

BOTSWANA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, with certain exceptions, and protection against governmental discrimination based on creed. An 18-month state of emergency that set strict caps on religious services and other group gatherings as a COVID-19 prevention measure ended September 30. Police arrested a pastor as he tried to deliver a petition to the government outlining concerns that the COVID-19 restrictions prevented church members from seeking counseling and religious support during the pandemic. Media reported that several of his supporters were beaten by police when they gathered outside the station demanding his release.

Representatives of religious organizations said the country continued to have a high degree of religious tolerance and robust interfaith relations.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of different faith groups to discuss religious freedom, interreligious relations, community engagement, and the role of the interfaith community in social change, including attitudes on HIV/AIDS and other public health issues. Specific topics included government tolerance of minority religious groups, the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on religious expression, and the importance of interfaith cooperation to address community challenges.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.4 million (midyear 2021). According to Botswana's 2011 Population and Housing Census reporting on the population 12 years and over (the most recent data available), 79 percent of citizens are members of Christian groups, 15 percent espouse no religion, 4 percent are adherents of the Badimo traditional indigenous religious group, and all other religious groups together constitute less than 1 percent of the population.

Anglicans, Methodists, and members of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa make up the majority of Christians. There are also Lutherans, Roman Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Mennonites, and members of the Dutch Reformed Church and other Christian denominations. According to the 2011 census, there are approximately 11,000 Muslims, many of whom are of South Asian origin. There are small numbers of

Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jews. Immigrants and foreign workers are more likely to be members of non-Christian religious groups than native-born citizens.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Under its broader protections of freedom of conscience, the constitution provides for freedom of thought and religion, the right to change religion or belief, and the right to manifest and propagate religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution's provision of rights also prohibits discrimination based on creed. The constitution permits the government to restrict these rights in the interest of protecting the rights of other persons, national defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health when the restrictions are deemed "reasonably justifiable in a democratic society." The state of emergency imposed from March 2020 to September 2021 to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which capped the size of regular religious gatherings and meetings, was the first time the government ever exercised this provision.

The constitution permits religious groups to establish places for religious instruction at their expense. The constitution prohibits requiring religious instruction or participation in religious ceremonies in a religion other than one's own. The constitution also prohibits compelling an individual to take an oath contrary to that individual's religious beliefs. The penal code criminalizes "hate speech" towards any person or group based on "race, tribe, place of origin, color or creed" and imposes a maximum fine of 500 pula (\$43) per violation.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with the government. To register, a group must submit its constitution to the Registrar of Societies section of the Ministry of Nationality, Immigration, and Gender Affairs. Registration enables religious groups to conduct business, sign contracts, and open an account at a local bank. In order to register, new religious groups must have a minimum of 150 members. For previously registered religious groups, the membership threshold is 10. Any person who manages, assists in the management of, or holds an official position in an unregistered group is subject to a fine of up to 1,000 pula (\$85) and up to seven years in prison. Any member of an unregistered group is subject to penalties, including fines up to 500 pula (\$43) and up to three years in prison. According to 2019 data from the Registrar of Societies (the latest available), there are 2,318 registered religious organizations in the country.

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

Government Practices

Police arrested a pastor from the Bethel Transfiguration Church September 7 when he tried to deliver a petition to President Mokgweetsi Masisi demanding his resignation over what the pastor said was mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis. The pastor, Thuso Tiego, also criticized the government for restricting religious gatherings at a time when he said that individuals turned to churches for counseling and support during the pandemic. Tiego was held overnight at a police station and released without charge. Media reported that several of his supporters were beaten by police when they gathered outside the station demanding Tiego's release. The national police service did not announce any disciplinary action against the officers involved.

The government continued to pursue court cases involving unregistered churches (sometimes called "fire churches") coming into the country to "take advantage of" local citizens by demanding tithes and donations for routine services or special prayers. The government required pastors of some of those churches to apply for visas – even those from countries whose nationals were normally allowed visa-free entry. The government said in June 2019 that it was reviewing the visa policy for these foreign pastors, but by year's end had not released the results of this review or announced any changes. Former members of one of the most prominent unregistered churches forced to close in 2019, the Enlightened Christian Gathering, subsequently formed their own smaller, independent churches with local leadership that was ultimately registered by the government.

Under the COVID-19 state of emergency that ended in September, the government limited attendance at religious services to no more than 50 persons at one time and limited services to twice a week. The government also banned all religious gatherings during "extreme social distancing" periods. Although the limits on religious gatherings lasted 18 months and prevented some individuals from fully practicing their faith, most religious groups did not say their freedom of religion was being restricted and stated that the extraordinary measures were necessary for public health.

Optional religious education remained part of the curriculum in public schools; this curriculum continued to emphasize Christianity, but it also discussed other religions practiced in the country. Government regulation of private schools did

not distinguish among Christian, Muslim, or secular schools. Since 2020, government policy has allowed students to wear a hijab or religiously based head covering in public schools.

Although it was common for government meetings to begin with a Christian prayer, members of non-Christian groups occasionally led prayers as well.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Representatives of religious organizations, including Christian and Muslim, again said that interfaith relations were strong, which in the past have included partnerships to address issues including HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence. They continued to say there was a high degree of tolerance for religious diversity in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged with Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and other religious representatives to discuss religious freedom, interreligious relations, and community engagement. Topics included government tolerance of minority religious groups, the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on religious expression, and interfaith cooperation to address community challenges.