

LESOTHO 2020 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. On January 10, the Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL), an umbrella organization of seven Christian churches, said in a statement that there was a risk that the government and security agencies would not respect the rule of law during a period of political change leading to the May 11 collapse of the ruling coalition. The government did not publicly respond to the statement. On August 10, in response to the continued ban on in-person religious services as part of the government's efforts to combat COVID-19, the Council of Pentecostal Churches of Lesotho publicly stated "the church is not a super spreader" like shopping malls and other businesses, which had been allowed to reopen, and the government should permit religious services to resume. On August 30, the government announced churches could hold services in groups of no more than 50 persons indoors and 100 persons outdoors. The government continued to provide extensive support for schools operated by religious groups, including paying and certifying all teachers.

While religious leaders said in general there was broad religious tolerance and respect in the country, some government and private sector representatives occasionally expressed distrust of business owners of South Asian origin, many of whom were Muslim. Some government and security-sector officials said they were concerned about the growth of Islamic religious practices in urban areas. Some colleagues of these officials, however, dismissed such concerns as fearmongering.

The U.S. embassy continued to maintain regular contact with religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance and the need to prevent discrimination against adherents of the country's growing minority religions, particularly Islam.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.0 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the CCL, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. An Afrobarometer February-March survey estimated the Christian population to be 95 percent or higher. The survey found that Protestants, including Anglicans, evangelical Christians, Methodists, members of the African Methodist

Episcopal Church, Pentecostals, Christian Zionists, Baptists, and members of the Church of Christ represent 52 percent of the population, and Roman Catholics 41 percent. The rest of the country's residents are Muslim, Hindu, 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, and a small number of Muslims, who live primarily in the northern area of the country and in the capital.

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. Other than the constitutional provision barring discrimination, there is no specific law requiring religious schools to accept children not of the school's denomination.

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

Government Practices

On January 10, the CCL, which represents the largest Christian groups, said in a statement that there was a risk the government and security agencies would not respect the rule of law during a period of political change leading to the May 11 collapse of the ruling coalition. The government did not take any action in response to the CCL statement.

On August 10, in response to the continued ban on in-person religious services as part of the government's efforts to combat COVID-19, the Council of Pentecostal Churches of Lesotho publicly stated "the church is not a super spreader" like shopping malls and other businesses, which had been allowed to reopen, and the government should permit religious services to resume. On August 30, the government announced churches could hold services in groups of no more than 50 persons indoors and 100 persons outdoors.

During the year, churches owned and operated 83 percent of all primary and 66 percent of all 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, according to parents and teachers. 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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

While religious and civil society leaders said in general there was broad religious tolerance and respect in the country, some government and private-sector representatives occasionally expressed distrust of business owners of South Asian origin, many of whom were Muslim. A few government and security-sector officials said they were concerned about the growth of Islamic religious practices in urban areas. Some colleagues of these officials dismissed such concerns as fearmongering.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy discussed religious tolerance and the need to prevent discrimination against religious minorities, particularly the country's small but growing Muslim community, with government, religious, and civil society leaders. Embassy staff also maintained regular contact with religious leaders, including leaders of minority religious communities.