

NAMIBIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of belief and the right to practice, profess, and promote any religion. The government periodically included religious leaders in discussions regarding issues affecting the country and in national events. The government held both formal and informal consultations with leaders of major religious groups during the year to discuss socioeconomic issues, including vaccines, community responses to COVID-19, and human rights.

The nongovernmental Interfaith Council consisting of members of various Christian and Muslim groups, as well as representatives of the Jewish and Baha'i faiths, met on a regular basis to coordinate their approach to the government to address the socioeconomic needs of their congregations with greater urgency and to use the council's collective voice to strengthen the influence of religious groups in general.

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with the government-run Office of the Ombudsman and the Namibian Correctional Services to discuss plans for Muslim prisoners to have access to their religious leaders as soon as COVID-19 pandemic restrictions permitted. Embassy representatives, including at the senior level, met with religious leaders and the Interfaith Council to better understand the country's religious environment and potential areas of religious discrimination.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.7 million (midyear 2021). According to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey released in 2015, approximately 97 percent of the population identifies as Christian. According to church statistics and the government's 2013 Demographic and Health Survey (the latest government data available), approximately 50 percent identify as Lutheran and 20 percent as Catholic. Other religious groups, including Anglican, various Reformed denominations, Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, evangelicals, charismatics, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, make up the remaining 27 percent of the population that is Christian. The number of Pentecostal and charismatic churches is growing. Some Zionist churches combine Christianity and traditional African beliefs. Muslims, Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists,

atheists, and other non-Christians together constitute approximately 3 percent of the population and reside primarily in urban areas.

Muslims are predominantly Sunni. Historically many were immigrants from elsewhere in Africa, South Asia, or recent converts; however, there is a growing indigenous Muslim community of multigenerational families.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution specifies the country is a secular state, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the right to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain, and promote any religion. It also specifies, “No persons may be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status.” These rights may be subject to “reasonable restrictions” justified by interests such as “the sovereignty and integrity of Namibia, national security, public order, decency, or morality.”

The law allows recognition of any religious group as a voluntary association, without the need to register with the government. Religious groups may also register as nonprofit organizations (an “association without gain”) with the Ministry of Industrialization, Trade, and SME (small to medium enterprise) Development. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations and religious groups formed as voluntary associations are exempt from paying taxes. If a religious group registers as a welfare organization, it may seek to purchase land at a reduced rate. Traditional authorities or town councils determine whether to grant the reduced rate based on whether the organization’s use of the land will benefit the community.

The constitution permits religious groups to establish private schools, provided no student is denied admission based on creed. The government school curriculum contains a nonsectarian “religious and moral education” component that includes education on moral principles and human rights and introduces students to a variety of African traditions and religions, as well as world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Baha’i Faith, and Rastafarianism.

Similar to other foreigners seeking to work in the country, religious workers must obtain a work visa. There is no separate religious worker visa.

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

Government Practices

The government Office of the Ombudsman stated it did not receive any religion-related complaints during the year. A Muslim member of the Interfaith Council, who had complained in 2020 about prison officials denying Muslim prisoners access to his mosque's leadership because of the blanket suspension of prison visitors by the Namibian Correctional Service due to COVID-19, said he would revisit his concerns about access when the pandemic subsided.

The government periodically included religious leaders in discussions regarding issues affecting the country and in national events. The government, to include President Hage Geingob, the Minister of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication, and Child Welfare, and representatives from the Ministry of Labor, held formal, informal, and ad hoc consultations with leaders of major religious groups, including the Interfaith Council, the Council of Churches that represents Christian denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Roman Catholic Church, and the Muslim community. The consultations were to strengthen government-interfaith community cooperation in administering vaccines, countering medical disinformation, and improving community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and to discuss current socioeconomic, human rights, and civil rights matters affecting the nation.

Religious leaders continued to state that they occasionally faced problems with the government regarding visas. Members of the Interfaith Council said that religious volunteers sometimes had difficulty obtaining visas, but they said this was due to general visa difficulties and their work not clearly falling into any of the country's visa categories and not to the targeting of religious workers. The religious leaders stated nonreligious organizations and businesspersons also had difficulty obtaining visas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The nongovernmental Interfaith Council consisting of members of various Christian and Muslim groups, as well as representatives of the Jewish and Baha'i faiths, held regular meetings and advocated for the government to address the

socioeconomic needs of their congregations with greater urgency. The Interfaith Council also engaged with the government with the goal of using the council's collective voice to strengthen the influence of religious groups. For example, some Christian leaders were invited by the Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication, and Social Welfare to review and validate the country's draft national strategy on trafficking in persons, as a way to encourage religious groups to provide community support and offer shelter to trafficking victims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives engaged with the Office of the Ombudsman and the Namibian Correctional Services to revisit previous concerns Muslim leaders expressed about religious leader access to prisoners and to discuss plans for Muslim prisoners to be allowed visitation by their religious leaders as soon as COVID-19 pandemic restrictions permitted.

Embassy representatives, including at the senior level, met with the Interfaith Council and other religious leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, and Muslim communities to gain their perspectives on potential areas of religious discrimination and the general state of faith in the country.