha Shivaratree. This gave rise to tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the locality in the days following the incident. By year's end there was no evidence that the initial incident was religiously motivated, but the investigation continued.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government promoted religious freedom through various public diplomacy programs, including some that highlight Islam in America, and engaged the government on religious freedom issues, advocating continued respect for diversity. The U.S. embassy held an iftar dinner (an evening meal during Ramadan) for prominent members of the Muslim community and maintained dialogue with other religious groups by regularly attending religious ceremonies and celebrations.