

ESWATINI 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. Although the law requires new religious groups to register, members of unregistered groups said they were generally able to operate freely, although one group complained of having a disadvantaged taxation status. The policy of excluding the teaching of other religions other than Christianity in public schools remained in effect. The Muslim community said this requirement increased misperceptions of their faith.

Widespread civil unrest broke out in June after the government limited some political freedoms, resulting in protests throughout the country. Observers stated the civil unrest, along with COVID-19 restrictions, preoccupied the government and pre-empted reconsideration of the Christian education requirement. Non-Christian groups said the government continued to provide favorable treatment to Christian beliefs and organizations, such as free access to radio and television time. In September, the King said he had received a message from God and ordered the public to display signs proclaiming “Hallelujah” throughout the country for a period of one month.

Muslim leaders continued to report negative and/or suspicious views of Islam in society. Muslim leaders and business owners stated they believed their businesses were targeted unfairly during the civil unrest in June and July, but sources stated it was unclear if this is due to religious or racial/ethnic bias. Religious leaders said that due to the travel and public gathering restrictions from COVID-19 and ongoing civil unrest, formal interfaith dialogues did not take place during the year, but religious communities held informal discussions and sometimes collaborated on community service or development initiatives.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials engaged with government officials on religious freedom and tolerance issues. The Ambassador and embassy officials also engaged with civil society, the academic community, and religious leaders of different faiths on religious issues, including the importance of developing and maintaining interfaith dialogue in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.1 million (midyear 2021). Religious leaders estimate that 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent is Muslim (of whom many are not ethnic Swati, the dominant ethnic group in the country), and the remainder belongs to other religious groups, including those with indigenous African beliefs. According to anecdotal reports, approximately 40 percent of the population practices Zionism, a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship (some adherents of which self-identify as evangelical Christians), while another 20 percent is Roman Catholic. Zionism is widely practiced in rural areas. Other religious groups represented include Anglicans, Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jewish and Baha'i communities.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. These rights may be limited by laws that are “reasonably required” in the interest of defense, public safety, order, morality, health, or protecting the rights of others. The constitution provides religious groups the right to establish and operate private schools and to provide religious instruction for their students without interference from the government.

The law requires religious groups to register with the government. The Ministry of Home Affairs is the government agency responsible for monitoring religious affairs in the country. To register as a religious group, Christian groups must apply through one of the country's three umbrella religious bodies – the League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches – for a recommendation, which is routinely granted and does not impede registration, according to church leaders. The application process requires a group to provide its constitution, membership, and physical location, along with the relevant umbrella body's recommendation, to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Trade, which then registers the organization. For indigenous religious groups and non-Christian religious organizations, authorities consider proof of a religious leader, a congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant registration. Registered religious groups are exempt from taxation, but contributions are not tax deductible.

All prospective builders, including religious groups, must obtain government permission for the construction of new buildings in urban areas, and permission from the appropriate chief and chief's advisory council for new buildings in rural areas. In some rural communities, chiefs have designated special committees to allocate land to religious groups for a minimal fee.

Christian religious instruction is mandatory in public primary schools per a 2017 directive from the Prime Minister and is incorporated into the daily morning assembly. Christian education is also compulsory in public secondary schools. There are no opt-out procedures. Religious education is neither prohibited nor mandated in private schools.

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

Government Practices

Representatives of various religious groups, including some Christians, said that the government policy declaring Christianity the only religion permitted to be taught in public schools and making Christian education compulsory was harmful to society because it fostered ignorance of other religions. These groups included the Muslim community, Seventh-day Adventists, the Catholic Church, and representatives from the Jewish Community. In particular, the Muslim community said the directive increased misperceptions of their faith because children learned about Islam from often erroneous information on social media instead of from materials taught in school. Efforts launched in 2020 to consider revising the Christian education requirement did not advance during the year since sources stated that the country was preoccupied by the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread civil unrest that began in June after the government limited some political freedoms, precipitating widespread protests, violence, looting, arson, and large-scale destruction of property. Security forces used deadly force to restore order, resulting in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries. Reports stated that security forces used excessive force responding to the unrest.

According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, school administrations continued to permit only Christian religious youth clubs to operate in public schools. In October, however, schools throughout the country closed "indefinitely" due to continued violence and protests. Schools partially reopened in late December and were expected to open fully in 2022. These school closures, combined with earlier closures due to COVID-19, meant that schools in the

country were closed for almost the entire year, severely limiting the possibility for extracurricular activities and Christian clubs.

Seventh-day Adventists complained that many official functions, such as elections and school testing, took place on Saturdays and that they were often unable to receive religious exceptions. Seventh-day Adventists also chose not to register under one of the three main religious umbrella bodies as required by law, and instead registered as a private entity. Seventh-day Adventists stated that as a result, they were unable to have tax-exempt status like other registered religious groups.

Non-Christian groups reported the government continued to provide some preferential benefits to Christians, such as free time on state television and radio. Government-owned television and radio stations broadcast daily morning and evening Christian programming. The government continued to provide each of the three Christian umbrella religious bodies and their affiliates with free airtime to broadcast daily religious services on the state-run radio station. Local newspapers provided free space in their announcement sections to Christian groups but not to non-Christian groups.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, continued to align itself with Christian faith-based groups and supported Christian activities such as commemorating Christian holidays. Official government programs often opened with a Christian prayer, and several government ministers held Christian prayer vigils that civil servants were expected to attend.

In August, following widespread civil unrest in late June and early July, the King ordered the country to pray and fast for three days. In September, at a government function, the King said he had received a message from God and issued a directive that government and municipality offices, private homes, and businesses throughout the country display signs proclaiming “Hallelujah” for a period of one month. Authorities did not enforce the directive. Citizens were frequently urged to attend royal festivals and events that celebrated traditional Swati culture and beliefs, and some reported fear of reprisal for nonattendance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim leaders continued to report negative and/or suspicious views of Islam in society. Muslim leaders and business owners said they felt their community was unfairly targeted during civil unrest, as a significant percentage of the businesses

that were looted and burned were owned by members of the Muslim community, although sources stated that it was unclear if this was due to religious or racial/ethnic bias. Other observers attributed the motivation for attacks on Muslim-owned shops during the protests to racism and a widely held perception that the Asian community had close ties to the King. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, with Muslims in the country being primarily of South Asian descent, it was difficult to categorize such incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Due to complications from COVID-19 restrictions and ongoing civil unrest, the Baha'i community did not hold the planned interfaith devotional fellowship dialogues during the year, although Baha'i and Muslim faith groups sometimes collaborated on community service or development initiatives.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials engaged with government officials on religious freedom and tolerance issues.

The Ambassador and embassy officials also engaged with civil society, the academic community, and religious leaders of different faiths on religious issues such as the King's directive to display "Hallelujah" signs, the importance of involving religious leaders in political discussions and in COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, and the importance of developing and maintaining interfaith dialogue in the country.