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Nine to be charged in Malta for wearing religious vestments

EarthTimes (06.03.2009) / HRWF (09.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Nine people are expected to be charged in court in Malta for wearing religious vestments during the recent carnival, the police said. The nine people aged between 20 and 35 years will be marched to court, days after Maltese bishops raised concerns about the behaviour of certain individuals and the costumes worn during this year's carnival in the small island of Gozo.

It is customary for some young people to dress up as priests and nuns during the rowdy carnival in the staunchly Catholic island.

The accused will face charges under a section of the Criminal Code which bars people from dressing up as priests or donning Church vestments or naval/military uniforms without a permit.

A spokesman for the Justice Ministry said photographs published in the media demonstrated that the behaviour was "not simply a case of people dressing up as Christ or the saints" but more a question of public indecency and offending religious sentiment.

Maltese Archbishop Paul Cremona and Gozo Bishop Mario Grech said in a statement: "It is good for society to defend the rights of minorities who have different views from the majority of the public. But no one should have the right to ridicule the belief of others in this way."

The bishops condemned what had taken place at the carnival and said those involved needed to recognize and respect religious and civil rights.

The bishops said that if no action was taken, the authorities would be endorsing and approving such illegal behaviour. They also said that this should not be allowed to happen again.

The police measure and the bishops' statements have been attacked in online fora, with one individual writing on the timesofmalta.com website that Malta had gone back to medieval times.