

SOLOMON ISLANDS 2018 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 2017 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 change. Prime Minister Rick Houenipwela maintained a program of visiting different churches throughout the country with the expressed intention of fostering fellowship beyond his own church and asking for prayers for the government.

The five largest religious groups that make up the Solomon Islands Christian Association organized joint religious activities and encouraged religious representation at national events. Police began to monitor a religious movement known as the Kingdom Movement in January for reportedly encouraging its members to sell their land and monitored threats made toward its leader.

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 a recommendation that the proposed change to the preamble of the constitution not discriminate against non-Christian religious organizations or activities. Officials discussed with religious minorities whether groups believed they could freely exercise their religious beliefs and if they had concerns about the proposed change to the constitution. Representatives from the embassy also met with religious leaders of larger groups and leaders of the Solomon Islands Christian Association.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 660,000 (July 2018 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, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 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 freedom of thought and of religion. This includes the freedom for individuals to change religion or belief and to worship, teach, practice, and observe one's religion in public or in private, either alone or with others. 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 submit the required paperwork to the Registrar of Companies; the application fee of 1,250 Solomon Islands dollars (SBD) (\$160) is waived for religious groups. Documentation required for the application process includes a description of the group, a list of board members, and a constitution that states how the group is governed and how members are chosen. The registrar issues a certificate when satisfied that the requirements have been met and 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 upon 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 (\$64).

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

Government Practices

As of the end of the year, the Constitutional Review Committee had not finalized a draft of constitutional changes to implement a 2017 parliamentary motion directing the committee to explore the possibility of amending the preamble of the constitution to declare Solomon Islands a Christian country. Committee representatives said the changes would recognize Christianity as the main religion of the country without limiting religious freedom.

Several new groups were registered during the year, and there were no reports of religious groups being denied registration.

The government continued to interact with religious groups through the Ministry of Home Affairs. The ministry characterized 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 again granted a small amount of funding to churches to carry out social programs. The maximum amount of these grants was SBD 15,000 (\$1,900). Some churches also received funding from local members of parliament through their constituent development funds. According to informal guidelines on how constituent development funds should be allocated, no more than SBD 250,000 (\$32,200) 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 operated several schools and health services. The government subsidized 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.

The prime minister recognized churches as important players in the country's development and encouraged churches to continue collaborating with the government to deliver services to the people. In October he met with the apostolic nuncio and emphasized the need for the government and churches to work together. He visited churches on a monthly basis as part of his stated program to engage with religious communities other than his own and to ask for prayers for the government.

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 were part of the Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association (SIFGA), an umbrella organization. In July SICA and SIFGA cohosted the visit of a U.S. evangelist.

According to a statement issued in January by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, police began to monitor a religious movement known as the Kingdom Movement for allegedly encouraging its members to sell their land and other property in preparation for a "miracle." Police provided temporary protection to a pastor from the Kingdom Movement after he received threats from individuals upset that they had sold their land to the movement. According to media reports, neither the SICA nor the SIFGA had affiliations or a relationship with the Kingdom Movement.

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 the 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. Representatives encouraged government officials to ensure the proposed changes to the constitution would uphold religious freedom for all, including non-Christian religions.

Embassy and consular representatives discussed with religious minorities their perceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Embassy representatives met with leaders of the Baha'i community, SICA, and the Catholic Archbishop of Guadalcanal to emphasize the importance of religious freedom regardless of religious affiliation.