

KIRIBATI 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Religious groups with memberships equal to or greater than 2 percent of the population are required to register with the government.

Two islands in the southern part of the country continued to uphold a “one-church-only” policy due to a stated deference to the first Protestant missionaries that visited the islands in the 1800s.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government, and officials from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji discussed religious tolerance and practices with the government when visiting the country. Embassy officials also met with leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) to discuss religious tolerance and the treatment of minority groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 112,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2015 census, approximately 57 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 31 percent belongs to the Kiribati Uniting Church (until 2016 known as the Kiribati Protestant Church). Members who did not accept the name change continue as the Kiribati Protestant Church. Five percent of the population belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the Baha’i Faith (2 percent), Seventh-day Adventist Church (2 percent), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Assemblies of God, and Muslims. The Church of Jesus Christ states its membership exceeds 12 percent of the population. Persons with no religious affiliation account for less than 1 percent of the population. Members of the Catholic Church are concentrated in the northern islands, while Protestants constitute the majority in the southern islands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience (including religion), expression, assembly, and association. These rights may be limited by law “which

is reasonably required” in the interests of public defense, safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights of others.

By law, any religious group with adult members representing no less than 2 percent of the total population (according to the most recent census) must register with the government, although there are no legal consequences for not registering. To register, the religious organization submits a request to the Ministry of Women, Youth, and Social Affairs, signed by the head of the group and supported by five other members of the organization. Also required in the request is information regarding proof of the number of adherents and the religious denomination and name under which the group wishes to be registered.

There is no mandated religious education in public schools. Public schools in the country allow a variety of religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ, to provide religious education in schools. Students who opt out of religious education must participate in a supervised study period.

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

Government Practices

Most governmental meetings and events began and ended with an ordained minister or other church official delivering a Christian prayer.

The government continued to administer a small grants program for development projects administered by nongovernmental organizations and registered religious organizations. Foreign missionaries, including members of the Church of Jesus Christ, were active in the country and operated freely. Missionary visits to islands with a “one religion” tradition were allowed as long as they followed the traditional practice of requesting permission from local leaders.

The government allowed the Kiribati Protestant Church to operate but had not completed the church’s registration, which was submitted when it separated from the Kiribati Uniting Church in 2016.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

With approximately 1,000 inhabitants each, the population of two islands – Arorae and Tamana – remained largely members of the Protestant Kiribati Uniting Church, at 98 percent and 96 percent, respectively, according to the 2015 census, although a small number of Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of Jesus Christ, and Baha’i adherents were also present. The residents of these islands continued their “one-church-only” tradition, which they stated was in deference to Protestant missionaries who came to the islands in the 1800s, according to government reports. On these islands, residents of other religious groups worshipped in their own homes. Villagers discouraged religious groups outside the Kiribati Uniting Church from proselytizing or holding meetings but permitted missionaries to visit if they requested permission from local leaders first.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji and representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Fiji visited the country in late January and early February and discussed religious tolerance and practices with government representatives and Church of Jesus Christ leaders.

The Ambassador and the embassy utilized their social media platforms to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, including highlighting comments by the President and posting videos in support of religious tolerance and practices on International Religious Freedom Day and major Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Muslim celebrations.