

LESOTHO 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. The government continued to provide extensive support for schools operated by religious groups, including paying and certifying all teachers.

On June 1, Christian and Muslim leaders participated in the National Day of Prayer on Reforms and Reconciliation (NDPRR). The Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL) participated in a national forum aimed at future reforms in key national sectors.

The U.S. embassy continued to discuss religious freedom with the government and maintained regular contact with religious leaders. The Ambassador attended the NDPRR in June and met with the Chairman of the CCL, Archbishop Tlali Lerotholi, in September. A senior embassy officer met with the CCL Secretary General and other CCL officials in August.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.0 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the CCL, an umbrella organization of five Christian churches, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. Other sources estimate the Christian population to be 95 percent or higher. Protestants, including Anglicans, evangelical Christians, Methodists, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Pentecostals, represent 45 percent of the population, and Roman Catholics 45 percent. The remaining 10 percent are Muslim, Hindu, and Baha'i, belong to indigenous or other religious groups, or are nonbelievers. Many Christians practice traditional indigenous rituals in conjunction with Christianity. There is a small number of Jews, most of whom are not citizens. Muslims live primarily in the northern area of the country. There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity, political, or socioeconomic status.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief, and to manifest and propagate one's religion. These rights may be limited by laws in the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or protecting the rights of other persons, provided the limitations are the minimum necessary.

The government has no established requirements for recognition of religious groups. By law, any group, religious or otherwise, may register as a legal entity with the government, regardless of its purpose, as long as it has a constitution and a leadership committee. Most religious groups register, but there is no penalty for those that do not. Registration gives a group legal standing, formalizes its structure under the law, and provides exemption from income tax. In the absence of registration, religious organizations may operate freely, but without legal standing or any of the protections of registered organizations.

The education ministry pays and certifies all teachers at government-funded schools, including religious schools, and requires a standard curriculum for both secular and religious schools. The government permits but does not mandate religious education in schools, and the constitution exempts students at any educational institution from requirements to receive instruction or attend any ceremony or observance associated with a religion that is not their own. The minister of education must approve all curricula, including for religious education classes. The law does not prohibit or restrict schools run by religious organizations.

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

Government Practices

Churches owned and operated 83 percent of all primary and 66 percent of secondary schools. The Roman Catholic Church, Lesotho Evangelical Church, Anglican Church, and, to a lesser extent, Methodist Church were the primary operators of religious schools, which were publicly funded. In practice, in any school offering religious education – including all religious schools and some secular schools – the subject was mandatory. Despite the constitution granting the ability for students to opt out, there were no reports of students electing to do so.

The government continued to permit families to send their children to schools run by a religious group other than their own, and some families chose this option. Others went to public schools or secular private schools.

The government declared June 1 a National Day of Prayer on Reforms and Reconciliation; in a ceremony at Setsoto Stadium in Maseru, King Letsie III asked citizens to “hold the kind of peace they are renowned of” and advised them to “forget and forgive each other.” The CCL chairman, Catholic Archbishop Tlali Lerotholi, in his address called on God to make the country “a peace driven and focused nation.” The government continued to invite the CCL regularly to open government ceremonies and meetings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The CCL, encompassing the majority of Christian believers and for which political parties expressed wide respect, participated in the National Leaders Forum in August. The secretary general of the CCL noted its effectiveness was partly due to most political party leaders belonging to a Christian faith. The CCL was involved in political mediation in the past, and it continued to play a role in the country’s national reform process.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government, typically in the context of broader discussions about human rights. The Ambassador attended the NDPRR in June and on September 5, the Ambassador met with CCL Chairman Lerotholi to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. A senior embassy official met with the CCL secretary general in August to discuss the CCL’s intervention in political disputes and the leadership role religious leaders played in the country’s reform process.