

Ninety-nine people convicted of blasphemy in Malta last year

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A report on human rights around the world from the US Department of State showed that 99 individuals were convicted in Malta last year for "public blasphemy". This was down from 119 the year before.

Maltese law prohibits vilification of or giving offence to the Roman Catholic Church, which is also Malta's official religion. In Malta, it is a criminal offence to utter publicly any obscene or indecent words, make obscene acts or gestures or in any other way offend public morality, propriety or decency.

However, the report was generally positive about the freedom of the press in Malta, saying that the media can express a wide variety of views without restriction.

"The constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights. An independent press and a functioning democratic political system combined to ensure freedom of speech and of the press," the report said.

It also pointed out that international media could operate freely and there was no indication of reprisals against individuals for either public or private criticism of the government.

However, the existence of a blasphemy law that is so heavily enforced tells a different story about the rights of individuals to say what is on their mind – particularly if it is about the Catholic Church.

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