

# VANUATU 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for individual freedom of “religious or traditional beliefs,” with the preamble to the constitution referring to “traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles.” There is no official state religion. The law makes discrimination a crime, including on the basis of religion. On penalty of a fine, the law requires religious groups to register. An amendment to the penal code also criminalizes defamation when exposing another individual to “public hatred, contempt, or ridicule” on any public platform. Media reports expressed concerns about the amendment. Prime Minister Bob Loughman stated the changes were aimed at social platforms, but also acknowledged the effects could be far reaching, according to media sources. Following a July 2020 request from Minister of Finance and Economic Management Johnny Koanapo, the interdenominational Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC), the preeminent religious organization in the country, organized prayer sessions in almost all government ministries. In 2020, Prime Minister Loughman told the VCC chairman the government would appoint a chaplain to work with the VCC to facilitate the prayer sessions, but the government had not yet done so by year’s end. In July, the government announced a grant to the VCC of 50 million vatu (\$450,000), increased from the usual 10 million vatu (\$90,000) grant, to meet new objectives outlined in the “Government Church Partnership Program,” and built on the 2019-2020 government grant of 20 million vatu (\$180,000) to strengthen the VCC and its network.

According to the VCC, religious minorities were respected, and any tension between groups was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues. Some members of minority faith groups, however, stated members of dominant religious denominations ridiculed their beliefs. In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision making predominated on significant social changes, such as the establishment of a new religious group. In November, members of the Baha’i Faith opened a Baha’i House of Worship, the first in the Pacific, in Lenakel on the island of Tanna.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country, but officials from the U.S. Embassy in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea are dual-accredited to Vanuatu. Representatives from the embassy discussed with government officials the importance of interfaith dialogue and the inclusion of religious minorities in national events and programs. Embassy representatives discussed religious

freedom issues with leaders of the VCC, religious minority groups, and civil society organizations.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 303,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2009 census, the most recent, approximately 82 percent of the population is Christian. An estimated 28 percent of the population is Presbyterian; 15 percent Anglican; 12 percent Roman Catholic; and 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups, cumulatively comprising 15 percent of the population, include the Church of Christ, Neil Thomas Ministries, the Apostolic Church, and the Assemblies of God. Smaller Christian groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), which states its membership at 10,210, and Jehovah's Witnesses, which estimates its membership at 800. According to the 2009 census, an estimated 88 other religious groups comprise approximately 13 percent of the population, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Muslims, and several newly formed groups. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group centered on the island of Tanna, constitutes approximately 3 percent of the population.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to "traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles," but there is no state religion. The constitution provides for individual freedom of "religious or traditional beliefs," including the freedoms of conscience and worship, subject "to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defense, safety, public order, welfare, and health." Any individual who believes these rights have been violated may apply "independently of any other possible legal remedy... to the Supreme Court to enforce that right." The Supreme Court may issue orders it considers appropriate to enforce these rights if it finds they have been violated and to order financial compensation.

Section 150 of the penal code provides a penalty of up to two years in prison for discrimination, including on the basis of religion. In June, amendments to the penal code came into effect that added forms of defamation as criminal offenses. A person may face up to three years imprisonment for false representation that

exposes another individual to “public hatred, contempt, or ridicule” on any public platform, including the internet, social networking sites, and blog sites.

The law requires every religious body to apply to the government for a certificate of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$9), and obtain final approval of the Minister for Internal Affairs to operate. Registration allows the religious group to maintain a bank account. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$450).

The Department of Education prohibits religious discrimination. According to law, children may not be refused admission to government and nongovernment schools or be treated unfavorably because of their religion. The government provides grants to schools operated by religious groups and pays the salaries of teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by VCC representatives using their own materials. The standard curriculum requires that students in grades seven through 12 receive one hour of religious instruction per week, but there is no uniform standard amount of time dedicated to religious instruction across all schools. Parents may request that students be excused from religious education classes in both private and public schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

Media reports expressed concern regarding the amendment to the criminal code passed in April that criminalized defamation that exposes another individual to “public hatred, contempt, or ridicule” on any public platform. Prime Minister Loughman stated the changes were aimed at social platforms, but also acknowledged the effects could be far reaching, according to media sources.

As of year’s end, the VCC had rolled out prayer sessions in almost all government ministries following a July 2020 request from Minister of Finance and Economic Management Johnny Koanapo. Also in 2020, Prime Minister Loughman told VCC Chairman Pastor Allan Nafuki the government would appoint a chaplain to work with the VCC to facilitate the prayer sessions and sources said the government planned to give new Bibles to all members of parliament. As of year’s end, the appointment of a chaplain and issuance of new Bibles to all members of parliament had not occurred.

The government continued to interact with religious groups primarily through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the VCC, the latter composed of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of Christ, and the Apostolic Church, with Seventh-day Adventists and the Assemblies of God having observer status. In September, media reported that Vanuatu Police and Vanuatu Mobile Force Chaplain Lieutenant Collen (Celeb) Willie planned to initiate a “Restoration Mandate” intended to promote harmony by creating a partnership between the government and Christian churches. Government officials said they respected religious minorities but preferred to work with a coordinated body such as the VCC, which represented the majority of churches, noting that religious minorities had different expectations and protocols.

In July, the government announced a grant to the VCC of 50 million vatu (\$450,000), compared with the usual 10 million vatu (\$90,000) grant. Regarding the increase, Director General of the Prime Minister's Office Gregoire Nimbtik said, “the government is showing its commitment with the increased amount it is granting VCC.” In October, the VCC confirmed receipt of 25 million vatu (\$225,000) to meet new objectives outlined in the “Government Church Partnership Program,” and to build on the 2019-2020 government grant of 20 million vatu (\$180,000) that was used to strengthen the VCC and its network.

Churches were eligible to apply for a one-time stimulus package that was part of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At year’s end, the funds had not been disbursed.

Officials customarily took government oaths of office with a hand on the Bible.

The VCC organized ceremonial prayers at national events, such as Father Walter Lini Day in February and Vanuatu Independence Day in July. Religious minorities, such as officials representing the Islamic, and Baha’i communities, criticized the government for not including non-Christian faith groups in celebrations of national events.

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

According to the main leader of the VCC, religious minorities were respected, and if there was tension between groups, it was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues. According to a leader in the Islamic community, the Muslim community and mainline Christian churches were equally respected. Some members of minority

faith groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Baha'is, however, stated that members of dominant religious groups ridiculed their beliefs.

In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision making predominated. In general, whenever a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action required agreement by the chief along with community consensus.

In November, members of the Baha'i Faith opened a Baha'i House of Worship, the first in the Pacific, in Lenakel on the island of Tanna. Approximately 3,000 persons attended the opening ceremony, including Prime Minister Loughman.

In September, 29 Presbyterian "Prayer Warriors" prayed throughout the Prime Minister's office complex. According to media reports, the group intended to drive evil from the offices and to restore the government's spiritual direction.

In March, organizers of the World Day of Prayer selected representatives from the country to write the worship prayer for the World Day of Prayer.

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

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government. In June and November, representatives from the U.S. embassy in Port Moresby discussed with senior government officials religious tolerance and the importance of interfaith dialogue. They also spoke about the role of faith-based organizations in disaster response operations, such as during a pandemic, and the inclusion of minority faiths in national events and programs.

Embassy representatives discussed with religious minorities, including Catholics, Baha'is, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses, their perceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Embassy representatives exchanged ideas with Christian leaders of various denominations, civil society organizations, and government agencies on the importance of interfaith dialogue regardless of religious affiliation. In November, embassy officials discussed with VCC representatives the central role played by church groups in response to social challenges, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and public health emergencies.