

# FIJI 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of religion and state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against any religious group a criminal offense. Religious groups must register with the government. An appeal by the prosecution following the 2018 acquittal of the senior management of a leading newspaper on charges related to publishing a letter to the editor that the government characterized as antagonistic toward the country’s Muslim community remained pending.

There were two acts of vandalism against religious sites in September, one at a Hindu temple and the other at a Muslim mosque. In the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque attack, religious groups, political groups, and civil society representatives spoke out forcefully against religious intolerance.

U.S. embassy officials promoted religious tolerance in meetings with senior government officials. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to promote religious tolerance, with the aim of encouraging and maintaining an active interfaith dialogue. In May the Charge d’Affaires hosted an iftar to promote religious tolerance for members of the Muslim community and other religious leaders. The embassy used social media to highlight U.S. support of religious diversity in the country.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 931,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2007 census, 64.5 percent of the population is Christian, 27.9 percent Hindu, and 6.3 percent Muslim. Protestants make up 45 percent of the population, of which 34.6 percent is Methodist, 5.7 percent Assembly of God, 3.9 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 0.8 percent Anglican. Roman Catholics make up 9.1 percent of the population, and other Christian groups 10.4 percent. There are small communities of Baha’is, Sikhs, and Jews.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijian) citizens, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. The majority of the country’s traditional chiefs belong

to the Methodist Church, which remains influential among indigenous people, particularly in rural areas where 49 percent of the population lives. Most Indian Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while an estimated 20 percent are Muslim and 6 percent Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The small community of mixed European and Fijian ancestry is predominantly Christian.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The government may limit these rights by law to protect the freedoms of others, or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, or nuisance. The constitution also mandates separation of religion and state. Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution provides that individuals may not assert religious belief as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions. Sacrilege is outlawed and is defined as committing any crime within a place of worship after breaking and entering or before exiting with force, or intentionally committing any act of disrespect in a place of worship. Penalties may include up to 14 years imprisonment.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees who may then hold land or property for the groups. To register, religious bodies must submit applications to the registrar of titles office. Applications must include names and identification of the trustees, signed by the head of the religious body to be registered, a copy of the constitution of the proposed religious body, land title documents for the land used by the religious body, and a registration fee of 2.30 Fiji dollars (\$1). Registered religious bodies may receive an exemption from taxes after approval from the national tax agency, on the condition they operate in a nonprofit and noncompetitive capacity. By law, religious bodies that hold land or property must register their houses of worship, including their land, and show proof of title. There is no mention in the law of religious organizations that do not hold land.

Permits are required for any public meeting on public property organized by religious groups, outside of regular religious services and houses of worship.

There is no required religious instruction under the law. Private or religious groups sometimes own or manage school properties, but the Ministry of Education administers and regulates the curriculum. The law allows religious groups the right to establish, maintain, and manage places of education, whether or not they receive financial assistance from the state, provided the institution maintains educational standards prescribed by law. The law permits noncompulsory religious instruction in all schools, enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations but receiving government support to offer religious instruction. Schools may incorporate religious elements, such as class prayer, as long as they do not force teachers to participate, and students may be excused if their parents request it. The government provides funding and education assistance to public schools, including schools owned and operated by religious organizations, on a per pupil basis. Some schools maintain their religious and/or ethnic origin, but they remain open to all students. According to the law, the government ensures free tuition for primary and secondary schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

In July the appellate court reviewed an appeal brought by the prosecution in the case of the senior management of the *Fiji Times* newspaper who were found not guilty in 2018 of charges related to publishing a letter to the editor that the government characterized as antagonistic toward the country's Muslim community. The prosecution appealed the decision, and a decision on the appeal remained pending at year's end.

Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, other cabinet ministers, and members of parliament continued to emphasize religious tolerance during public addresses at home and overseas. After the March attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, the prime minister called on Fijians to “pledge to condemn those making racist and hateful statements, whether online or in person” adding that “...people must do something, have the courage to call (them) out, and counter (their) hatred with vision” and that Fijians must “be the voice of love and change.” Government officials stated the country is a multifaith nation with religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution and must unite to defend the rights of citizens to practice their religion.

According to media reports, the Fiji Police Force investigated individuals on social media who were alleged to be posting messages of animosity to “incite further hatred against the Muslim community” after the attacks.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In September a man broke into and stole items from a Hindu temple in Suva. Police charged the man with one count of sacrilege for the offense. Also in September a mosque in Nausori, outside Suva, was vandalized; after the incident, the Fiji Muslim League sent out an advisory to its affiliates to take precautionary measures. Authorities made no arrests.

Media reported that Akuila Petero, an *iTaukei* man who had converted to Islam living in Nasaibitu Village, faced opposition when he began to build a home and place of worship for himself and other local *iTaukei* Muslims. Petero stated that in March a truck transporting materials for the building was stopped and that he and two other Muslims were assaulted as they were constructing the building. Local police said they were monitoring the situation.

Following the March attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in which three Muslims of Fijian descent died, religious groups, political groups, and civil society representatives spoke out to condemn the act and to encourage tolerance and respect. Catholic Archbishop Peter Loy Chong said, “Fiji is home to about 62,000 Muslims. The Roman Catholic Church shares her sympathy, condolence, and prayers to Fiji Muslim families in Fiji and New Zealand who lost loved ones in the Christchurch shooting.” The Pacific Conference of Churches expressed messages of solidarity and love for the Muslim community at an interfaith vigil organized by the Fiji Muslim League. Leader of the Opposition Sitiveni Rabuka also condemned the attack and called on authorities to work together to prevent further violence.

In October some Catholic parishes commemorated Diwali at a special Mass they stated was to show respect to Hindus.

The Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as Hindu and Muslim groups operated numerous schools, including secondary schools, which were eligible for government subsidies based on the size of the student population.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials promoted religious tolerance in meetings with government officials.

Embassy officers met with local religious leaders with the aim of encouraging and maintaining an active interfaith dialogue. Embassy officers met with Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious leaders to discuss the importance of respect for religious freedom as a universal human right.

On May 29, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an iftar to promote religious tolerance for members of the Muslim community and other religious leaders.

The embassy used social media to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, such as posts highlighting diverse religious traditions in the country.