

KIRIBATI 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Religious groups with memberships equal to or greater than 2 percent of the population are required to register with the government. The government allowed the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC) to operate, but the Church was not able to register during the year due to a court case and opposition to its registration from the Kiribati Uniting Church, according to KPC leadership. Church officials stated they were optimistic the government would approve registration due to the government's grant support for its activities.

Two islands in the southern part of the country continued to uphold a "one-church-only" policy due to a stated deference to the first Protestant missionaries that visited the islands in the 1800s.

Embassy officials held a teleconference with the leader of the KPC to discuss religious tolerance and registration. The U.S. embassy in Fiji, which covers Kiribati, utilized its social media platforms to promote religious pluralism and tolerance on major Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim celebrations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 113,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2015 census, approximately 57 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 31 percent belongs to the Kiribati Uniting Church (until 2016 known as the Kiribati Protestant Church). Members who did not accept the name change continue as the KPC. The KPC estimates a membership of 10,000, or approximately 8 percent of the population. According to the census, 5 percent of the population belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), but the Church states its membership exceeds 12 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the Baha'i Faith (2 percent), Seventh-day Adventist Church (2 percent), Jehovah's Witnesses, Assemblies of God, and Muslims. Persons with no religious affiliation account for less than 1 percent of the population. Members of the Catholic Church are concentrated in the northern islands, while Protestants constitute the majority in the southern islands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience (including religion), expression, assembly, and association. These rights may be limited by law “which is reasonably required” in the interests of public defense, safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights of others.

By law, any religious group with a membership equal to or greater than 2 percent of the total population (according to the most recent census) must register with the government, although there are no legal consequences for not registering. To register, the religious organization submits a request to the Ministry of Women, Youth, and Social Affairs, signed by the head of the group and supported by five other members of the organization. Also required in the request is information regarding proof of the number of adherents and the religious denomination and name under which the group wishes to be registered.

There is no mandated religious education in public schools. Public schools in the country allow a variety of religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ, to provide religious education in schools. Students who opt out of religious education must participate in a supervised study period.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to administer a small grants program for development projects administered by non governmental organizations and religious organizations, of which the KPC was a recipient. Missionaries were active in the country and operated freely. Missionary visits to islands with a “one church” tradition were allowed as long as they followed the traditional practice of requesting permission from local leaders. Sources stated that minority religious groups did not seek to send any missionaries to these islands during the year.

The government allowed the KPC to operate, but the Church was not able to register during the year due to a court case and opposition to its registration from the Kiribati Uniting Church, according to KPC leadership. The Church’s registration application was submitted when it separated from the Kiribati Uniting

Church in 2016, and Church officials said they were optimistic the government would grant registration due to the government's grant support for its activities.

Most governmental meetings and events began and ended with an ordained minister or other church official delivering a Christian prayer.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

With approximately 1,000 inhabitants each, the population of two islands – Arorae and Tamana – continued their “one-church-only” tradition, which they stated was in deference to Protestant missionaries who came to the islands in the 1800s, according to government reports. Residents of the two islands were largely Protestants, who represented 98 percent and 96 percent, respectively, according to the 2015 census. While most residents of Arorae accepted the name change to Kiribati Uniting Church, most residents of Tamana joined the KPC. A small number of Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of Jesus Christ, and Baha'i adherents were also present. On these islands, residents of other religious groups worshipped only in their own homes. Sources stated that villagers on Arorae discouraged religious groups outside the Kiribati Uniting Church from proselytizing or holding public meetings but permitted missionaries to visit members in their homes if they requested permission from local leaders first.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials held a teleconference with the leader of the KPC to discuss religious tolerance and registration. The U.S. embassy in Fiji, which covers Kiribati, utilized its social media platforms to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, posting messages on major Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim celebrations on Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Ganush Chaturthi, Navrati, and Eid al-Fitr.