

TUVALU 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for religious freedom. However, traditional island councils discouraged public meetings of several minority religious groups. The government adhered to constitutional commitments and resisted pressures from traditional leaders to enforce religious bans.

On some islands, traditional leaders worked actively against non-traditional religious groups.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government, and the Embassy in Suva promoted religious freedom on social media and in meetings with the minister responsible for religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is approximately 10,800 (July 2014 estimate). The Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu (Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu), with historic ties to the Congregational Church and other churches in Samoa, has the largest number of followers. Approximately 97 percent of the population belongs to the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu, 1.4 percent to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and 1 percent to the Bahai Faith. There are small populations of Muslims, Baptists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

The nine island groups have traditional chiefs, all of whom are members of the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu. Most members of other religious groups are found in Funafuti, the capital, although a relatively large number of Bahais live on Nanumea Island.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu is by law the state church, and this status primarily affords its followers “the privilege of performing special services on major national events.” The constitution otherwise provides for separation of religion and state. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, which may be

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limited by law for reasons such as avoiding divisiveness; protecting the rights of others; defense; and public order, safety, morality, and health. 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 adult members representing not less than two percent of the country’s total population (at last census) must register with the government; failure to register could result in prosecution. Under the law all religious groups in the country must register with and obtain approval from the traditional elder councils, known as *falekaupule*, of any island on which they conduct services. The law prohibits joint or public worship by religious groups not approved by these councils. The law also allows the *falekaupule* to withhold permission from certain religious groups to meet publicly should they be locally judged to “directly threaten the values and culture of the island community.” The law provides for unapproved groups to be fined up to 500 Australian dollars (\$410) if they engaged in public meetings in violation of the law.

The law guarantees individuals’ right to worship freely within their own residences. The Ministry of Home Affairs requires religious groups seeking registration to submit a request signed by the head and supported by five other members of the organization. Information on and proof of the number of adherents, the name of the religious organization and approval from the *falekaupule* are also required in the request. Several observers have noted the law appears incompatible with the constitution, though there has not yet been a legal challenge to the act.

Government Practices

The government continued to protect the right to choose freely and practice religion publicly and in private, despite the pressure traditional leaders reportedly exerted on the central government to enforce *falekaupule* religious bans.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and other unapproved groups continued to meet publicly at their places of worship. There were no arrests or fines reported.

Missionaries practiced without restriction on some islands, but on other islands the *falekaupule* issued formal and informal bans on proselytizing by representatives of

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religious groups that were not already established or were thought to be new. For example, in Funafuti, a formal ban of the Jehovah's Witnesses the *falekaupule* issued in 2012 remained in effect.

There were reports that students who were Jehovah's Witnesses at the only government-owned high school in Vaitupu were required to attend services of the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On at least five islands, including Funafuti, Nukufetau, Nanumanga, Niutao, and Vaitupu Island, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Brethren Church, and other religious groups were reportedly perceived by residents as being outside of traditional norms. In some cases, local traditional leaders discouraged groups from proselytizing or holding meetings, claiming that non-traditional and minority religious groups might disrupt traditional societal structures. Many religious groups continued to operate without formal approval, especially in Funafuti.

Jehovah's Witnesses on Nanumanga stated that they had experienced discrimination and societal abuse, including threats of violence. Government representatives denied threats of violence had been made.

The Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu exerted considerable influence in the social and political life of the country. For example, the church limited activities on Sunday and encouraged a modest dress code in local villages.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. The embassy used social media to post content promoting religious freedom and tolerance. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Suva visited the country and expressed concern with the minister responsible for religious affairs about the status and effects on religious groups of the legal restrictions on public meetings.