

# **FIJI 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of religion and state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against any religious group a criminal offense. Religious groups must register with the government.

In November, during the run-up to December parliamentary elections, an online Hindu publication accused the attorney general, with the backing of the government, of a “jihad” against Hindus. Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama condemned the article as “fake” and said the government would not tolerate antagonism against any faith.

Police investigated several separate incidents in January, April, May, and September in which police charged individuals with sacrilege. The incidents affected Hindu and Christian places of worship. The police investigation into a 2021 incident in which a Christian pastor was accused of sacrilege involving a sacred Hindu object remained pending at year’s end.

In April, the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires hosted events marking Lent and Ramadan for several members of multiple religious communities. The U.S. embassy used social media to highlight U.S. support for religious diversity in the country.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 944,000 (midyear 2022). According to the 2007 census (the most recent with a breakdown by religion), 64.5 percent of the population is Christian, 27.9 percent Hindu, and 6.3 percent Muslim. There are small Baha’i, Jewish and Sikh communities throughout the country. Protestants make up 45 percent of the population, of which 34.6 percent are Methodist, 5.7 percent Assembly of God, 3.9 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 0.8 percent Anglican. Roman Catholics make up 9.1 percent of the population, and other Christian groups together comprise 10.4 percent.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most indigenous Fijians, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. Most Indian Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while an estimated 20 percent are Muslim and 6 percent Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community are Christian, while the small community of mixed European and Fijian ancestry is predominantly Christian.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The government may limit these rights by law to protect the freedoms of others or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, and/or nuisance. The constitution mandates separation of religion and state. Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution provides that individuals may not assert religious belief as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions. Sacrilege is outlawed and is defined as committing any crime within a place of worship after breaking and entering or before exiting with force, or intentionally committing any act of disrespect in a place of worship. Penalties may include up to 14 years in prison.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees, who may then hold land or property for the groups. To register, religious bodies must submit applications to the registrar of titles office. Applications must include the names and identification of the trustees signed by the head of the religious body seeking registration, a copy of the constitution of the proposed religious body, title documents for the land used by the religious body, and a registration fee of 2.30 Fiji dollars (\$1). Registered religious bodies receive exemption from taxes after approval from the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, on the condition they operate in a nonprofit and noncompetitive capacity. By law, religious bodies that hold title to land or property must register their houses of worship, including their

land, and show proof of title. The law does not address conditions for religious organizations that do not hold title to land.

Permits are required for any public meeting on public property organized by religious groups, except for regular religious services in houses of worship.

There is no required religious instruction for children or youth. Private or religious groups sometimes own or manage school properties, but the Ministry of Education administers and regulates the curriculum. Religious groups have the right to establish, maintain, and manage places of education, whether or not they receive financial assistance from the state, provided the institution maintains educational standards. The law permits noncompulsory religious instruction in all schools, enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations but receiving government support to offer religious instruction. Schools may incorporate religious elements, such as class prayer, as long as they do not require teachers to participate, and students may be excused if their parents request it. The government provides funding and education assistance to public schools, as well as schools owned and operated by religious organizations, on a per-pupil basis. The law states that schools must remain open to all students, regardless of religious and/or ethnic origin. According to the law, the government ensures free tuition for primary and secondary schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, who took office on December 24, former prime minister Voreqe Bainimarama, other cabinet ministers, and members of parliament publicly emphasized religious tolerance in the context of an election campaign in which religious intolerance was a subject of discussion. On December 25, as a part of his first Christmas address, Prime Minister Rabuka encouraged Fijians to be kind and to accept those with different religious beliefs. On November 15, during the lead-up to the December 14 general election, Bainimarama spoke out against religious intolerance, stating he would not tolerate antagonism against any faith. This followed an article in the online publication *Hindu Post* alleging that then attorney general Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum was “engaging in Jihad against Hindus through the patronage of the Fijian

government and with the help of Pakistan.” The article further stated that in recent years, attacks against Hindus had reached “monstrous proportions.” Bainimarama condemned the article as “fake,” declared it was circulated by “those in Fiji who have an agenda against the government,” and stressed that “Christians, Hindus and Muslims are all accepted and protected in Fiji.”

A decision on an appeal against the 2018 acquittal of three staff members of the *Fiji Times* on sedition charges remained pending at year’s end. The three, who included the editor in chief, were charged based on the 2016 publication of a letter to the *Fiji Times*’ indigenous-language newspaper *Nai Lalakai* that the government characterized as antagonistic toward the country’s Muslim community.

The Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Hindu and Muslim groups operated numerous schools, including secondary schools, that were eligible for government subsidies based on the size of their student population.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On January 28, police opened an investigation into an incident in which thieves broke into the Baulevu Nav Durga Temple and set a religious text on fire. The investigation remained pending at year’s end.

On February 18, police charged a man with sacrilege and breaking into the Ram Mandir Temple in Sigatoka, Nadroga, stating he stole items valued at 4,000 Fijian dollars (\$1,838). Court proceedings remained pending at year’s end.

On April 4, police charged a man with sacrilege, two counts of theft, and two counts of burglary for breaking into and stealing assorted items from a church and a pastor’s residence in Nakasi in April. Court proceedings remained pending at year’s end.

On May 29, police charged a 17-year-old youth with two counts of sacrilege, stating he broke into a family temple in Waituri, Nausori, and set fire to religious books and religious figures inside the temple. Court proceedings remained pending at year’s end.

On September 25, police arrested five men and a juvenile for their alleged involvement in an incident of sacrilege at the Tovata Methodist Church in Suva. Police charged the six individuals with breaking into and stealing money and other valuable items stored inside the church. Court proceedings remained pending at year's end.

The police investigation into a 2021 incident in which witnesses saw Pastor Rajesh Gounder in a video demolishing a statue of a Hindu effigy in Lautoka and charged with criminal sacrilege remained pending at year's end.

A majority of the country's traditional chiefs continued to belong to the Methodist Church, which, sources stated, remained influential among indigenous persons, particularly in rural areas, where 44 percent of the population lives, according to the 2017 census.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The embassy used social media posts and videos that highlighted diverse religious traditions in the country and religious holidays, including Diwali, Eid al-Adha, Navratri, and Yom Kippur, to promote religious pluralism and tolerance.

On April 5, the Chargé d'Affaires hosted an event in observation of the season of Lent with the local Christian community. The Charge d'Affaires also hosted an iftar on April 7 with members of the Muslim community to promote tolerance and respect for the religious freedom of minority communities.