

ESWATINI 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. These rights may be limited by laws “reasonably required” in the interest of defense, public safety, order, morality, health, or protecting the rights of others. The law requires religious groups to register with the government.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest of 2021, the government implemented a new policy that required religious groups to request permission to hold major events, such as all-night vigils, so those events could be reviewed in advance for security implications; faith groups said the new requirements were restrictive. Schools fully reopened nationwide in September following widespread closures due to the 2021 unrest and the pandemic, but representatives of various religious groups, including some Christians, continued to state the government’s policy mandating Christian instruction in schools was harmful to society because it fostered ignorance of other religions. Faith leaders said religious groups were increasingly restricted and excluded from government and community-led dialogue and engagement. Non-Christian groups said the government continued to provide favorable treatment to Christian beliefs and organizations, such as free access to radio and television time.

Religious leaders said formal, government-facilitated interfaith dialogues did not take place during the year but that religious communities resumed public activities, held informal interfaith discussions, and collaborated on some community service or development initiatives. For example, Baha’i leaders hosted a nongovernmental, interfaith religious dialogue, “My Faith My Community,” in July with Christian, Muslim, and other groups. Muslim leaders continued to report negative and suspicious views of Islam in society.

The U.S. Ambassador met with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on issues of religious freedom and tolerance, as linked to good governance, civil discourse, restoration of peace, and reconciliation. The Ambassador and U.S. embassy officials also engaged with civil

society groups and religious leaders of different faiths on religious issues, including during an embassy-hosted roundtable on October 20 that emphasized the importance of government cooperation with faith groups on major social issues and developing and maintaining interfaith dialogue in the country. The Ambassador encouraged faith leaders, in the spirit of tolerance, to help build momentum in their communities toward an inclusive and transparent national dialogue to promote healing following the 2021 civil unrest.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.1 million (mid-year 2022). Religious leaders estimate 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent is Muslim (of whom many are not Swati, the dominant ethnic group in the country), and the remainder belong to other religious groups, including some with Indigenous African beliefs. According to anecdotal reports, approximately 40 percent of the population practices Zionism, a blend of Christianity and traditional Swati ceremonies and rituals that is widely observed in rural areas. Some adherents of Zionism self-identify as evangelical Christians. Approximately 20 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups represented include Anglicans, Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarians, Hindus, Jews, and Baha'is.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. These rights may be limited by laws that are "reasonably required" in the interest of defense, public safety, order, morality, health, or protecting the rights of others. The constitution provides religious groups the right to establish and operate private schools and to provide religious instruction for their students without interference from government.

The law requires religious groups to register with government. The MHA is the government agency responsible for monitoring religious affairs in the country. To register as a religious group, Christian groups must apply through one of the country's three umbrella religious bodies, the League of Churches, the Swaziland Conference of Churches, or the Council of Swaziland Churches, for a recommendation that is routinely granted and does not impede registration, according to church leaders. The application process requires a group to provide its constitution, membership, and physical location, along with the relevant umbrella body's recommendation, to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Trade, which then registers the organization. For Indigenous religious groups and non-Christian religious organizations, authorities consider proof of a religious leader, a congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant registration. Registered religious groups are exempt from taxation, but contributions are not tax deductible. The government does not publicize the numbers and types of religious groups registered.

All prospective builders, including religious groups, must obtain government permission for the construction of new buildings in urban areas as well as permission from the appropriate chief and chief's advisory council for new buildings in rural areas. In some rural communities, chiefs have designated special committees to allocate land to religious groups for a minimal fee.

Christian religious instruction is mandatory in public primary schools per a 2017 directive from the Prime Minister and is incorporated into the daily morning assembly. Christian education is also compulsory in public secondary schools. There are no opt-out procedures. Religious education is neither prohibited nor mandated in private schools.

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

Government Practices

In the aftermath of COVID-19 restrictions and civil unrest in 2021, the government required all faith groups, including Christian faith groups, to request permission in advance from local traditional authorities (*umphakatsi*) or municipal offices to hold major prayer events, such as all-night vigils or public days of prayer. Officials stated the policy was introduced so authorities could review events for security

implications. According to religious leaders, these procedures constituted new restrictions on these common and popular events. There were no reports of groups being denied permission to hold events, but some said delays in obtaining permission, due to the government's slow bureaucracy, were "unreasonable."

The government registered some religious groups during the year but did not publicize how many or their identities. Some groups said the requirement to register with the Register of Companies in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Trade meant they were treated more like businesses than religious groups. Registering via the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Trade was unwieldy, bureaucratic, and subject to excessive processing times, according to several church group leaders, prompting some groups to simply not register. In contrast, church groups said that the MHA provided professional assistance to and oversight of religious affairs in the country and acted in the interests of faith communities and churches. Legislation pending since 2017 to regulate churches and church-related nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and place them within the MHA's purview did not advance during the year.

Schools fully reopened nationwide in September following widespread closures due to unrest and the pandemic in 2021. By common practice, public schools began each day with Christian prayers; prayers from other faiths were not permitted. Religious leaders said children of other faiths had no option but to be present during these prayers but were not otherwise pressured or proselytized. According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, school administrations continued to permit only Christian religious youth clubs to operate in public schools. Other religious group leaders said they wanted to be able to openly practice their faiths at schools and in public places, but that they chose not to complain about the Christian youth club policy in the interest of interfaith harmony. There were no reports of non-Christian groups objecting to the prayers or religious youth club policy during the year.

Representatives of various religious groups, including some Christians, however, continued to say the government's policy mandating Christian instruction in schools was harmful to society because it fostered ignorance of other religions. These groups, which included the Muslim community, Seventh-day Adventists, the Catholic Church, and representatives of the Jewish community, highlighted the issue for awareness but did not publicly object to the government's policy.

Muslim community leaders said the directive increased misperceptions of their faith because children learned about Islam from often erroneous information on social media instead of materials taught in school. The Christian instruction requirement was put into place by a directive from the Prime Minister in 2017. Prior to the directive, school textbooks included general education on world religions. A government-planned review of the compulsory Christian education requirement was announced in 2020 but did not take place in 2021 or 2022.

Seventh-day Adventists continued to raise the issue that many mandatory official functions, such as voting in elections and testing in schools, took place on Saturdays and they were often unable to obtain religious exceptions to attend worship services on those days. Seventh-day Adventists again chose not to register under one of the three main religious umbrella bodies as required by law and instead registered as a private entity. Seventh-day Adventists stated that as a result, they were unable to have tax-exempt status like other registered religious groups.

Leaders of all faiths said religious groups were increasingly restricted and excluded from government- and community-led dialogue and engagement. Many religious groups reported they were not invited to government-led prayer breakfasts and religious gatherings; they claimed invitations were only extended to faith groups aligned with the King. Churches aligned with the monarchy included the League of Swaziland Churches and other affiliated Zionist churches, which celebrated the traditional monarchical calendar in collaboration with government.

Non-Christian groups reported authorities provided preferential benefits to Christian groups, such as free time on state television and radio, for each of the three Christian umbrella religious bodies and their affiliates to broadcast daily religious services. Local newspapers continued to provide free space in their announcement sections to Christian groups but not to non-Christian groups. Non-Christian groups had to pay for access to public communications and were not guaranteed equal time with Christian groups.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, continued to align itself and its official calendar only with Christian faith-based traditions, and it supported Christian activities, such as commemorating Christian holidays and Christian-

influenced traditional cultural holiday rituals, while not making equal efforts to recognize or observe the holidays of other faiths. Official government programs often opened with a Christian prayer and several government ministers held Christian prayer vigils that civil servants were expected to attend. The government, however, generally did not interfere with non-Christian religious groups' holding their own private observances as long as they did not compete for official recognition or proselytize publicly. For example, the government did not interfere with Baha'i-owned businesses closing on Baha'i holidays. Muslim leaders did not request or draw attention to the practice and recognition of Muslim holidays but celebrated these holidays privately within their own communities.

Citizens were also frequently urged to attend royal festivals and events celebrating traditional Swati culture and religious beliefs; some reported fear of reprisal for nonattendance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders said formal, government-facilitated interfaith dialogues did not take place during the year, as they had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but religious communities resumed public activities, held informal interfaith discussions, and collaborated on some community service or development initiatives. For example, Bahá'í leaders hosted a nongovernmental interfaith religious dialogue in July titled, "My Faith My Community," that included Christian, Muslim, and other groups. This was the first such event since 2019, before the pandemic.

Some Muslim leaders continued to report that suspicious and negative views remained towards the Islamic faith, traditions, and practices in communities throughout the country, which contributed to a Muslim sense of marginalization, particularly in rural areas where traditional Swati practices dominated. It was difficult to categorize the root causes of marginalization as being solely based on religious identity, however, because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, with Muslims in the country being primarily of South Asian descent. Some Muslim community members who operated small businesses in urban settings where competition for customers was highest said discrimination against their businesses increased during the year because of the government's policies

favoring Swati-owned businesses. Muslim leaders reported harmonious relations between the larger Sunni population and the smaller Shi'a community in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy officials engaged with government officials from the MFA and MHA on religious freedom and tolerance issues and urged the government to move forward on the pending legislation to support churches and church-related NGOs. Embassy officials also encouraged the government to treat all faith groups equally, as required by the constitution.

The Ambassador and embassy officials engaged with civil society and religious leaders of different faiths on various issues. During a roundtable on October 20, for example, the Ambassador and embassy officials convened Catholic, Hindu, Seventh-day Adventist, and other Protestant leaders, as well as officials from the Council of Churches and the MHA, to underscore the importance of involving religious leaders in relevant political discussions with the government, in COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, and efforts to stop trafficking in persons and gender-based violence. The Ambassador encouraged faith leaders, in a spirit of tolerance, to help build momentum in their communities toward an inclusive and transparent national dialogue to promote healing following the 2021 civil unrest.