

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely. From April to June, Prime Minister James Marape conducted a nationwide poll on a proposed constitutional amendment defining the country as Christian. The government did not release the results of the poll by year's end. Political opponents, civil society groups, and some religious groups objected to the proposed amendment, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation and that the amendment could spark conflict among the largest faith groups. Marape said the government would erect a monument to the country's Christian identity in Peace Park in Port Moresby, which is land owned by the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is. Some national ministries continued to instruct civil servants to participate in weekly prayer devotionals, but government officials said individuals could opt out without repercussions. Students were able to opt out of religious instruction and Christian life studies courses. Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituencies to carry out religious activities. All of these institutions were Christian.

Civil society representatives and religious leaders said gender-based violence, including the killing of women and their daughters accused of sorcery, was increasing in the country, and that many perpetrators were not prosecuted because they had connections to senior government officials/societal leaders. The Catholic Diocese of Wabag included in its 2021-2025 pastoral plan instructions to pastors to raise awareness and aid victims of violence related to accusations of sorcery. The diocese reported there were 11 women and three girls under its care during the year because they were victims of such violence. According to the diocese, two women accused of sorcery died as a result of being beaten and tortured. Media reported that seven Catholic priests were assaulted and robbed in their home in the Catholic Diocese of Alotau; one priest was severely injured and hospitalized. Sources said the attackers may have targeted the priests to gain attention from the government.

U.S. embassy officials discussed with government officials, including from the Department for Community Development and Religion, the importance of equitable distribution of governmental support for religious groups. Embassy officials engaged with government officials and civil society representatives to ensure any moves to declare the country a Christian nation did not conflict with the

freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution. The Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and religious groups' roles as health and educational service providers in regular meetings with the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches (PNGCC) and local religious leaders. Embassy officials attended a monthly interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.4 million (midyear 2021). According to the most recent census in 2011, 98 percent of citizens identified as Christian. Approximately 26 percent of the population is Roman Catholic; 18 percent Evangelical Lutheran; 13 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 10 percent Pentecostal; 10 percent United Church (an offshoot of the London Missionary Society, Australian Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand); 6 percent Evangelical Alliance; 3 percent Anglican; and 3 percent Baptist. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Kwato Church, and the Salvation Army, together constitute 9 percent. There are approximately 60,500 members of the Baha'i Faith, constituting less than 1 percent of the population, and 2 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Newer, self-identified fundamentalist Christian religious groups are increasing. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with indigenous beliefs and practices. The Jewish community in Port Moresby (locally referred to as the Messianic group) totals approximately 800 members, of whom almost 40 percent are local converts. The Muslim community numbers approximately 10,000, including local converts. Most Muslim expatriate workers live in Port Moresby, and Muslim converts live in Port Moresby or villages in the highlands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Section 45 of the constitution provides the individual the right to "freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs," except where that practice infringes on another person's rights or where it violates public laws, safety, and the welfare of marginalized groups. The preamble of the constitution refers to "our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours." There is no official state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government in order to hold bank accounts, own properties in the religious group's name, have limited individual liability, and apply to the Internal Revenue Commission for exemption on income tax and the Department of Treasury for exemption of import duty. The IRC does not maintain accurate information on how many groups are registered or from what religious groups. To register, groups must provide documentation, including a list of board or executive committee members and a constitution.

According to the law, religious instruction in public schools is noncompulsory, but Christian education is offered in most public schools. Students of non-Christian religious groups may opt out with approval of the school principal. Religious organizations are free to establish private schools, but students deciding to opt out of religious instruction might be asked to transfer to public schools.

Foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. Religious workers receive a three-year special exemption visa from the government. Applications for the visa require a sponsor letter from a religious group in the country, an approved work permit from the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, and a 100 kina (\$28) fee.

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

Government Practices

In April, the Department of Community Development and Religion and the Papua New Guinea Constitutional Law Reform Commission finalized drafting instructions on a constitutional amendment that would define the country as Christian. From April to June, Prime Minister Marape conducted a nationwide poll on the proposed amendment. Media reported Marape said the change would not take away the rights of a person as enumerated in the constitution, but it would reflect the fact that the majority of citizens in the country practice Christianity. He said, "There is a need to redefine and give absolute prominence to our Christian beliefs....In our nation of a thousand tribes, I believe Christianity can bind us together as one nation." Marape said the government would commit two million kina (\$570,000) to help in the polling process and another three million kina (\$855,000) for a unity pillar monument at the Peace Park in Port Moresby meant to symbolize the country's Christian identity. Peace Park is located on land owned by the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is, which at year's end was in litigation with the government over the issue. The results of the public poll had not yet been presented to parliament at year's end. Political opponents, civil society

groups, and some religious groups, including the PNG Council of Churches, Catholic Church, Baha'i Faith, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Evangelical Alliance, objected to the proposed amendment, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation, and that the controversy could potentially cause a "holy war" among the largest faith groups for supremacy of one denomination over the others and against religious minorities. They said if the country were declared Christian, the government would be obliged to identify which denomination was the state church. Some religious opponents of the amendment also said it would undercut the sentiment that all people are children of God.

Parliamentary sessions and most government meetings continued to begin and end with Christian prayers, but according to parliament officials, persons of different faiths were able to opt out with no repercussions. The Speaker of the House selected a member of parliament to start the sessions with a Christian prayer. According to senior government officials, some national government agencies continued to tell public servants they had to attend weekly morning devotions for 10 to 20 minutes; the specific day of the devotion varied by region and agency. Pastors from different Christian denominations led the morning devotional sessions. Individuals choosing to opt out of these activities could do so without negative consequences, according to the same government officials.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools. Such instruction remained legally noncompulsory, although almost all students attended. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and there was no standard curriculum. Children whose parents did not wish them to attend religious instruction classes, or take Christian life studies classes, were able to opt out, and there were no cases reported during the year of a principal denying approval.

The government continued to fund churches to deliver health and education services through the Church-State Partnership Program, which received additional funding from international partners. PNGCC member churches – including the Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, United, and Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Salvation Army, as well as other churches and organizations as associate members – continued to operate approximately 60 percent of schools and health services in the country, and the government subsidized these institutions using a formula based on the number of schools and health centers run by each church. In addition, the government continued to pay the salaries of and provide benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff

(generally members of the civil service) who worked at these church-administered institutions, as it did for teachers and health staff of national institutions. The church-administered institutions provided services to the general population irrespective of religious beliefs, and operations were not religious in nature.

Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituencies to carry out religious activities. All of these institutions were Christian.

The PNGCC continued to work with provincial governments to establish provincial church councils.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Civil society representatives and religious leaders said gender-based violence, including the killing of women and their daughters accused of sorcery, was increasing, and that many of those responsible were not prosecuted because they had highly placed connections in the police or with political figures. Sources stated that sorcery practices had roots in the country's pre-Christian history, and since those days, such practices have been "detected" by traditional "seers."

Media reported the Catholic Diocese of Wabag included in its 2021-2025 pastoral plan instructions to pastors to raise awareness and aid victims of violence related to accusations of sorcery. The diocese reported there were 11 women and three girls under its care during the year. According to the diocese, during the year, two women accused of sorcery died as a result of being beaten and tortured. In late December, a video went viral on social media showing the severe physical abuse of seven women accused of practicing sorcery – five in Kagua-Erave District, Southern Highlands Province, where three died from injuries, and two in Pogera, Enga Province. In response, national leaders called for measures to protect women.

Media reported that in April in the Catholic Diocese of Alotau, seven Catholic priests were assaulted and robbed in their home by members of a local organized gang. Sources said the attackers may have targeted the priests to gain attention from the government to the stated grievances of the gang – more employment opportunities and services for villages controlled by it. One priest was hospitalized and recovered months later. Media reported the thieves stole laptops, mobile phones, cash, and other valuables, including a new outboard motor, solar panels, a projector, and a television. The Bishop of Alotau told media the attack "was of

such magnitude, involving many persons, we could almost conclude it was premeditated.” Police investigated but took no action as of year’s end.

As in previous year, religious leaders, through the Church-State Partnership Program, discussed working together to address social issues that affected congregation members, such as education, health, gender equality, fragmentation of family values, and sorcery-related violence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officers discussed with government officials, including those from the Department for Community Development and Religion, the importance of equitable distribution of government support for religious groups. In June, the Ambassador hosted a roundtable to engage on the importance of interfaith dialogue and to solicit faith leaders’ views on the public poll regarding the proposed constitutional amendment to declare Papua New Guinea a Christian country. In August, embassy officers attended national prayer events and Repentance Day ceremonies, engaging key government officials and civil society leaders on the importance of religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and the relationship between religion and state. Embassy officials attended a monthly interfaith dialogue that evolved after World Religion Day in January and gained momentum following a June meeting with the Ambassador.

Embassy representatives attended church-organized activities, such as a tour of the new National Baha’i House of Worship, and they participated in discussions on the role of churches in development and the importance of including a broad spectrum of religious groups in these efforts. Embassy officials asked attendees, including government officials and civil society representatives, to ensure any moves to declare the country a Christian nation did not conflict with the freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution.

In regular meetings with the PNGCC and local religious leaders from the Evangelical Alliance, National Spiritual Assembly of Baha’is, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious tolerance and religious groups’ role as health and educational service providers.