

VANUATU 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion or traditional belief. The preamble to the constitution refers to traditional Christian values, but there is no state religion. On penalty of a fine, the law requires religious groups to register; however, the government did not enforce this requirement. In October during a visit to Jerusalem, the prime minister said Vanuatu was a Christian country. The Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) received a 10 million vatu (\$89,500) annual grant from the government. The VCC said it would use the funds to strengthen the capacity of the VCC to support member churches and provide training.

The VCC reportedly continued to believe the government should revisit the freedom of religion clause in the constitution to prohibit the establishment of non-Christian faiths in the country, although it did not make any public statements supporting this proposal as in 2016. In February the VCC chairman spoke out against a decision from the University of the South Pacific's main campus in Fiji to ban Christian fellowship programs on the university campus, stating he would oppose a similar ban on the Vanuatu campus. The VCC called on the government to ban the import of goods and materials "detrimental to both spiritual and physical health and life of Christians in Vanuatu."

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. On periodic visits to the country, officials from the U.S. Embassy in Papua New Guinea discussed religious freedom with representatives of the government. Embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the VCC and smaller religious organizations, and posted about religious freedom on social media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 288,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2009 census, approximately 82 percent of the population is Christian. An estimated 28 percent of the population is Presbyterian; 15 percent, Anglican; 12 percent, Roman Catholic; and 12 percent, Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups, cumulatively comprising 15 percent of the population, include the Church of Christ, Neil Thomas Ministries, the Apostolic Church, and the Assemblies of God. Smaller Christian groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, who estimate their membership at 750, and The Church of Jesus Christ

of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), which estimates its membership at nearly 9,000. According to the census, approximately 13 percent of the population are followers of an estimated 88 other religious groups, including Baha'is, Muslims, and several newly formed groups. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group, is centered on the island of Tanna and constitutes less than 1 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees individual freedom of “religious or traditional beliefs,” including the freedoms of conscience and worship, subject “to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defense, safety, public order, welfare, and health.” Any individual who believes these rights have been violated may apply “independently of any other possible legal remedy... to the Supreme Court to enforce that right.” The Supreme Court may issue orders it considers appropriate to enforce these rights if it finds a violation of such rights and to order payment of compensation. The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to “traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles.”

The law requires every religious body to apply to the government for a certificate of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$9), and obtain the final approval of the minister for internal affairs to operate. Registration allows the religious group to maintain a bank account. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$450); however, the law is not enforced.

According to law, children may not be refused school admission or be treated unfavorably because of their religion.

The Department of Education prohibits religious discrimination. Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by VCC representatives using their own materials. The government provides grants to church-operated schools and pays the salaries of teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. There is no uniform standard amount of time dedicated to religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that students in years seven through 12 receive one hour of religious instruction per week. Parents may request that students be excused from religious education classes in both private and public schools.

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

Government Practices

In October during an official visit to Jerusalem, the prime minister stated that “as a Christian country,” Vanuatu was considering the possibility of recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. In January the minister of internal affairs told media it was important for families to uphold Christian values for a better Vanuatu.

The government interacted with religious groups through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the VCC, the latter composed of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of Christ, and the Apostolic Church, with the Seventh-day Adventist and Assemblies of God Churches having observer status. The VCC chairman and secretary general of the VCC were members of the Constitutional Review Committee established by the parliament in 2016. The committee considered amending the constitution to call for “respect for Christian principles and traditional Melanesian values” and “faith in God” more broadly. The VCC supported these amendments to make the country officially Christian; however, the amendments were not among those the committee proposed and parliament did not consider them.

In January the Ministry of Health signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Seventh-day Adventist Church to cooperate in the delivery of health services. Five other Churches – the Presbyterian Church, Anglican Church, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, and the Church of Jesus Christ – already had similar arrangements.

The VCC received a 10 million vatu (\$89,500) annual grant from the government. The VCC said it would use the funds to strengthen the capacity of the VCC to support member churches and provide training.

Government oaths of office customarily were taken on the Bible.

Ceremonial prayers at national events were organized through the VCC.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The VCC reportedly continued to believe the government should revisit the freedom of religion clause in the constitution to prohibit the establishment of non-

Christian faiths in the country, although it did not make any public statements or organize marches in support of this proposal as in 2016.

In February the VCC chairman said he felt like “picking up a whip and whipping those who want to make Vanuatu a marketplace because it is not, it is a Christian country where people worship God.” His statement referred to an ongoing debate at the University of the South Pacific’s Port Vila campus regarding whether or not it would implement a ban on Christian fellowship programs on campus, as was done on the university’s main campus in Suva, Fiji in 2016. He said expatriate atheists were behind the ban. In August he again stated foreign influences were responsible for “compromising Vanuatu’s position as a Christian country.” He called for the government to ban imported goods and materials “detrimental to both spiritual and physical health and life of Christians in Vanuatu.”

In April a school run by the Anglican Church expelled two Seventh-day Adventist students for attending church on Friday evening and Saturday instead of taking part in school activities. The Seventh-day Adventist Church criticized the dismissal, calling it a violation of the students’ rights to education and freedom of worship. Two Seventh-day Adventist schools admitted the affected students.

In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision making predominated. In general, if a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action required agreement by the chief and the rest of the community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. ambassador to Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government and embassy officials periodically visited the country and discussed religious freedom with government officials. The ambassador and other embassy representatives also met with the VCC and discussed its views on the presence of traditional and new non-Christian faiths in the country, encouraging respect for diversity. Embassy officials also spoke with smaller religious groups and highlighted U.S. support for religious freedom through social media.