

FIJI

Executive Summary

Prior to its abrogation in April 2009, the constitution and other laws and policies protected religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Laws and policies generally continued to protect religious freedom for most groups. However, the government placed restrictions on annual meetings of the Methodist Church. The military-led government demonstrated a trend toward deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to interfaith and civic dialogue as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

Estimates of the country's religious affiliation are: 52 percent of the population is Christian, 30 percent Hindu, and 7 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church, which claims approximately 218,000 members, nearly one-quarter of the population. Other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church also have significant followings. The Methodist Church is supported by the majority of the country's chiefs and remains influential in the ethnic Fijian community, particularly in rural areas. There is also a small number of active nondenominational Christian groups.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. Most indigenous Fijians, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. Most Indo-Fijians, who account for 37 percent, are Hindu, while 20 percent of the Indo-Fijians are Muslim and 6 percent of Indo-Fijians are Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The very small European community is predominantly Christian.

Hindu and Muslim communities maintained a number of active religious and cultural organizations.

Numerous Christian missionary organizations are nationally and regionally active in social welfare, health, and education. Many major Christian denominations have missionaries in the country. The Adventist, Anglican, Catholic, Hindu, Methodist, Mormon, Muslim, and other communities operate numerous schools, including colleges, which are not subsidized by the government.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Prior to its abrogation in April 2009, the constitution and other laws and policies protected religious freedom. Since then, laws and policies generally continued to protect religious freedom for most groups, but the government's level of respect for religious freedom declined. The deterioration continued during the year.

Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, both in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. There is no state religion. Religious groups are required to register with the government under the Religious Bodies Registration Act. The government did not restrict foreign clergy or foreign missionary activity, but did restrict some domestic religious activity.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter, Christmas, Diwali, and the birth of the Prophet Mohammed.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. The role of religion continued to be a sensitive political issue, however, and the government's respect for religious freedom declined in practice during the year.

In April the police stopped issuing permits to Hindu temples that were not registered with the Hindu religious body, Shree Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji.

A 2009 government ban on the Methodist Church's annual conference continued. The government accused church ministers of being on the payroll of the ousted Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua government and spying on the military before

the 2006 coup. The 2009 ban on the quarterly meetings of the church's 52 divisions also continued. The government issued an announcement in 2010 lifting the ban on meetings, with the condition that the annual meeting must be conducted in one day, rather than over four days as in previous years. The church was given a permit in August to hold its annual meeting on one day; however, the permit was rescinded on the day that the meeting was to take place and the ban reimposed. The annual meeting was broken up on the day it was to begin. Police told the gathered clergy that authorities had rescinded the permit, without explaining further the reason for the cancellation. In addition, the military council of the government advised the Methodist church that all church meetings, other than regularly scheduled church services on Sunday and during the week, required permits under the Public Order Act. It was widely understood that the prohibition was due to government concerns that the restricted meetings might contain a political element. This meant that meetings of the youth fellowship, women's fellowship, men's fellowship, stewards, and the individual church committees required permits. This greatly hampered the administration of individual church congregations.

The August announcement applied to all religious bodies and mandated that all meetings other than regularly scheduled church services required a permit. Hindu temples not registered with the Shree Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji continued to face difficulties getting permits for their religious gatherings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. As defined by local authorities, there were 18 sacrilege cases reported in 2011. Police believed that many incidents had more to do with theft than with religious intolerance.

There were isolated problems for religious groups viewed as outside the mainstream that sought to establish congregations in villages and on outer islands.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government and NGOs dedicated to interfaith and civic dialogue as part of the overall bilateral discussion of human rights.