

# SAMOA

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom, although implementation of Christian-oriented educational policies demonstrated a clear government preference for Christian ideology and teachings.

There were occasional reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The constitution favors Christianity and public statements by prominent societal leaders emphasized the country's Christian principles.

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and also maintained contacts with representatives of the country's various religious communities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the most recent 2006 census, the major religious groups in the country include: Congregational Christian, with approximately 34 percent; Roman Catholic, at approximately 19 percent; Methodist, approximately 14 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), approximately 13 percent; Assemblies of God, approximately 7 percent; and Seventh-day Adventist, with 3.5 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Congregational Church of Jesus, Nazarene, nondenominational Protestant, Baptist, Worship Centre, Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, Elim Church, and Anglican. A comparison of the 2001 and 2006 censuses showed a slight decline in the membership of major denominations and an increase in participation in nontraditional and evangelical groups.

Although there are no official data, it is generally believed that there are also some practicing Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews in the country, primarily in Apia. The country has one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship; there is also a Muslim community that meets in a small mosque.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change the religion of one's choice, and the government observed and enforced these provisions. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private as well as government actors.

The preamble to the constitution describes the country as “an independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions.” Although Christianity is favored constitutionally and public ceremonies typically begin with a Christian prayer, there is no official state religion. In practice village chiefs often choose the religious denomination of their extended families.

There are no requirements for the recognition of a religious group or for licenses or registration.

The constitution provides freedom from unwanted religious education in schools and gives each religious group the right to establish its own schools. Church-run pastoral schools in most villages traditionally have provided religious instruction following school hours.

At the end of 2010 a commission established by the government to make recommendations regarding possible amendments to the constitution concerning religious freedom completed its collection of public submissions. The final report still has not been publically released or tabled in parliament.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, White Monday (Children's Day), and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was one change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

In January the government began to enforce a 2009 education policy that makes Christian instruction compulsory in public primary schools and optional in public secondary schools. The policy is in line with a decision by the government stating that Christian beliefs ought to be taught in schools.

In contrast with the previous year, the Censor Board did not ban any movies due to requests from religious groups.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were occasional reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In addition prominent societal leaders repeatedly publicly emphasized the country is Christian. Public discussion of religious issues often included negative references to non-Christian religions.

Traditionally, villages tended to have one primary Christian church. During the year, many larger villages had multiple churches serving different denominations that coexisted peacefully. However, some Christian religious groups faced resistance when attempting to establish a foothold in some villages.

There remained minor tensions between Fa'a Samoa (the Samoan way) and individual religious rights. One of the elements of Fa'a Samoa is the traditional, tightly-knit village community. Often village elders and the community at large were not very receptive toward those who attempted to introduce another denomination or religion into the community. While underreported, it was common knowledge that in many villages throughout the country leaders forbade individuals to belong to churches outside of the village or to exercise their right not to worship. Villagers in violation of such village rules faced fines and/or banishment from the village. Some religious leaders have expressed concerns that proposed changes to the Village Fono Act would enhance village leaders' ability to enforce such punishments.

There is a high level of religious observance throughout the country. There is strong societal pressure at the village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities, and to support church leaders and projects financially. In some denominations, such financial contributions often totaled more than 30 percent of family income. This issue has gained media attention as some members of parliament have been outspoken about the unrelenting pressure on families to give disproportionate amounts of their incomes to churches. A recent report also told of a local businesswoman having to replace her entire staff due to theft. In this

case, as in many others, meeting church financial obligations was cited as a significant reason for such theft.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and also maintained contacts with representatives of the country's various religious communities.