



Marshall Islands

Stable / Unchanged —

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **94.9%**
- Baha'is : **2.7%**
- Agnostics : **1.5%**
- Others : **0.9%**

53,100

181 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Marshall Islands are “two archipelagic island chains of 29 atolls, each made up of many small islets, and five single islands”.^[1] They lie halfway between Hawaii and Australia.

The country’s constitution grants every person the right to “free exercise of religion”. “[R]easonable restrictions” on this right may be imposed by law, if they are “necessary to preserve public peace, order, health, or security or the rights or freedoms of others”.^[2] Any such restrictions must achieve these aims by the least restrictive means possible and must not “penalise conduct on the basis of disagreement with the ideas or beliefs expressed.”^[3]

Religious groups are not required to register with the government. Under the constitution, no executive or judicial act shall, either expressly or by practical application, discriminate on the basis of religion. The constitution also allows the government to fund “religiously supported institutions”^[4] that offer educational, medical or other social services on the condition that it does not discriminate between groups when it provides this funding.

Islanders are predominantly Christian and Christianity has been the main cultural influence since Western missionaries first visited the islands in the nineteenth century. Although there is no official state religion, governmental functions and other formal, public meetings often start and end with a Christian prayer. Figures vary with regard to denominational breakdown. Major religious groups include the United Church of Christ (which according to some sources represents 54.8 percent of the population), the Assemblies of God (25.8 percent) and the Roman Catholic Church (8.4 percent). Official statistics indicate that almost all natives to the country are Christians and many of those who were born overseas are also Christian. Minority religions include Baha'is, Iglesia ni Cristo, Jews, Hindus, Ahmadi Muslims, Baptists; these and other minorities collectively constitute less than percent of the population.^[5] In 2012, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community opened its first mosque in the capital, Majuro. It remains the only mosque in the Marshall Islands.

All indications suggest that the constitution's provisions regarding freedom of religion are respected in practice. Independent monitors such as Freedom House have shown that they have not been breached.^[6]

Incidents

Research yielded no reports of serious incidents during the period under review and there were few indications of societal tensions.

The construction of the Ahmadiyya mosque in 2012 was met with some local hostility at the time. The mosque was discussed in parliament in 2014.^[7] However, reports from 2017 suggest that concerns and suspicions have not hardened or noticeably persisted.^[8] In 2016 the local imam organised a world religions conference which was attended by Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus and atheists.

In the past, there has been passing comment on the more "aggressive evangelism" of newer religious groups that have come to the islands.^[9] However, such reports need to be seen in the context of widespread co-operation between different Christian denominations in events such as the 2017 Women's Day of Prayer.^[10]

Prospects for freedom of religion

There is nothing to suggest that the situation of religious freedom in the Marshall Islands will change in the near future.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] 'Marshall Islands', The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_rm.html, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[2] Marshall Islands' Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1995, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Marshall_Islands_1995.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Marshall_Islands_1995.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] CIA World Factbook, op. cit.

[6] 'Marshall Islands', Freedom in the World 2016, Freedom House <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/marshall-islands>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[7] See, for example, 'Muslim community puts down roots in Marshall Islands', Pacific Institute of Public Policy, 6th August 2014, <http://pacificpolicy.org/2014/08/muslim-community-puts-down-roots-in-marshall-islands/>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

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[8] 'Muslims in the Marshalls', Marshall Islands Guide, 25th February 2017, <http://www.infomarshallislands.com/muslims-in-the-marshalls/>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[9] 'Christianity in Micronesia' , (2010), Francis X Hezel S.J., micsem.org, <http://www.micsem.org/pubs/articles/religion/frames/christmicrofr.htm>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[10] 'Women's Day of Prayer', Marshall Islands Journal, 9th March 2017, <http://marshallislandsjournal.com/?s=catholic>, (accessed 17th February 2018).