

TUVALU

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. In January a new law went into effect that requires all religious organizations practicing in the country to register with and obtain approval from island councils.

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, particularly on the northern island of Nanumanga. Some traditional island councils interfered with the free practice of religion on some islands.

Although the U.S. government does not maintain a resident embassy in the country, the U.S. ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives from the embassy in Fiji visited the country and discussed religious freedom in the context of overall discussions about human rights with the government and nongovernmental organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The Church of Tuvalu, which has historic ties to the Congregational Church and other churches in Samoa, has the largest number of followers. Government estimates of religious affiliation as a percentage of the population include the Church of Tuvalu, 91 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 3 percent; Baha'i Faith, 3 percent; Jehovah's Witnesses, 2 percent; and Roman Catholic, 1 percent. There also are smaller numbers of Muslims, Baptists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The Tuvalu Brethren Church, a charismatic Protestant group, claims to have as many as 500 adherents.

The nine island groups have traditional chiefs, all of whom are members of the Church of Tuvalu. Most followers of other religious groups or denominations are found in Funafuti, the capital, with the exception of a relatively large number of followers of the Baha'i Faith on Nanumea Island.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

Although the Church of Tuvalu is by law the state church, this status has few ramifications other than to afford it “the privilege of performing special services on major national events.” The constitution provides for separation of church and state. The preamble of the constitution states the country is “an independent State based on Christian principles, the Rule of Law, and Tuvaluan custom and tradition.” Government ceremonies at the national level, such as the opening of parliament, and at the island-council level, often include Christian prayers and clergy.

By law any new religious group with more than 50 members must register; failure to register could result in prosecution. Under the terms of a new law that took effect on January 1, all religious organizations practicing in the country also are required to register with and obtain approval from the respective island councils. The law required religious organizations to apply for approval by the beginning of 2012.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Gospel Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the year.

Missionaries practiced without restriction on some islands, but on other islands traditional island elder councils have issued formal and informal bans on proselytizing by representatives of religious groups that are not already established there.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. On several of the outer islands, particularly on Nanumanga Island, some perceived the Brethren Church and other groups, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, as being outside the mainstream. In some cases, local

traditional leaders discouraged groups from proselytizing or holding meetings, claiming that “new” religious groups might disrupt traditional societal structures.

Social discrimination, including acts and threats of violence, occurred against Brethren Church members on Nanumanga. Such treatment prompted some members of the group to move to Funafuti.

The Church of Tuvalu exerts considerable influence in the social and political life of the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Although the U.S. government does not maintain a resident embassy in the country, the U.S. ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives of the U.S. embassy in Fiji visited the country and discussed religious freedom in the context of their overall discussions about human rights with the government. Embassy officials also discussed the status of legal cases surrounding the Brethren Church with nongovernmental organizations and the Tuvalu People’s Lawyer, who in the absence of private law practices provides legal counsel, and serves as a public defender.