

# **LESOTHO 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. Although some Christian and Muslim groups stated the government did not consult them before establishing COVID-19-related guidelines that affected their religious practices, the government partnered with leaders from various religious groups to support the COVID-19 vaccination campaign. A Muslim religious leader noted Christian groups had comparatively greater access to state media for the propagation of religious beliefs. He said the country's National Reforms Authority, which included representatives of political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious groups, among others, rejected Muslim advice on the constitutional reforms process. The government continued to provide extensive support for schools operated by religious groups, including paying and certifying all teachers. Some government and security sector officials said they were concerned regarding the growth of Islamic religious practices in urban areas.

The Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL), an umbrella organization representing eight church entities in the country, stated it met with various faith-based organizations throughout the country, including non-Christian groups. The CCL also cited increasing concern among religious leaders regarding crime in the country, noting that it affected their members even if not targeted at specific religious groups.

U.S. embassy officials continued to maintain regular contact with religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance and the need to prevent discrimination against adherents of the country's growing minority religions, particularly Islam.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (midyear 2021). According to the CCL, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. An Afrobarometer survey from February-March 2020 estimated the Christian population to be 95.1 percent or higher. The survey found that Protestants, including Anglicans, evangelical Christians, Methodists, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Pentecostals, Christian Zionists, Baptists, and members of the Church of Christ represent 53.7 percent of the population, and

Roman Catholics 41.4 percent. The rest of the country's residents include Muslims, Hindus, Baha'is, those who belong to indigenous or other religious groups, and nonbelievers. Many Christians practice traditional indigenous rituals in conjunction with Christianity. According to Afrobarometer, Muslims constitute 0.4 percent of the population. Muslims live primarily in the northern area of the country and in the capital.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. These rights may be limited by laws in the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or protecting the rights of other persons, provided the limitations are the minimum necessary.

By law, any group, religious or otherwise, may register as a legal entity with the government, regardless of its purpose, as long as it has a constitution and a leadership committee. Most religious groups register, but there is no penalty for those that do not. Registration gives a group legal standing, formalizes its structure under the law, and provides exemption from income tax. In the absence of registration, religious organizations may operate freely, but without legal standing or any of the protections of registered organizations.

The Ministry of Education pays and certifies all teachers at government-funded schools, including religious schools, and requires a standard curriculum for both secular and religious schools. The government permits but does not mandate religious education in schools, and the constitution exempts students at any educational institution from requirements to receive instruction or attend any ceremony or observance associated with a religion that is not their own. The Minister of Education must approve all curricula, including for religious education classes. The law does not prohibit or restrict schools run by religious organizations. Other than the constitutional provision barring discrimination, there is no specific law requiring religious schools to accept children not of the school's denomination.

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

### **Government Practices**

Some Christian and Muslim groups stated the lack of government consultation in establishing COVID-19-related guidelines affected their religious practices and complicated modifying those guidelines as circumstances changed. Government restrictions on the number of participants permitted at public events, including religious services, and the duration of those events changed five times between January and July in response to the ebb and flow of the pandemic. Religious leaders said their services should not be treated like other public gatherings because they could ensure their members followed the COVID-19 protocols. The government partnered with the CCL to support the COVID-19 vaccination campaign. According to the Minister of Health, outreach to village chiefs and local churches encouraged community mobilization to get more citizens vaccinated. In Maseru's Maseru District, several religious leaders allowed Ministry of Health workers to use their church facilities as vaccination sites. In cooperation with an international organization and the CCL, the Ministry of Health also provided training to religious leaders to counter what they stated was misinformation about COVID-19 vaccinations.

A Muslim religious leader said Muslims had no access to state-owned television religious programming opportunities available to Christian groups, which left Muslims unable to propagate their religion through this medium. He stated the government did not agree to their request to recognize Islamic holidays and that the National Reforms Authority, which comprises representatives of political parties, non governmental organizations, and faith-based organizations, among others, rejected Muslim advice on the constitutional reforms process underway.

In a statement released on September 29, the Lesotho Catholic Bishop's Conference, appealing to some politicians who sources said had a tendency towards divisive speech, said that political leaders should not make inflammatory statements during the upcoming campaign for the 2022 elections.

Churches owned and operated 83 percent of all primary and 66 percent of all secondary schools. The Roman Catholic Church, Lesotho Evangelical Church, Anglican Church, and, to a lesser extent, Methodist Church were the primary operators of religious schools, which were publicly funded.

In practice, religious education – including in all religious schools and some secular schools – was mandatory, according to parents and teachers. Despite the constitution allowing students to opt out, there were no reports of students electing to do so.

The government continued to permit families to send their children to schools run by religious groups other than their own, and some families chose this option. Others went to public schools or secular private schools.

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

CCL leaders conducted meetings with various faith-based organizations throughout the country, including non-Christian organizations. The CCL cited increasing concern among religious leaders about crime in the country, which it said was fueled by anger from the lack of opportunity for youth, aggressive gang activity, and gender-based violence. The CCL noted crime affected their members even if not specifically targeted at a religious group and said that churches should play a larger role in addressing these societal issues.

Some officials from government entities, including the National Security Service and Lesotho Defense Force, mentioned concerns regarding the growth and influence of Muslim communities throughout the country.

A National University of Lesotho lecturer said religious freedom was embedded in the country's constitution but that religious groups had not explored it to the fullest. He cited the lack of a forum representing all religious groups in the country as an example.

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

Embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and the need to prevent discrimination against religious minorities, particularly against the country's small but growing Muslim community, with Christian, Baha'i and Muslim religious leaders and academics. During a virtual meeting on October 7, embassy representatives discussed the underpinnings of religious freedom and tolerance with a National University of Lesotho lecturer.