

# **SOLOMON ISLANDS 2021 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.

During political and social unrest in November, leaders of several churches took action to encourage peaceful resolutions to problems in the country. There were, however, 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 and the proposed constitutional amendment to declare Solomon Islands a Christian country with government officials during the year. Embassy officials discussed with religious minorities whether groups believed they could freely exercise their religious beliefs.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 691,000 (midyear 2021). 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 split 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, to proselytize, and to worship, teach, practice, and observe one's religion in public or in private, either alone or with others. The constitution 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 must 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 member churches of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA), an ecumenical NGO comprising the country'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 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 (\$63).

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 in the new government did not take up the proposal since its original submission and determined the proposal was unlikely to be reviewed during this term. 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. Government sources stated there were no pending registrations for other groups. Officials said that some groups were able to register as NGOs or charities without being required to reveal any religious affiliation.

The Ministry of Home Affairs and the MTGPEA continued to interact with religious groups. 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 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. It allocated these subsidies proportionally based on the number of students at the schools and the size of the health centers.

The government customarily continued to use the Bible to administer oaths of office but this was not compulsory.

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

There was severe civil unrest throughout Honiara from November 24-26 as an initially peaceful protest of individuals from the province of Malaita at the nation's Parliament House turned into three days of looting, arson, and destruction. Rioters burned down the Parliament's "Leaf House," most of Chinatown, and other buildings in Honiara including the Pacific Light Baptist Church. The Central Bank of Solomon Islands estimated the destruction's adverse impact on the economy at SBD 534 million (\$67.71 million). During the period of unrest, major news sources in the country ran articles stating that members of society sought moral leadership from the religious community. Church leaders from SICA and Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association (SIFGA) submitted a letter to the Prime Minister and the Premiers of Malaita and Guadalcanal Provinces to call for dialogue. Honiara-based Seventh-day Adventists called on Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, an Adventist elder, to seek wisdom from the Seventh-day Adventist Church amid the political crisis. President of the Adventist Church Silent Tovosia appealed to all members to refrain from involvement in illegal acts. Anglican Church of Melanesia Archbishop Leonard Dawea said, "Solomon Islands has failed again as a Christian nation following the violence and destruction which happened in Honiara."

The five largest religious groups that comprise SICA continued to play a leading role in civic life, organizing joint religious activities and encouraging religious representation at national events and religious events organized around Solomon Islands independence celebrations.

Members of minority faith groups said that members of dominant religious groups ridiculed their beliefs, publicly shamed them, and spread rumors alleging violence to stoke fear within society. Members of the Chinese community stated that some Christians criticized them, saying they were anti-Christian and faithless.

#### **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.