

SOLOMON ISLANDS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for religious freedom, including the freedom to change religions, proselytize, and establish religious schools. Laws “reasonably required” to achieve certain listed public goals may restrict these rights. In April parliament passed a motion to explore the possibility of amending the preamble of the constitution to declare Solomon Islands a Christian country. As of the end of the year, the Constitutional Review Committee had not finalized a draft of the proposed changes.

In September the acting prime minister opened a conference for church leaders from the two main associations of Christian groups with the aim of defining the role of churches in development and nation building.

The U.S. government, through the Embassy in Papua New Guinea and its consular agency office in Solomon Islands, discussed religious tolerance with the government during the year, including the proposed change to the preamble of the constitution. Officials discussed with religious minorities whether groups believed they could freely exercise their religious beliefs. Representatives from the embassy also met with religious leaders of larger groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 648,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the government census and independent anthropological research, approximately 90 percent of the population is affiliated with one of the following Christian churches: Anglican Church of Melanesia, 32 percent; Roman Catholic, 20 percent; South Seas Evangelical, 17 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 12 percent; and United Methodist, 10 percent. An estimated 5 percent of the population, consisting primarily of the Kwaio ethnic community on the island of Malaita, adheres to indigenous, animistic religions. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Muslims, Bahais, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and members of indigenous churches that have broken away from major Christian denominations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom to practice or change religion and proselytize, for the individual and community. It also provides for the freedom to establish noncompulsory religious instruction. These provisions may be restricted by laws “reasonably required” to protect the rights of others, for defense, or for public safety, order, morality, or health.

All religious groups must register with the government. Religious groups are required to apply in writing to the Registrar of Companies for a certificate of registration. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations may register as charitable organizations. For any group to register, the group must create an online account on the appropriate government website; the application fee of 1,250 Solomon Islands dollars (SBD) (\$170) is waived for religious groups. Part of the application process requires a description of the group, a list of board members, and a constitution. The registrar issues a certificate when satisfied that the nature, extent, objectives, and circumstances of the applicant are noncommercial.

The public school curriculum includes an hour of weekly religious instruction, the content of which is agreed by the member churches of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA), an ecumenical nongovernmental organization comprising the county’s five largest churches. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Government-subsidized church schools are required to align their nonreligious curricula with governmental criteria. Non-Christian religious instruction is provided in the schools upon request. Ministers or other representatives of the religion provide these classes. Anyone found to be preventing religious instruction faces imprisonment of up to one year or a fine of up to SBD 500 (\$67).

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In April parliament passed a motion to direct the parliamentary constitutional review committee to explore the possibility of amending the preamble of the constitution to declare Solomon Islands a Christian country. As of the end of the year, the Constitutional Review Committee had not finalized a draft of the final

changes but said the change would be meant to recognize Christianity as the main religion of the country without limiting religious freedom.

There were no reports of religious groups being denied registration; at least one new group (Kofiloko Local Church) was registered during the year.

The government continued to interact with religious groups through the Ministry of Home Affairs. The ministry continued to characterize its role as maintaining a balance between constitutionally protected rights of religious freedom, free speech, and free expression and maintaining public order. The ministry also granted a small amount of funding to churches to carry out social programs. The maximum amount for these grants was SBD 15,000 (\$2,000). Some churches also received funding from local members of parliament through their constituent development funds. According to informal guidelines on how these funds should be allocated, no more than SBD 250,000 (\$33,400) per year per district could be given to religious groups. Groups needed to apply directly to members of parliament to receive these funds.

Religious groups continued to operate several schools and health services. The government continued to subsidize most of the schools administered by the Catholic Church, Anglican Church of Melanesia, United Church, South Seas Evangelical Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church. Subsidies were allocated proportionally based on the number of students at the schools and the size of the health centers. There were no reports of discrimination among groups in receiving these subsidies.

Government oaths of office customarily continued to be taken on the Bible, but this was not a compulsory practice.

In opening a conference of church leaders in September, the acting prime minister said that since the arrival of Christianity in the country, churches have brought peace, unified people, and shaped the lives of communities over the years.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The five largest religious groups that make up SICA continued to play a leading role in civic life, organizing joint religious activities and encouraging religious representation at national events. Other, smaller Pentecostal churches also formed an umbrella organization called the Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association (SIFGA). In September church leaders attended a conference cosponsored by

SICA and SIFGA to strengthen church partnership in addressing development issues in the country.

Leaders of minority religious groups reported no incidents of religious discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy and consular representatives from the Embassy in Papua New Guinea and its consular agency office in Solomon Islands discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including parliament's proposal to change the preamble of the constitution and the process for registering religious groups.

Embassy and consular representatives discussed with religious minorities whether groups believed they could freely exercise their religious beliefs. Embassy representatives met with leaders of the Bahai community, SICA, the Anglican Church, and the Catholic Archbishop of Guadalcanal to emphasize the importance of religious freedom regardless of religious affiliation.