

SEYCHELLES 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds and forbids any laws establishing any religion or imposing any religious observance. It provides for freedom of religion, including the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religion. Because of COVID-19 restrictions that limited gatherings, the government suspended public discussion of a proposed amendment to the law regulating religious groups and associations (the Registration Act) that would tighten registration and fraud-detection mechanisms. A Catholic priest was detained briefly on April 4 and fined for allowing too many persons in his church for Easter Mass, in contravention of COVID-19 protocols. The government consulted with the Seychelles Interfaith Council (SIFCO), an interfaith group composed of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, and other religious groups present in the country, on issues directly affecting religious groups as well as the country. President Wavel Ramkalawan met with the outgoing chair of SIFCO, Bishop Denis Wiehe, in October to discuss the future of interreligious affairs and the continued role of SIFCO. SIFCO supported the amendment to the Registration Act; it continued to express concern regarding the number of religious groups that registered as nongovernmental organizations, as well as the registration process, which SIFCO said could attract fraudulent religious groups to the country. The President also met with Catholic leaders, members of the Seychelles Bible Society, the secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance, and members of the newly created National Muslim Council of Seychelles. The President said he supported the Seychelles Bible Society project to create a "Bible House," which would be a center for Bible study and would provide counseling services to various Christian groups. Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, some non-Catholic students in public schools providing Catholic instruction did not have access to alternative activities during those classes.

SIFCO members participated in national events, including special interfaith prayers for COVID-19 victims and an end to the pandemic, as well as prayers with multiple religious leaders on the country's national day, June 29.

The U.S. embassy in Mauritius monitored religious freedom in Seychelles. However, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and restrictions on gatherings, there were no significant engagements during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 96,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2010 census conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, (the most recent), approximately 76 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups include Anglicans (6 percent), Hindus (2.4 percent), and Muslims (1.6 percent). Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Brahma Kumaris, and Christian groups, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, Nazarites, Orthodox, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds and forbids any laws establishing any religion or imposing any religious observance. The constitution permits limitations on freedom of religion only "as prescribed by a law and necessary in a democratic society" in the interest of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health as well as to protect the rights and freedoms of other persons. It provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right of individuals to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate their religion in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community with others, in public or private. These rights may be subject to limitations stated in the constitution. The constitution stipulates individuals shall not be required to take a religious oath counter to their religious beliefs or profess any religion as a prerequisite for public office.

The law requires registration for all religious groups as either corporations or associations. To apply through the Registrar of Associations, a group must submit its name, location, rules, and list of assets; the name, occupation, and addresses of officers and at least seven members; and the resolution appointing its officers. A minimum of seven members is required to register an association. To receive tax benefits, including tax exemptions on the importation of goods and for projects that are considered to advance the country's socioeconomic goals and meet certain other criteria, religious groups must also register with the Finance Ministry. The government recognizes the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, Islamic groups (Quran and Sunnah Society of Seychelles, Islamic Society of Seychelles, and Islamic Foundation of Seychelles), and the Baha'i local spiritual assembly through individual acts of incorporation.

According to the penal code, any act or words that deliberately incite hatred, contempt, or disaffection against individuals or groups are misdemeanors and carry a penalty of imprisonment for one year.

Although no penalties are prescribed for unregistered groups, only those registered as corporate bodies or associations have legal status and certain rights, for example, ability to petition the state broadcaster for airtime for religious programming or permission to provide spiritual counsel in prisons.

The constitution prohibits compulsory religious education or participation in religious ceremonies in state schools but permits religious groups to provide religious instruction. Religious instruction is provided by the Catholic and Anglican Churches and is offered during school hours. There are no faith-based schools.

The law prohibits religious groups from obtaining radio or television licenses. The state-funded Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) provides broadcast time to religious groups on national radio and for an early morning television program. Access to radio programming is granted based on the size of each group's membership. Religious groups may publish newspapers.

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

Government Practices

Because of COVID-19 restrictions that limited gatherings, the government suspended public discussion of a proposed amendment to the law regulating religious groups and associations (the Registration Act). The amendment would impose new criteria for registering heads of religious groups and establish mechanisms to detect financial fraud and terrorist financing through religious groups. SIFCO supported the amendment and continued to express concern regarding the number of religious groups that registered as nongovernmental organizations. SIFCO also expressed concerns about the registration process, which it said could attract fraudulent religious groups to the country, some of which could be involved in money laundering.

On April 4, a Catholic priest in the district of Belombre was detained and fined 500 rupees (\$38) for allowing too many persons in his church for Easter Mass, in violation of COVID-19 protocols. Members of his congregation paid the fine for

him. The priest stated that it was the right of the faithful to gather and pray together in any number. The priest was released from custody the same day.

Some religious leaders said that churches were being more tightly restricted than restaurants and other hospitality establishments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The SBC continued to broadcast religious programming for holidays such as Christmas, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Due to COVID-19 restrictions that prohibited large gatherings, the SBC continued to broadcast 90-minute Catholic and Anglican services weekly on the radio, and it opened the television channels to all other groups for prayer services, including regular Friday prayers for Muslims. The state-funded broadcaster continued to review and approve all other religious programming to ensure hate speech was not broadcast. Other religious programming consisted of 15-minute prerecorded prayers by Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Seventh-day Adventist, Catholic, and Anglican groups every two weeks. Private radio and television stations did not feature religious programs.

President Ramkalawan met with the outgoing chair of SIFCO, Bishop Denis Wiehe, in October as part of his pledge to respond to SIFCO's call for the government to consult religious leaders in the lawmaking process. The President then announced that the government would not provide land at Ile Perseverance for SIFCO to build an interfaith house of worship because each faith group had different rites; the government would instead assist the various groups to build their own places of worship. SIFCO, which had leased the land in question for 50 years, stated, "The President was entitled to his views regarding the use of the land, and SIFCO has proposed to build an orthodox church [instead of the interfaith house of worship]." The SIFCO statement continued, "SIFCO is an independent NGO that has close relations with the government regarding policies and laws and respects all opinions and views. [The] ultimate decision [about how it uses land] rests, however, with its management and its members."

President Ramkalawan met with representatives of several religious groups throughout the year, including Catholic leaders, members of the Seychelles Bible Society, the secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance, and members of the newly created National Muslim Council of Seychelles. When he met with the Seychelles Bible Society in March, the President said he supported its project to create a "Bible House," which would be a center for Bible study and would provide counseling services to various Christian groups. With the Muslim Council

of Seychelles, the President's discussions centered on the role of that new umbrella organization in representing the three Muslim groups in the country.

On August 1, fulfilling a promise made during his election campaign, the President hosted an interfaith prayer event in the government's executive offices attended by all members of the Cabinet, the First Lady, and representatives of all the SIFCO member faith groups. The event was broadcast live on television and radio.

Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, non-Catholic students in some public schools providing Catholic instruction were not offered alternative activities during those classes, according to parents.

Various religious groups stated they continued to engage with prison authorities to carry out spiritual and religious activities in prisons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

SIFCO members participated in national events, including special interfaith prayers for COVID-19 victims and an end to the pandemic, as well as prayers with multiple religious leaders for the nation on the country's national day, June 29.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy in Mauritius continued to monitor religious freedom and other issues in Seychelles, but due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and limits on in-person gatherings, there were no significant engagements during the year.