

# **MARSHALL ISLANDS 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides protections for religious freedom with “reasonable restrictions” to ensure public order and the rights of other individuals. The constitution provides for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and to the free exercise of religion.

Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community reported disparaging remarks on social media sites and occasional harassing phone calls. They said that some members of the general community seemed to have a general fear of their mosque. Protestant parishioners again reported feeling pressured to give substantial amounts of income to their church or face severe penalties from church leaders, including excommunication, if donation quotas were not met.

U.S. embassy officials met with the Foreign Minister to affirm the importance of religious freedom and to discuss how interfaith dialogue could promote religious freedom. Embassy officials also met with officials from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Assemblies of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the United Church of Christ.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 78,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). The Pew Foundation reported in 2010 that the population was more than 97 percent Christian. Major religious groups, according to the most recent census that covered religious affiliation (1999), include the United Church of Christ (formerly Congregational), with 54.8 percent of the population; the Assemblies of God, 25.8 percent; the Roman Catholic Church, 8.4 percent; Bukot nan Jesus (also known as Assembly of God Part Two), 2.8 percent; and the Church of Jesus Christ, 2.1 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Full Gospel, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, and atheists. Almost all those native to the country are Christian, according to government statistics. Many foreign-born residents and workers are also Christian, and the majority of non-Christians are foreign born.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as for free exercise of religion and equal protection under the law, regardless of religious beliefs. It also provides for “reasonable restrictions” imposed by law on the “time, place, or manner of conduct” – provided they are the least restrictive necessary for public peace, order, health, or security or the rights or freedoms of others, and they do not penalize conduct based on a disagreement with the ideas or beliefs expressed. The constitution states no law or legal action shall discriminate against any person on the basis of religion.

The constitution allows the government to extend financial aid to religiously supported institutions to provide nonprofit educational, medical, or social services, on the condition that such services do not discriminate among religious groups.

There are no requirements for the registration of religious groups, but if religious groups register as a nonprofit corporation or a cooperative, they may qualify for tax exemptions. The law states the tax on gross revenue shall not be applied to “corporations, associations, or societies organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, or educational purposes.” In addition, the goods imported into the country by “churches for their own religious, educational, or charitable purposes” are exempt from import duty.

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

### **Government Practices**

Governmental functions, by continuing custom, usually began and ended with an ordained minister or other church official delivering a Christian prayer. While there was no religious education in public schools, most extracurricular school events began and ended with an interdenominational Christian prayer delivered by a minister. According to local residents, prayers before and after events were a longstanding cultural practice and part of the widely accepted tradition of the country.

During the year, the government provided funding totaling \$795,000 to private schools, including religious private schools. All chartered private schools were eligible for government funding. The amount of funding religious schools

received depended on how much was available after ensuring the basic needs of the public school system were covered first. The distribution of allocations was based on a combination of enrollment, test results, and accreditation.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community representatives said that disparaging remarks on their social media sites and occasional harassing phone calls stemmed from the misunderstandings of some that linked Islam to terrorism, including some encouraging them to leave the country. They also reported difficulty finding interpreters for some events and that some in the community seemed to have a general fear of their mosque. The Ahmadi leaders said they continued their efforts to dispel preconceptions and present Islam as a religion of peace by operating a daily soup kitchen and participating in various community service events.

Protestant parishioners reported feeling pressured to give substantial amounts of income to their church or face the threat of severe penalties from church leaders, such as being demoted within the hierarchy of the church or excommunication, which would have significant impact on social standing. There were reports of devout church members giving so much of their income to the church to meet the requirements and stay in good standing with the church that their families would occasionally go without basic food essentials.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials met with the Foreign Minister to affirm the importance the United States places on religious freedom and encourage government officials to promote interfaith dialogue and policy.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met with different religious officials, including representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Assemblies of God, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the United Church of Christ to discuss the climate of religious tolerance.