

NAMIBIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of belief and the right to practice, profess, and promote any religion. According to one press report, local authorities in the city of Rundu declined a request by the Johane Masowe Echishanu Apostles Church to use the town's river beach for baptism, saying the Church had no members in the town.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with religious groups and leaders to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, approximately 97 percent of the population identifies as Christian. According to church statistics and the government's 2013 Demographic and Health Survey, approximately 50 percent identify as Lutheran and 20 percent as Catholic. Other denominations, including Anglican, various Reform denominations, Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, evangelical, charismatic, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), make up the remaining 27 percent of the population that is Christian. The number of Pentecostal churches is growing, primarily in the northern Zambezi region. A number of Zionist churches combine Christianity and traditional African beliefs. Muslims, Bahais, Jews, Buddhists, atheists, and other non-Christians together constitute approximately 3 percent of the population and reside primarily in urban areas.

Many members of the Himba and San ethnic groups combine indigenous religious beliefs with Christianity. Muslims are mostly Sunni and are predominantly immigrants from elsewhere in Africa, South Asia, or recent converts.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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The constitution specifies the country is a secular state, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the right to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain, and promote any religion. These rights may be subject to “reasonable restrictions . . . which are necessary in a democratic society and are required in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of Namibia, national security, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.”

The law allows recognition of any religious group as a voluntary association, without the need to register with the government. A voluntary association is required to have a written constitution stating its purpose, be membership-based, be a “legal person,” and have a plan for disposing of its assets if it ceases operation. Religious groups may also register as nonprofit organizations (an “association without gain”) with the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Under the law, a nonprofit organization must have a minimum of seven members and two directors, an auditor, and a registered address in the country, and must comply with all regulations of domestic corporate law. Both religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations and religious groups formed as voluntary associations are exempt from paying taxes. Other faith-based organizations may also register as welfare organizations with the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS). Under the MoHSS regulations, a welfare organization must have a minimum of seven members, an auditor, and a constitution. If the group meets the objectives of a welfare organization, the MoHSS will issue a letter of certification. There is no difference in the application process between religious and non-religious groups. A welfare organization may apply to the Department of Inland Revenue to receive tax-exempt status. Once registered as a welfare organization, a religious group may seek to obtain communal land at a reduced rate, which is at the discretion of traditional authorities or town councils, based on whether they believe the organization’s use of the land will benefit the community.

The constitution permits religious groups to establish private schools, provided no student is denied admission based on creed. The government school curriculum contains a nonsectarian “religious and moral education” component that includes education on moral principles and human rights and introduces students to a variety of African traditions and religions, as well as world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Bahai Faith, and Rastafarianism.

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Government Practices

According to one press report, local authorities in Rundu declined a request by the Johane Masowe Echishanu Apostles Church to use the town's river beach for baptism, saying the Church had no members in the town.

On September 27 and 28, immigration officials detained at the international airport in Windhoek approximately 80 members of the Johane Masowe Echishanu Apostles Church who had traveled from other countries. According to press reports, the group wanted to enter the country to attend a Church conference. Government officials stated the group members lacked the proper visas, and some minors were traveling without their parents and without written parental permission. One press report said there were 12 children traveling with the group. The government said that because of the group's failure to comply with immigration law and because of concerns about potential illegal immigration, it refused entry to the group and deported them on September 30. After the group was deported, one local newspaper quoted a person described as a representative of the Church as saying the government was incorrect when it stated the members did not have proper documents.

The government periodically included religious leaders in discussions regarding issues affecting the country and in national events. Government officials held regular consultations with leaders from various Christian denominations and from the Muslim community to discuss opportunities for collaboration in such areas as crime reduction and marriage law reform.

The University of Namibia and the Namibia University of Science and Technology in Windhoek, both government-supported institutions, provided rooms to religious groups, such as Christian, Muslim, and Bahai students, to use for prayer and meetings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials and religious leaders and communities to better understand the country's religious landscape and any potential issues of discrimination.