

# **TONGA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution grants freedom to practice, worship, and assemble for religious services. The constitution requires the Sabbath, which the government defines as Sunday, be “kept holy” and prohibits most commercial transactions and many recreational activities on Sunday, except as permitted by law. The law does not require registration of religious groups. A religious group, however, must register to be eligible for specific benefits, such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers and tax exemptions.

The Forum of Church Leaders, comprising only Christian leaders, met to discuss social issues in the country. The secretariat compiled and submitted reports on these issues to the cabinet.

The U.S. Embassy in Fiji utilized social media to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, including through posts highlighting the religious holidays of minority religions in the country, including Ramadan and Diwali.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 106,000 (midyear 2021). According to 2016 local census data, membership in major religious groups includes the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 35 percent of the population; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), 19 percent; the Roman Catholic Church, 14 percent; the Free Church of Tonga, 12 percent; and the Church of Tonga, 7 percent (the latter two are local affiliates of the Methodist Church). Other Christian groups account for approximately 9 percent of the population and include the Tokaikolo Church, Mo’ui Fo’ou ‘ia Kalaisi, the Constitutional Church of Tonga, Seventh-day Adventists, the Gospel Church, the Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, other Pentecostal denominations, Anglicans, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. According to the census, 60 individuals identified as Buddhist, while approximately 750 reported they followed the Baha’i Faith. Approximately 600 individuals reported no religious affiliation or did not answer the census question. Approximately 900 individuals identified as belonging to other faiths, including 34 Muslims.

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

## Legal Framework

The constitution allows freedom of religious practice, freedom of worship, and freedom of assembly for religious services, provided these freedoms are not used “to commit evil and licentious acts” or “do what is contrary to the law and peace of the land.” The constitution requires that the Sabbath, which the government recognizes as Sunday, be “kept holy” and prohibits commercial transactions on the Sabbath. Only a limited number of restaurants and retail stores are allowed to operate after receiving approval by the Minister of Police. The law also prohibits many recreational activities and sports on the Sabbath. The law applies to both Christians and non-Christians.

The law does not require registration of religious groups. Any group may gather together, worship, and practice their faith without informing the government or seeking its permission. A religious group, however, must register to be eligible for specific benefits, such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers; tax exemptions on nonbusiness income, importation of goods for religious purposes and fundraising; protection of a denomination’s name; and access to broadcasting on public channels. Registration as a religious group requires an application to the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor, accompanied by certified copies of the group’s rules and constitution, a declaration detailing any other trust in which the applicant holds assets, a witness’s signature, and a 115 pa’anga (\$52) application fee. If a group elects to register with the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor, the law requires it also to register with the Ministry of Revenue and Customs as a nonprofit organization.

The law allows religious leaders to legalize marriages. According to the law, only marriages solemnized by clergy or religious officiants, who must be Christian, are legally recognized, and no other marriage is valid. Those non-Christians unwilling to be married by a Christian minister have no legal options to marry.

Religious groups may operate schools, and a number do so. There are no schools operated by non-Christian religious groups. In public schools, the government allows religious groups to offer an hour-long program of religious education to students once per week but does not require schools to do so. In public schools where religious education is provided, students are required to attend the program led by the representative of their respective denomination. Students whose faith does not send a representative are required to take a study period during the hour devoted to religious education.

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

### **Government Practices**

On September 27, the government renewed a state of emergency declaration that extended COVID-19 restriction measures, but which relaxed restrictions on religious gatherings. Under the renewed declaration that ended on December 20, individuals could attend religious services on Sundays only. The government did not limit the number of people who could attend these religious services. The one Islamic mosque in the country was ordered closed by the government for three weeks. On November 3, a Tongan missionary from the Church of Jesus Christ returning from Africa via New Zealand tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, prompting a weeklong lockdown of the main island Tongatapu. The government ordered people to remain in their homes, halted public transportation, and directed schools, churches, restaurants, bars, and clubs to close.

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC), a 24-hour service, maintained policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines stated that in view of “the character of the listening public,” those who preach on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga must confine their preaching “within the limits of the mainstream Christian tradition.” There were no reports, however, of the TBC denying any group’s request to broadcast on public channels. The government permitted all Christian groups to participate in broadcasting one free hour of services on the radio each Sunday. All churches were able to broadcast notices of their activities on six FM radio stations and three television stations: Television Tonga, Digi TV, and the Christian station Doulos Television Radio.

The government continued to enforce a ban that prohibits retail establishments, bakeries, and most restaurants from operating on Sunday to comply with the constitution’s prohibition of commercial activity on the Sabbath. By special permit, the government continued to allow hotels and resorts to operate on Sunday for tourists. These special permits were granted by the Minister of Police.

The education ministry continued to allow the Scripture Union and Sisu koe Fetu’u Ngingila, two private Christian nongovernmental organizations, to provide Bible study and other activities for students of different faiths throughout the year for one hour per week. Students who did not wish to participate were allowed to study independently in school libraries.

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

The Forum of Church Leaders, comprising Christian leaders, under its secretariat at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, met to discuss social issues in the country, such as suicide, crime, drugs, healthy lifestyles, deportees, climate change issues, and teenage pregnancy. The secretariat compiled and submitted reports on these issues to the cabinet.

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

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government.

The U.S. Embassy in Fiji utilized social media to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, including posts highlighting the religious holidays of minority religions in the country, including Ramadan and Diwali.