



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **90.3%**
- Agnostics : **6.7%**
- Atheists : **1.5%**
- Others : **1.5%**

10.304.000

92.226 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Portugal's constitution upholds the right to religious freedom, declaring that no one should be "persecuted, deprived of rights" because of their faith. However, the constitution also adds that no one should be exempt from "civic obligations or duties because of their religious convictions or practice". The constitution guarantees "the freedom to teach any religion practised... and the use of media to pursue religious activities". The right to conscientious objection is also guaranteed under the constitution. Article 41 requires the separation of Church and state. Relations between the Portuguese state and the Catholic Church are regulated by the Concordat of 18th May 2004. Relations with other religious faiths are governed by Religious Freedom Law no. 16/2001. Article 45 of the law allows for the state to enter into agreements with Churches and other religious communities in Portugal.

According to current legislation, minority faith groups based in Portugal may, like Catholics, celebrate religious marriages with civil effects. No Church or other religious group is funded by the state. That said, the state may support the construction of churches and, on occasion, of non-Catholic places of worship, as well as social and welfare works. In certain situations, faith groups are eligible to some tax benefits. Under article 52 of Law no. 16/2001, the Religious Freedom Commission (CLR) was created to monitor the application of the Religious Freedom Law.

Incidents

In June 2016, members of the Christian Inspired Press Association (AIC) met Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. AIC chairman Father Elísio Assunção told the president of his "concern and indignation" at the State's Regulatory Entity for Social Communication, which he said discriminated against Christian publications!^[1]

In July 2016, the public television channel changed the pre-arranged schedules of Catholic programmes to broadcast the Tour de France live. The religious programmes in question – ‘The Faith of Men’, ‘Paths’ and ‘70x7’ – were broadcast at different times during the two weeks of the sporting event. Article 25 of the Religious Freedom Law guarantees “a broadcasting time” to the “Church and other registered religious communities.”^[2]

In August 2016, the parishes of Beja reported “a wave of unprecedented robberies” targeting churches and priests’ property. In a statement quoted by the Ecclesia Agency, the local diocese described the situation as “alarming” and that “an assessment of the damage” was needed. Among the parishes targeted were Almodôvar, Castro Verde, Mértola, Odemira and Ourique and São João Baptista, the most well-attended parish in the city of Beja.^[3] The report did not investigate whether burglaries involving non-Church property had risen over the same period. The motive for the attacks was unclear.

Also in August 2016, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Portugal claimed that the Concordat with the Holy See was being flouted in connection with government demands regarding Church payment of the IMI property tax. Father Manuel Barbosa, secretary and spokesman of the bishops’ conference said: “Article 26 of the agreement between the Holy See and the Portuguese State, the Concordat, is not being respected. They are charging undue IMI to parishes and parish homes. These situations are regrettable.”^[4] Dozens of parishes in the country received notifications from the Ministry of Finance to pay IMI for assets and facilities used for social purposes. The bishops’ conference added that it would ask the state to explain the apparent change regarding tax demands.^[5] In response, the Ministry of Finance issued a clarification on IMI exemptions within the scope of the Concordat, noting that the provisions “have not undergone any change recently”. By the end of the month, the Portuguese tax authorities had asked parishes to pay municipal tax on the buildings that were previously exempt.^[6]

Five senior members of the Portuguese Medical Association signed a letter in October 2016 opposing the legalisation of euthanasia, stating that the practice of “taking [of a] life” goes against the profession’s ethical standards.^[7] In May 2018, the country’s parliament rejected plans to legalise euthanasia. The media reported that the Portuguese Medical Association opposed the change, saying it violated key principles of the medical profession.^[8]

Also in October 2016, the Mayor of Gondomar, Marco Martins, from the Metropolitan Area of Oporto, stated that “more than 20 religious processions have changed course this year in order not to pay... fees and charges”. He said: “Just [for a procession] to cross the road the celebration committee has to pay €200 plus VAT and if it travels on the national road it pays €500.”^[9] The mayor stressed that the tax impacted unfairly on religious processions across the region, but acknowledged that the rates also applied to other entities. Local politician Hermínio Loureiro described these fees as an “injustice”. The company enforcing the charges stated that it was complying with the law.

In November 2016, the Department of Historic and Artistic Heritage of the Diocese of Beja and the Union of Parishes of Serpa reported an attack on the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The heritage department stated that the shrine was “severely vandalised [by a] group of bandits [who]...kicked and used iron rods and sticks as levers to destroy walls and ornamental structures, among them some urns of baroque inspiration, from the churchyard”^[10]

Meeting in Fatima in January 2017, Portuguese Catholic bishops declared their objection to the topic of abortion being covered in classes of children as young as 11 (fifth and sixth grades). The bishops also “reaffirmed the right of parents to the education of their children” and that “sex education must be... [part of the] integral education in the growth of the personality of the person.”^[11]

In January 2017, there was renewed controversy relating to Portugal’s Concordat with the Holy See. Although the chairman of the Religious Freedom Commission, Vera Jardim, the former justice minister, did not directly suggest repealing the Concordat, he said relations between the Catholic Church and the state should be regulated by the same law that applies to other religions. He also argued that classes on Catholicism should be dropped in favour of civic education. Up to four months previously, Vera Jardim had chaired the Religious Freedom Committee, an advisory body to the Government and Parliament, which is responsible for alerting the authorities to violations of religious freedom. In this

interview, he said the Catholic Church had benefited in comparison to other religions but said this reflected the prominent place of Catholicism in society.^[12]

In March 2017, parents reportedly objected to Easter Mass being held during school hours at a public school. The students of Alfândega da Fé School rehearsed Catholic songs in music classes for an Easter Mass, due to be held later. The case was thought not to be unique. A media report stated that other “specific situations” were confirmed by the president of the Association of Directors. Also, the Portuguese Atheist Association was reported to have already received complaints from some “heads of education about the existence of unauthorised religious practices in public schools”^[13]

In November 2017, the Church of Our Lady of Loreto in Lisbon was vandalised just after restoration work lasting seven months had been completed. At 4am on a Sunday, scaffolding outside the church was set alight. The flames blackened parts of the church wall. The case was investigated by the police. The authorities are reported to suspect arson. Rubbish bins in the region were also set on fire at about the same time as the attack on the church. In a statement published on ‘The Crow’ website, parishioner Giuseppe Maria Negri also suspected that the fire was deliberate. He said: “We regret it, of course. The case was handed over to the authorities. But we cannot say anything else.”^[14]

At dawn one morning in March 2018, the Blessed Sacrament was desecrated during Eucharistic Adoration at the Church of São Tiago in the Diocese of Coimbra. Father Orlando Henriques, editor of the weekly ‘The Friend of the People’, referred to sources connected with worshipers who claimed that criminals took the monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament.^[15] Reports also describe a robbery at the church, suggesting that there were financial motives for the attack as well as religious ones.

In April 2018 there were reports that a poor family had been made homeless after the parish church of Salvador de Paço de Sousa in Penafiel, was required to pay the IMI property tax. The church was required to rent one of the 13 “houses of the poor” built by Father Américo to cover the tax.^[16]

In May 2018, Father Manuel Barbosa, secretary and spokesman for the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Portugal said Parliament’s vote to reject bills legalising euthanasia “is a victory of life in all its meaning, of life that should never be put to the vote with a view to its elimination”. He said the bishops’ conference “welcomes the disapproval of the legalisation of euthanasia in Parliament” and [other] numerous institutions” in the defence of life. “It is a victory for democracy and for all those who have committed themselves to defending life... We also recognise the active role that all Christian communities and their pastors have had in this process of defending life through prayer and awareness.”^[17]

Prospects for freedom of religion

In the period under review, there were no significant cases of discrimination on religious grounds or abuses of religious freedom that could be attributed to the state or other entities. One important issue was the question of whether the buildings belonging to the Catholic Church should remain exempt from IMI (Municipal Property Tax). No social, economic or political developments are expected in the near future that may change this situation. Although there appears to have been an increase in violent incidents involving Church property, the motives remained unclear, with financial gain as well as religious hatred being suggested as underlying reasons for the attacks.

Some events during this period suggest that the issue of religious freedom or persecution of Christian communities is gaining a – more positive – prominent role. An example of how this fundamental human right gained profile in the two years under review is that the Portuguese office of Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) was invited three times to participate in Parliamentary committees. This indicates the growing importance that Parliament attaches to these issues and greater recognition of the work carried out in the country by religious groups and charities.

Another example of the growing recognition of religious freedom came in October 2016 when more than 70 MPs from all parties delivered a letter to the Pakistan embassy in Lisbon asking for the liberation of Asia Bibi. In their letter, the MPs said “religious freedom [should benefit] everyone,” as should the defence of other fundamental human rights.

Endnotes / Sources

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