

VANUATU 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.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. ambassador to Papua New Guinea is also accredited to the government of the country. Representatives of the embassy in Papua New Guinea met with the leadership of the Catholic Church, the Church of Melanesia (Anglican), and the Vanuatu Christian Council, among others, and periodically discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The 2009 National Census estimates the population to be 234,000. Approximately 83 percent is Christian, of which an estimated 30 percent is Presbyterian, 12 percent Roman Catholic, 15 percent Anglican, and 13 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Other groups together constituting 15 percent of Christians include the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, and other Protestant denominations. Six percent of the population is Jewish. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group with its own political party, is centered on the island of Tanna and constitutes less than 1 percent of the population. Other religious groups present include Bahais, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). There are believed to be members of other religious groups within the foreign community. These groups are free to practice their religion but are not known to hold public religious ceremonies.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to “traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles.” However, there is no state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government, but this law is not enforced.

The government interacts with religious groups through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Vanuatu Christian Council. Aside from the ministry’s activities, government resources are not typically used to support religious activities, although no law prohibits such support.

Government oaths of office customarily are taken on the Bible.

The government provides grants to church-operated schools and pays teachers’ salaries at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. These benefits are not available to the few non-Christian religious schools.

Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of council churches, using materials those churches produce. There is no uniform standard time for religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that students in years seven through twelve receive one hour of religious instruction per week. By law, parents may have their children excused from religion classes, although in practice, the schools’ day-long responsibility for students requires their presence in class at all times.

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

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In rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision-making predominated. If a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action required agreement by the chief and the rest of the community. If such a group were established without approval, the community viewed the action as a threat to community solidarity and a gesture of defiance by those who joined the new group. However, religious tension generally was resolved through appeals from traditional leaders to uphold individual rights.

Religious representation at national events was organized through the Vanuatu Christian Council. The council's ecumenical activities were limited to the interaction of its members.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. ambassador to Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government. Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Papua New Guinea periodically discussed religious freedom with government officials and with representatives of nongovernmental organizations. Embassy staff also met with the Catholic archbishop, the leadership of the Church of Melanesia (Anglican), and the Vanuatu Christian Council, among other religious leaders.