

MAURITIUS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for religious freedom, including the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religious beliefs. The government grants subsidies to six religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus, and Muslims, based on their relative numbers in the population. Other groups must register with the government to obtain tax-exempt status but receive no subsidies. Christians and Muslims stated they were underrepresented in the civil service and government, including at the highest levels. The government limited the number of foreign missionaries allowed to work in the country.

Tensions between Hindus and Muslims continued; however, unlike in previous years, there were no reports of interreligious violence. On November 20, unknown individuals vandalized two mosques and a predominantly Muslim cemetery in the Savanne District. On December 30, unknown individuals vandalized a Tamil temple in Port Louis. There were no developments in the September 2015 case in which two Muslim men vandalized a Hindu temple, which was followed by five Hindu men vandalizing a mosque in the south of the island. The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 different faiths and denominations, hosted regular religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities.

The embassy promoted religious tolerance and understanding through engagement with government officials and with religious leaders. The Charge d'Affaires hosted an iftar with Muslim civil society and religious leaders to highlight religious tolerance and emphasize ways to continue to foster interreligious tolerance. Embassy representatives attended numerous religious holiday ceremonies of different faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 local census, approximately 48 percent is Hindu, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 6 percent other Christian religious groups including Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, evangelical Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses,

members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and members of the Assemblies of God. The remaining 3 percent includes Buddhists, animists, individuals who reported no religious affiliation, and others. More than 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni.

On the main island, the population of Port Louis is primarily Muslim and Catholic, while the majority of the remainder of the island's population is Hindu. The island of Rodrigues is approximately 90 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 Buddhism, Anglicanism, or Catholicism. Creoles and citizens of European descent are primarily Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for freedom of thought and religion including the right of individuals to change their religion or belief, and to manifest and propagate their religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community and in private or in public. These rights may be subject to limitations to protect public order, safety, morality, or health, or the rights of others. The constitution also bars oaths contrary to an individual's religious belief and bars compulsory religious education or attendance at religious ceremonies in schools. It gives religious groups the right to establish schools and to provide religious instruction therein to members of that group; these institutions are open to the population in general as well. Citizens can file complaints of religious discrimination with the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), and the EOC can initiate investigations on its own if it believes a citizen's rights may have been infringed. Legislative election candidates must identify themselves according to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution: Hindus, Muslims, Sino-Mauritians, or general population.

A parliamentary decree recognizes the six religious groups that were present prior to independence: Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus, and Muslims. These groups receive annual lump sum payments from the finance ministry based on the number of their adherents as determined by the voluntary self-identification of individuals in the 2010 census. The registrar of associations registers new religious groups, which must have a minimum of seven members with designated leadership responsibilities. The finance ministry grants these new groups tax-exempt privileges. Although

registration of religious groups is required, the law does not prescribe penalties for unregistered groups.

Religious groups must obtain both a residence permit and a work permit for each foreign missionary. The prime minister's office is the final authority on the issuance of these documents. While there are no explicit restrictions, there are unofficial limits on the overall number of missionaries per religious group who are issued the requisite visas and work permits. The government grants residence permits to missionaries for a maximum of three years with no extensions.

Religious education is allowed in public and private schools, at both the primary and high school levels. Students are permitted to opt out and civic education classes are provided for non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools.

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

Government Practices

Some Christians and Muslims continued to state that the predominance of Hindus in the civil service resulted in "interference" in the government promotion system, and prevented Christians and Muslims from reaching higher level positions in the civil service. More generally, non-Hindus often stated they were underrepresented in government. There were no reliable statistics available on the numbers of different religious groups represented in the civil service.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There continued to be tensions between Hindus and Muslims; however, unlike in previous years, there were no outbursts of interreligious violence reported.

On November 20, unknown individuals vandalized two mosques and a predominantly Muslim cemetery in the Savanne District. The individuals wrote graffiti translated from Creole to "Trump for them," with the implication that (then-President-elect) Trump supported Hindus and was against Muslims. Also written was "Gabbar is BACK," a reference to a famous Bollywood antagonist famed for murdering his enemies. A trident, a symbol frequently associated with Lord Shiva, the Destroyer, and the letters HSS were also written. According to speculation in the press, HSS was a reference to the Hindu Power Party (HSS), although the group's leader reportedly denied involvement. The police investigation of the incident remained open at year's end.

On December 30, police received a report that unknown individuals vandalized a Tamil temple. According to the president of the temple, the incidents took place between December 23 and December 30. Graffiti on the temple said that Mauritius represented the new ISIS chapter. The vandals also destroyed Deity figurines. Investigation of the incidents continued at year's end, with no arrests made.

There were no developments in the September 2015 case in which two Muslim men vandalized a Hindu temple, which was followed by retaliation from five Hindu men who vandalized a mosque in the south of the island.

The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 different faiths and denominations, hosted regular religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities. In September the Council of Religions held a workshop on "Challenges on Interfaith Dialogue" to encourage different religious groups to engage in dialogue with each other.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives continued to pursue outreach and engage the government on religious freedom issues, advocating continued respect for religious diversity and tolerance. Embassy representatives met with law enforcement officials to better understand religious tensions related to recent incidents of vandalism. The Charge d'Affaires hosted an annual iftar with Muslim civil society and religious leaders to highlight religious tolerance and ways to continue to foster interreligious tolerance. Embassy representatives regularly attended religious ceremonies and celebrations of the Council of Religions and various religious groups to support religious diversity. The embassy provided funding for the Council of Religion's project to produce 300 booklets entitled "Peace and Interfaith Dialogue".