

NAMIBIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of belief and the right to practice, profess, and promote any religion. Islamic leaders stated that prison officials continued to prevent some newly converted Muslim inmates from updating their religious affiliation in prison records and from meeting with Muslim clergy.

A nongovernmental interfaith council consisting of members of various Christian and Muslim groups, as well as representatives of the Jewish and Baha'i faiths, met on a regular basis and advocated for the shared needs of their congregations.

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with the government-run Office of the Ombudsman and the Namibian Correctional Services about complaints regarding religious freedom. Embassy officials engaged with religious leaders and the interfaith council to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, approximately 97 percent of the population identifies as Christian. According to church statistics and the government's 2013 Demographic and Health Survey, approximately 50 percent identify as Lutheran and 20 percent as Catholic. Other religious groups, including Anglican, various Reformed denominations, Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, evangelicals, charismatics, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, make up the remaining 27 percent of the population that is Christian. The number of Pentecostal and charismatic churches is growing. Some Zionist churches combine Christianity and traditional African beliefs. Muslims, Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, atheists, and other non-Christians together constitute approximately 3 percent of the population and reside primarily in urban areas.

Many members of the Himba and San ethnic groups combine indigenous religious beliefs with Christianity. Muslims are mostly Sunni and are predominantly immigrants from elsewhere in Africa, South Asia, or recent converts.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution specifies the country is a secular state, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the right to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain, and promote any religion. These rights may be subject to “reasonable restrictions” justified by interests such as “the sovereignty and integrity of Namibia, national security, public order, decency, or morality.”

The law allows recognition of any religious group as a voluntary association, without the need to register with the government. Religious groups may also register as nonprofit organizations (an “association without gain”) with the Ministry of Industrialization, Trade, and SME (small to medium enterprise) Development. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations and religious groups formed as voluntary associations are exempt from paying taxes. If a religious group registers as a welfare organization, it may seek to purchase land at a reduced rate. Traditional authorities or town councils determine whether or not to grant the reduced rate based on whether the organization’s use of the land will benefit the community.

The constitution permits religious groups to establish private schools provided no student is denied admission based on creed. The government school curriculum contains a nonsectarian “religious and moral education” component that includes education on moral principles and human rights and introduces students to a variety of African traditions and religions, as well as world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Baha’i Faith, and Rastafarianism.

Similar to other foreigners seeking to work in the country, religious workers must obtain a work visa. There is no separate religious worker visa.

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

Government Practices

The government Office of the Ombudsman stated it did not receive religion-related complaints during the year. A Muslim member of the interfaith council said that prison officials denied access to the leadership of his mosque to Muslim prisoners during Ramadan and also denied them halal meals. He attributed the lack of access

to the ongoing inability of prisoners to update their religious status, an issue he was unable to address prior to a blanket suspension of prison visits by the Namibian Correctional Services pursuant to COVID-19 public health guidelines. He stated he intended to revisit the issue, which was the subject of 2019 complaint by inmates who converted to Islam while at a Windhoek correctional facility, with the Namibian Correctional Service when the pandemic threat has subsided.

The government periodically included religious leaders in discussions regarding issues affecting the country and in national events. President Hage Geingob held both formal and ad hoc consultations with leaders of major religious groups, including the interfaith council, the Council of Churches that represented Christian denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Dutch Reformed Church, and Roman Catholic Church, and the Muslim community.

Religious leaders continued to state that they occasionally faced problems with the government regarding visas. The interfaith council's Baha'i representative said that religious volunteers had difficulty obtaining visas due to their work not clearly falling into any of the country's visa categories. The religious leaders stated nonreligious organizations and business people also had difficulty obtaining visas and did not believe they were targeted by the government based on religion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A nongovernmental interfaith council consisting of members of various Christian and Muslim groups, as well as representatives of the Jewish and Baha'i faiths, held regular meetings and advocated for the government to address the socio-economic needs of their congregations with greater urgency. The interfaith council also engaged with the government with the goal of using the council's collective voice to strengthen the influence of religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives engaged with the Office of the Ombudsman and the Namibian Correctional Services.

Embassy representatives, including at the senior level, met with religious leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, and Muslim communities to better understand the country's religious landscape and any potential problems of discrimination.

Embassy representatives also met with the interfaith council to discuss religious accommodation in prison, the lack of a religious organization registration category, and the general state of faith in the country.