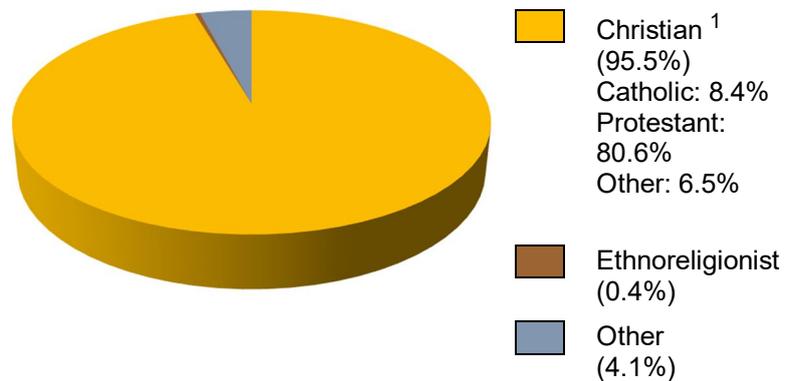
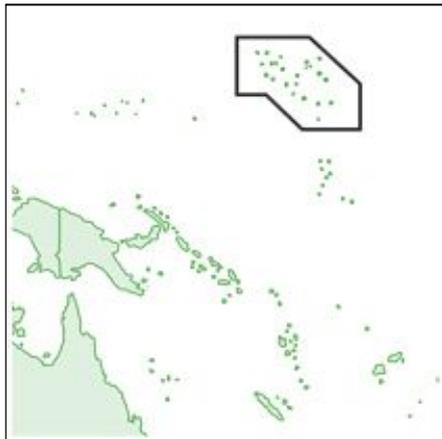


# THE MARSHALL ISLANDS



<b>Area:</b> 181.43 km <sup>2</sup>	<b>Population:</b> 52,555	<b>Political system:</b> Democracy	<b>Major Language(s):</b> Marshallese, English
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## Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Consisting of two chains of coral atolls, more than 1,000 islets make up the Marshall Islands. The Marshall Islands gained full independence from the USA in 1986.

Islanders are predominantly Christian and Christianity has been the main cultural influence since Western missionaries first visited the islands in the nineteenth century, though there is no official state religion. Major religious groups include the United Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Roman Catholic Church. There is the Apostolic Prefecture of the Marshall Islands and the Diocese of Caroline Islands. Members of the Baptist, Baha'i and no faith also account for a small percentage of the population. There are also fewer than 20 members of Judaism and of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.

In 2012, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community opened its first mosque in the capital of the Marshall Islands, Majuro. It remains the only mosque in Oceania's sub-region of Micronesia. In the years since its construction, the growing presence of the Muslim community has sparked debate over its right to practise its faith in the islands despite the country's constitution that promises religious freedom. Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2015 report describes the freedom of religious belief as being "respected in practice,"<sup>2</sup> giving the nation the best possible freedom rating. The US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2014 stated there were "no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom."<sup>3</sup>

The Marshall Islands' constitution sets out the freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights, Article II, Section 1 guaranteeing the free exercise of religious belief.<sup>4</sup> The 1979 constitution promises equal protection under law and there are no restrictions on religious practice. Unlike other Micronesian regions, the Marshall Islands do not have a system for religious groups to register their organisations and groups are not penalised for not registering.

There is no religious education in public schools and the quality of education is reportedly low. Major religious groups are free to manage their own institutions though the government does subsidise religious schools based on accreditation. Daily collective prayers are not said in public

schools though ordained ministers or Church officials are invited to begin and end government meetings with a Christian prayer.

Traditional religious beliefs before the arrival of Christian missionaries are described by Every Culture as polytheistic pantheon including numerous deities with specialised areas of control. Over time, celebrants and authorities on such traditional faiths have been superseded by Christian priests and Sisters but seers are still widespread in the islands. Some local shrines including coral heads and coconut trees still survive and ancient celebrations including Ku Rijmoj, the local celebration of Christmas, are still carried out. Such ritual events take place with feasting, dancing and games and can last many weeks.

### **Incidents**

Research yielded no reports of incidents during the period under review.

### **Prospects for Freedom of Religion**

Although religious groups in the Marshall Islands and Micronesia are free to practise their faith, they do face some challenges. As a group of islands in the Pacific, they are isolated and are not often able to access new religious materials. It has also been observed that the established dominant religion in society is at risk from new, more hard-line religious groups that have been met with suspicion from locals who have a positive existing relationship with older denominations of the Christian Church.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it remains to be seen whether new religious groups will have an impact on the situation for religious freedom in the Marshall Islands.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_144\\_2.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_144_2.asp)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/marshall-islands>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238312#wrapper>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rmiembassyus.org/Constitution/Constitution.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.micsem.org/pubs/articles/religion/frames/christmicrofr.htm>