

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The ambassador met with both the outgoing and new minister for religion, youth, and community development to discuss religious freedom. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and met regularly with local religious leaders, including the general secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference PNG and Solomon Islands, as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The most recent population estimate by the National Statistics Office in 2011 is 7,059,700. According to the 2000 census (the most recent available), 96 percent of citizens identified themselves as Christian. Churches with the most members are Roman Catholic, 27 percent; Evangelical Lutheran, 20 percent; United Church, 12 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 10 percent; Pentecostal, 9 percent; Evangelical Alliance, 5 percent; Anglican, 3 percent; and Baptist, 3 percent. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Salvation Army together constitute 9 percent. Bahais make up less than 1 percent of the population, and the remaining 3 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with some indigenous beliefs and practices.

Nontraditional Christian and non-Christian religious groups have become increasingly active in recent years. Muslim and Confucian organizations largely serve the expatriate population. The Muslim community has about 3,000 members with a mosque in Port Moresby and 12 Islamic centers across the country. Pentecostal and charismatic Christian groups have found converts within congregations of the more established churches.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution's provisions for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion have consistently been interpreted to mean that any religion may be practiced or propagated as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others. The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the constitution, which refers to "our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours." However, there is no state religion.

The Department of Community Development, Religion, and Family Affairs has a nominal policy-making role that has largely been confined to reiterating the government's respect for church autonomy.

In general the government does not subsidize the practice of religion. Churches continue to run most schools and many health services, and the government provides support for these institutions. Upon independence, the government recognized that it had neither the funds nor the personnel to take over these institutions and agreed to subsidize their operation on a per pupil or per patient basis. In addition, the government pays the salary and provides benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff (generally members of the civil service) who work at these church-administered institutions, as it does with teachers and health staff of national institutions. The education and health infrastructures continue to rely heavily on church-run institutions.

Immigrants and noncitizens are free to practice their religions, and foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. The Roman Catholic Church is the only traditional church that relies to a large extent on foreign clergy.

It is the policy of the Department of Education to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in the public schools. Representatives of Christian churches teach the lessons, and students attend the class operated by the church of their parents' choice. Children whose parents do not wish them to attend the classes are excused. Members of non-Christian religious groups are not numerous, and they use family and group gatherings before and after school for religious lessons.

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Christian groups such as Seventh-day Adventists and Mormons also teach religious lessons in schools.

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

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In recent years, as new missionary movements have proliferated, representatives and individuals of some established churches have questioned publicly, in denominational meetings and newspaper articles, whether such activity was desirable. However, such questioning has not led to any action.

During the year, the head of the Gutnius Lutheran church--one of the smaller Lutheran church groups in the country--publicly criticized the role of foreign missionaries in the country. His statement, however, did not lead to any government or societal action.

The Council of Churches made the only known effort at interfaith dialogue. The council members included the Anglican, Gutnius Lutheran, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, United churches, and the Salvation Army. In addition, 16 church-affiliated organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participated in its activities. The ecumenical work of the Council of Churches was confined primarily to cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects. The Council of Churches does not include Seventh-day Adventists or Pentecostals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador met with both the outgoing and new minister for religion, youth, and community development on a number of occasions to discuss religious freedom. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and

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met regularly with local religious leaders, including the general secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference PNG and Solomon Islands, as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations.