

# **SOLOMON ISLANDS 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for religious freedom, including the freedom to change religions, proselytize, and establish religious schools. Laws “reasonably required” to achieve certain listed public goals may restrict these rights. Government officials said the proposed constitutional amendment to declare the Solomon Islands a Christian country had not moved from the constitutional review committee in parliament, while members of minority faiths said that most citizens, who are predominantly Christian and Protestant, would likely support the proposed amendment.

The five largest religious groups that make up the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) organized joint religious activities and encouraged religious representation at national events, including a week-long prayer event focused on Christian unity in June, a national prayer breakfast in July, and religious events organized around Solomon Islands independence celebrations. There were reports of rumors spread by dominant religious groups denigrating the reputation of minority religious groups.

The U.S. government, through the embassy in Papua New Guinea and the consular agency in Solomon Islands, discussed religious tolerance with the government during the year and the proposed constitutional amendment to declare Solomon Islands a Christian country. Embassy officials discussed with religious minorities whether groups believed they could freely exercise their religious beliefs. Embassy representatives met virtually with religious leaders of larger groups and leaders of SICA.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 685,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2019 government census and independent anthropological research, approximately 90 percent of the population is affiliated with one of the following Christian churches: Anglican Church of Melanesia, 32 percent; Roman Catholic, 20 percent; South Seas Evangelical, 17 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 12 percent; and United Methodist, 10 percent. An estimated 5 percent of the population, consisting primarily of the Kwaio ethnic community on the island of Malaita, adheres to indigenous, animistic religions. Groups together constituting

less than 5 percent of the population include Muslims, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and members of indigenous churches that have broken away from major Christian denominations, such as the Christian Fellowship Church, which separated from the United Methodist Church in 1960.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of thought and of religion. This includes the freedom for individuals to change religion or belief and to worship, teach, practice, and observe one's religion in public or in private, either alone or with others. It also provides for the freedom to establish noncompulsory religious instruction. These provisions may be restricted by laws "reasonably required" to protect the rights of others, for defense, or for public safety, order, morality, or health. The Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace, and Ecclesiastical Affairs (MTGPEA) delivers ecclesiastical programs in partnership with faith-based organizations, engages with religious leaders to support peace initiatives, and manages government grants to churches.

All religious groups must register with the government. Religious groups are required to apply in writing to the Registrar of Companies for a certificate of registration. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) may register as charitable organizations. To register, a group must submit the required documentation to the Registrar of Companies; the application fee of 1,250 Solomon Islands dollars (SBD) (\$160) is waived for religious groups. Documentation required for the application process includes a description of the group, a list of board members, and a constitution that states how the group is governed and how members are chosen. The registrar issues a certificate when satisfied that the requirements have been met and that the nature, extent, objectives, and circumstances of the applicant are noncommercial.

The public school curriculum includes an hour of weekly religious instruction, the content of which is agreed upon by the member churches of SICA, an ecumenical NGO comprising the county's five largest churches. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Government-subsidized church schools are required to align their nonreligious curricula with governmental criteria. Non-Christian religious instruction is provided in the schools upon request. Ministers or

other representatives of the religion provide these classes. Anyone found to be preventing religious instruction faces imprisonment of up to one year or a fine of up to SBD 500 (\$65).

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

### **Government Practices**

As of year's end, the Constitutional Review Committee had not finalized draft constitutional changes intended to implement a 2017 parliamentary motion to explore the possibility of amending the preamble of the constitution to declare the country a Christian nation. Ministry of Justice officials said the proposal had not moved from the constitutional review committee in parliament. According to these officials, parliamentarians had not taken up the proposal since its original submission and had determined the proposal was unlikely to be reviewed during the year. Members of minority faiths said that most citizens, who are predominantly Christian and Protestant, would likely support the proposed amendment.

Multiple religious groups, including Christian, Jewish, and Islamic groups, were registered in the country. There were no pending registrations for other groups. Officials said that some groups may register as NGOs or charities without being required to reveal any religious affiliation.

The government continued to interact with religious groups through the Ministry of Home Affairs and the MTGPEA. The Ministry of Home Affairs characterized its role as maintaining a balance between constitutionally protected rights of religious freedom, free speech, and free expression, and maintaining public order. The MTGPEA provided funding to churches to carry out social programs, such as a Christian care center for victims of domestic violence administered by the Anglican Church of Melanesia, and for the maintenance of church buildings. The total budget was SBD 14.5 million (\$1.87 million). According to the MTGPEA, SBD 12.5 million (\$1.62 million) was divided among the 50 constituencies that comprise the country, with the remaining SBD two million (\$259,000) allocated to the ministry for miscellaneous religious activities throughout the year. Some churches also received funding from local members of parliament through their constituent development funds. Groups were required to apply directly to members of parliament to receive these funds. The MTGPEA distributed an additional SBD five million (\$646,000) to SICA and the Solomon Islands Full

Gospel Association (SIFGA), an umbrella organization made up of smaller Pentecostal churches, as part of a one-time stimulus package in response to pandemic-related consequences. SICA and SIFGA had the responsibility to disburse the stimulus funds to member churches.

Religious groups operated several schools and health services. The government subsidized most of the schools and health centers administered by the Catholic Church, Anglican Church of Melanesia, United Methodist Church, South Seas Evangelical Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church. Subsidies were allocated proportionally based on the number of students at the schools and the size of the health centers. There were no reports of discrimination among groups receiving these subsidies.

Government oaths of office customarily continued to be taken on the Bible, but this was not a compulsory practice.

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

The five largest religious groups that make up SICA continued to play a leading role in civic life, organizing joint religious activities and encouraging religious representation at national events, including a week-long prayer event focused on Christian unity in June, a national prayer breakfast in July, and religious events organized around Solomon Islands independence celebrations.

Roman Catholic Archbishop of Honiara Christopher Cardone published a July open letter in local media, calling on Seventh-day Adventists to respect Catholics and other religious groups that worship on Sundays. In his letter, the Archbishop wrote that Seventh-day Adventists used local media to pressure Catholics not to attend Sunday Mass and called on the Prime Minister to publicly support the right of all to worship according to the tenets of their faith.

Members of minority faith groups complained that members of dominant religious groups ridiculed their beliefs, publicly shamed them, and spread rumors alleging violence to stoke fear within the community.

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

Embassy and consular representatives from the embassy in Papua New Guinea and the consular agency in Solomon Islands discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the status of the proposed constitutional

amendment, the role of faith-based organizations in disaster response operations such as during a pandemic, and the inclusion of minority faith groups in government programs supporting religion.

Embassy and consular representatives discussed with religious minorities their perceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Embassy representatives exchanged ideas with leaders of various religious groups, civil society organizations, and government agencies on the importance of religious freedom regardless of religious affiliation. In September, embassy officials discussed with SICA the central role played by church groups in humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and public health emergencies.