

MAURITIUS 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religious beliefs. The government recognizes six groups as religions: Hindus, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Seventh-day Adventists. Other groups must register as associations. As such they can obtain tax-exempt status but cannot receive subsidies like the six recognized religions. Before general elections in November, a political party and several independent candidates refused to identify themselves as belonging to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution (Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian, and general population), arguing that the practice was undemocratic. The Supreme Court ruled against them and they were unable to run in the elections.

Police said low level tensions between Hindus and Muslims continued. The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 religious groups, hosted regular religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities.

U.S. embassy officers promoted religious tolerance and understanding with government officials and met with police to inquire about ongoing investigations into religious strife in previous years. Embassy officials met with religious leaders several times, including members of the Council of Religions. Officers from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom participated in many of these meetings.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, approximately 48 percent of the population is Hindu, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 6 percent non-Catholic 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, and members of the Assemblies of God. The latter state they are the second-largest Christian group after Catholics with approximately 50,000 members. The remaining 3 percent includes Buddhists, Baha'is, animists, and individuals who

report no religious affiliation. More than 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni. There are approximately 100 Jews, according to the Jewish community president.

According to the 2011 census, the population of Port Louis is primarily Muslim and Catholic, while the remainder of the island's population is predominantly Hindu. The island of Rodrigues, which contains approximately 3 percent of the country's population, 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 (persons of African descent) and those 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, manifest, and propagate their religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community, in private or in public. These rights may be subject to limitations to protect public order, safety, morality, health, or the rights of others. The constitution also bars requiring 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 provide religious instruction to members of that group. These schools are open to the general population as well. Citizens may file religious discrimination complaints with the Equal Opportunities Commission, which may open investigations if it determines a citizen's rights may have been infringed.

The constitution states that legislative candidates must identify themselves as belonging to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution: Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian, or general population.

A parliamentary decree recognizes the six main religious groups present prior to independence in 1968: Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Seventh-day Adventists. These groups receive annual lump-sum payments from the finance ministry based on the number of members who identified as such during the last census. The registrar of associations registers other religious groups, which must have a minimum of seven members with designated leadership

responsibilities. The finance ministry may grant these other 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 residence and work permits for each foreign missionary. The Prime Minister's Office is the final authority on the issuance of these documents. 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 secondary levels. Students may opt out, however. For example, Catholic schools offer civic education classes for non-Catholic students.

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

Government Practices

The Assemblies of God has petitioned the government for years to be recognized as a religion, but as of year's end the government had not addressed the issue and the group was still considered an association. As a consequence, according to a pastor from the Assemblies of God, newborns could not be registered as members and its pastors had limited access to hospitals and prisons.

Before the November elections, a political party and several independent candidates refused to identify themselves as belonging to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution, arguing that the practice was undemocratic. The Supreme Court ruled against them and they were run in the elections. These politicians said they would take the case to the UN Human Rights Committee. At year's end, there was no further update on the case.

Some Christians and Muslims continued to state the predominance of Hindus in the civil service favored Hindus in government recruitment and promotion, preventing Christians and Muslims from reaching higher level positions in the civil service. In general and dating back years, non-Hindus have stated they were underrepresented in government. There were no reliable statistics available on the numbers of members of different religious groups represented in the civil service. According to the Truth and Justice Commission's 2011 report, however, civil service employment did not represent national ethnoreligious diversity.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Police said they continued to investigate the 2017 case in which unknown individuals vandalized five Hindu temples and other places of worship. The vandals destroyed deity statuettes and smeared blood on the places of worship. As of year's end, there were no arrests.

The court case against two Muslim men accused of vandalizing a Hindu temple in 2015 remained pending. Five Hindu men responded to the vandalism of the temple by vandalizing a mosque in the south of the island.

Police said low level tensions between Hindus and Muslims continued.

The Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 religious groups, hosted regular interfaith religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities. These included interfaith ceremonies in local private companies and the celebration of International World Peace Day. The council continued the distribution of booklets entitled "Peace and Interfaith Dialogue" to local schools and institutions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November embassy officers and officials from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom met with police officials to discuss previous incidents of religiously motivated conflict, government efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism related to religion, and the ability to practice one's faith in prison.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with leaders from Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, and Jewish groups and discussed interfaith relations. They also engaged with members of the Council of Religions to discuss mutual respect among religious groups and interfaith dialogue.

The embassy posted several articles on social media that discussed religious freedom.