

FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states no law may be passed to establish a state religion or impair the free exercise of religion. Senior government officials regularly met with religious leaders to promote the government's commitment to freedom of religion. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some U.S. missionaries, church workers, and religious teachers from various churches departed the country. Multiple religious leaders reported many of their staff and congregation members had to remain outside the country due to travel restrictions. At year's end, the backlog of returnees outpaced the limited number of repatriation seats available. The government continued to provide grants to private, church-affiliated schools and continued to state it made no distinction between public and private schools in its grant programs. All private schools were either Catholic or Protestant.

The Ahmadi Muslim community that had previously been established at a community center in Pohnpei State was inactive during the year due to the community organizers being off-island as a result of COVID-19-related travel restrictions. Ahmadi Muslims reported that the closure of the center was not due to any mistreatment of their community. The Interdenominational Council in Pohnpei stated it encouraged unity among religious groups by addressing local social problems and promoting cooperation among religious communities. The council was inactive for most of the year as a result of key members being unable to return to the country due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, but it restarted monthly meetings in November.

U.S. embassy officers held discussions with senior government officials and local religious leaders to promote religious inclusion and tolerance, including in Pohnpei and Yap States.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 102,000 (midyear 2021). According to government statistics, approximately 99 percent of the population identifies as Christian. Several Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church are present in all four states. According to government statistics, 55 percent of residents are Catholic and 42 percent are Protestant. The United Church of Christ is the main Protestant denomination. Other Christian groups include

Baptists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, the Apostolic Church, the Salvation Army, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Church of Jesus Christ counts its membership as approximately 6,300 members. The Jehovah's Witnesses state they have approximately 10,000 followers throughout the country. Other religious groups exist in small numbers, with a variable expatriate population of Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center report, the most recent published on folk religions in the country, 2.7 percent of the population followed folk religions. Informally, many in the country combine Christian beliefs with traditional indigenous beliefs in spirits, magic, and communing with the dead. Funerals usually include some aspects incorporating traditional beliefs.

In Kosrae State, 90 percent of the population is Protestant, with the United Church of Christ the most prominent denomination. In Pohnpei State, the population is divided evenly between Protestants and Catholics, although more Protestants live on the western side and more Catholics live on the eastern side. In Chuuk State, an estimated 60 percent is Catholic and 40 percent Protestant. In Yap State, an estimated 80 percent of the population is Catholic and the remainder Protestant. Religious affiliation often follows clan lines.

The majority of foreign workers are Filipinos, who number more than 1,000 and are mostly Catholic. The Fijian community comprises fewer than 100 individuals and is predominately Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution forbids the establishment of a state religion or of governmental restrictions on freedom of religion. The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion. It states, "No law may deny or impair freedom of expression, peaceable assembly, association, or petition," and "No law may be passed respecting an establishment of religion or impairing the free exercise of religion." The constitution also says that the traditions of the country are protected by statute and that if a statute protecting a tradition is challenged as violating rights provided in the constitution, protection of the tradition "shall be considered a compelling social purpose warranting...governmental action."

Religious entities are required to register as nonprofit organizations to be exempt from taxation.

While there is no religious education in public schools, private schools teach religion in addition to the curriculum established by the Department of Education. The government may fund nonreligious activities in religiously affiliated schools.

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

Government Practices

Senior government officials regularly met with religious leaders to promote the government's commitment to freedom of religion.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some U.S. missionaries, church workers, and religious teachers from the Church of Jesus Christ, the United Church of Christ, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh-day Adventists departed the country. The government closed its borders to international travelers from March 2020 to May 2021, and multiple religious leaders reported many of their staff and congregation members had to remain outside the country. At year's end, the backlog of returnees outpaced the limited number of repatriation seats available.

The government continued to provide grants to private, church-affiliated schools and continued to state it made no distinction between public and private schools in its grant programs. All private schools are either Catholic or Protestant. There are no non-Christian religious schools in the country.

National and state government events routinely opened and closed with a prayer, invocation, or benediction from a Protestant or Catholic clergy member, and often two, one from each group.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Ahmadi Muslim community that had previously been established at a community center in Pohnpei State was inactive during the year due to the community organizers being off-island due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions. Ahmadi Muslims reported that the closure of the center was not due to any mistreatment of their community. The community moved from Kosrae to Pohnpei in 2017.

The Interdenominational Council in Pohnpei stated it encouraged unity among religious groups by addressing local social problems such as drug abuse and suicide and by assisting the government's task force with anti-human-trafficking efforts, as well as by promoting cooperation among religious communities. Council officials noted that the council met annually with other religious groups in the country to promote unity and cooperation, for example, by implementing measures to assure social distancing at church services. The council was inactive for most of the year as a result of key members being unable to return to the country due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, but it restarted monthly meetings in November.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with senior government officials and local religious leaders to stress the primacy of the constitution and its provisions regarding religious freedom over local laws or practices.

Embassy officials met in Pohnpei and Yap States with representatives of St. Mary's Catholic Church, Yap Catholic High School, Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, and Pacific Mission Fellowship to discuss religious tolerance, interdenominational cooperation, and ways their congregations could help support local shelters for victims of human trafficking and domestic violence.