

SAMOA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion. In June parliament amended the constitution to define the country as a Christian nation. Previously Christianity was mentioned only once in the preamble of the constitution. Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi stated the amendment does not affect the freedom of religion guaranteed by the constitution. The media reported the amendment received largely positive reviews from the populace but negative reactions from the Muslim League of Samoa and an association of academics at the National University of Samoa.

There were continued reports that village leaders resisted attempts by new religious groups to establish themselves in village communities, forbade individuals to belong to churches outside their village, and did not permit individuals to abstain from participating in worship services. There was reportedly strong societal pressure at the village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities, and in some cases to give large proportions of household income to support church leaders and projects. Letters to the editor in the *Samoa Observer* objected to groups collecting large amounts of money for churches.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and maintained contact with various religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 200,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 national census, Congregational Christians constitute 32 percent of the population; Roman Catholics, 19 percent; members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 15 percent; Methodists, 14 percent; members of the Assemblies of God, 8 percent; and Seventh-day Adventists, 4 percent. Groups together constituting less than 8 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Congregational Church of Jesus, Church of the Nazarene, nondenominational Protestants, Baptists, Worship Centre, Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, Elim Church, Bahais, Anglicans, and a small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews, primarily in Apia. Less than 1 percent stated no religion or did not select a religion.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion. This right may be subject to "reasonable restrictions" by law in the interests of national security or public order, health, or morals, or protecting the rights of others. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private citizens as well as government officials. The preamble to the constitution describes the country as "an independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions." In June the parliament added the following clause to the first article of the constitution: "Samoa is a Christian nation founded on God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The government does not require religious groups to register, but groups have the option to register as a charitable trust with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Labor. Registration is free, with a simple application. Becoming a charitable trust entitles groups to receive tax exemptions and legal status. Unregistered religious groups may not formally buy property or pay employees. Religious groups may be established on community land or on land owned by their leader.

The constitution provides that no one may be forced to take religious instruction in a religion other than his or her own, and gives each religious group the right to establish its own schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In January during parliamentary debate on the constitutional amendment that would make the country an officially Christian state, several parliamentarians stated the constitution should be amended further to limit Samoa to "Christian denominations only."

In June parliament amended the constitution to define the country as a Christian state founded on the Trinity. Discussing the amendment, Prime Minister Tuilaepa stated the main reason Christianity was not included in the body of the constitution initially was because there were no religious wars in the country when the constitution was written. He added that religious wars were a common occurrence throughout the world and that it was the government's duty to legislate accordingly

to avoid religious tensions. Tuilaepa largely framed the justification for this amendment as protecting the country from religions that promote violence and “murderous rage.” While not naming any religion specifically, he followed up that comment by referring to terrorism and the Middle East.

The amendment received mixed feedback, but the media, including the *Samoa Observer*, reported largely positive reviews from the public, including statements praising the moral influence of Christian principles in the country’s heritage. The Muslim League of Samoa and an academic from the National University of Samoa criticized the amendment in the media, stating it could have negative consequences for religious freedom in the country.

Reportedly, *matai* councils, the traditional governing body of villages, frequently continued to resist attempts to introduce new religious groups into their communities on the grounds of “maintaining harmony within the village,” a duty that is prescribed in legislation. Observers continued to report that in many villages throughout the country, leaders forbade individuals to belong to churches outside of the village or to exercise their right not to worship. Villagers in violation of such rules faced fines and/or banishment from the village.

Traditionally, villages have tended to have one primary Christian church. Village chiefs often have chosen the religious denomination of their extended families. Many larger villages have had multiple churches serving different denominations and coexisting peacefully.

Ten or more chaplains continued to be available to prisoners on a rotational basis, covering the majority of Christian denominations in the country.

The government enforced an education policy making Christian instruction compulsory in public primary schools and optional in public secondary schools. There was no opt-out provision.

Public ceremonies typically began with a Christian prayer.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Prominent societal leaders repeatedly stated in public that the country was Christian. Public discussion of religious issues sometimes included negative references to non-Christian religions. In a March article giving opinions of a small

group of “people on the street,” the *Samoa Observer* reported the majority said Muslims were dangerous.

As reported by media and in letters to the editor, there was a high level of religious observance and continued strong societal pressure at village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities, in addition to support church leaders and projects financially. For example, the *Samoa Observer* reported in August that local citizens expressed concern that Chinese construction workers continued to conduct hard labor on Sundays, not respecting the Christian Sabbath. In some denominations, financial contributions often totaled more than 30 percent of family income. This issue gained periodic media attention, in outlets such as the *Samoa Observer*, as members of society occasionally spoke out about pressure on families to give large amounts of their income to churches. There was a continued increase throughout the year in public expression in print and social media citing church commitments, and in particular financial commitments, as one of the major sources of hardship for citizens in the country and abroad. Two letters to the editor in March in the *Samoa Observer* criticized the building of large churches while their members were mostly poor. Some individuals expressed concern that church leaders abused their privileged status among the congregation and village.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed government protection of religious freedom for all groups regardless of religious affiliation with high-level Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade officials.

The embassy maintained contact with various religious groups, including all major Christian denominations and members of the Bahai Faith.