

NAMIBIA 2022 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 law allows recognition of any religious group as a voluntary association and does not require registration with the government. The constitution allows religious groups to operate private schools so long as school admission is not based on the student's religion.

In February, Namibia Police (NAMPOL) shut down what they characterized as “fake churches” based on allegations that the churches were promoting civil unrest, inciting violence, engaging in unsafe health practices, and committing fraud. On February 28, the Namibian Christian Freedom Fighters (NCFF), a Christian activist group, staged a demonstration to protest what it said was unfair treatment by police and the unconstitutional closure of churches. According to local media, the president of the NCFF said authorities were “just looking for reasons to incriminate and close down churches.” The NCFF petitioned the government about the church closures, stating that authorities were wrongly imposing an antiwitchcraft law from 1933 to limit religious rights and eliminate smaller independent religious groups in the country. The government held consultations with leaders of major religious groups during the year to discuss cooperation on socioeconomic issues, land issues, efforts against human trafficking, public health problems, and strategies to combat gender-based violence.

The nongovernmental Interfaith Council, consisting of members of various Christian and Muslim groups as well as representatives of the Jewish and Baha'i communities, met on a regular basis to coordinate its approach to the government to address the socioeconomic needs of their congregations and to use the council's collective voice to strengthen the influence of religious groups in general. Concerning the issue of “fake churches,” the general secretary of the Council of Churches in Namibia called for discussions on formulating a framework for the regulation of all religious institutions.

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with the Office of the Ombudsman and NAMPOL officials to discuss police intervention in “fake churches” and with religious leaders, including from the Salvation Army, concerning that organization’s role in the government’s action plan to combat trafficking-in-persons. Embassy representatives met with religious leaders 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 2022). 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. Members of 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 identifies as 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. There is, however, 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, color, 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 to world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Baha’i Faith, and Rastafarianism.

A preindependence law that is still active (the Witchcraft Suppression Proclamation 27 of 1933) states, “A person shall be guilty of an offense and liable on conviction to imprisonment with or without hard labor for a period not exceeding five years, or to a fine, or to any two or more punishments if they [the witness] indicate that someone is a witch.” In addition, if a person accuses someone of using “non-natural means in causing any disease in any person or property, or in causing injury to any person or property, or names or indicates another as a wizard or a witch, they shall be prosecuted.” There are no recorded convictions under this law since independence in 1990.

Like 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

In February, NAMPOL shut down what it called “fake churches” based on allegations from the local community, nongovernmental organizations operating in the area, and local government institutions that these churches were promoting civil unrest, inciting violence, engaging in unsafe health practices, and committing fraud. An unknown number of these churches were initially closed around the country; some remained in discussions with NAMPOL and local authorities at the end of the year about their operating status. NAMPOL Inspector General Sebastian Ndeitunga said, “These churches are telling people in the community they are bewitching each other, they have demons, and they should not talk. Those are the churches that we are looking for.” He also said, “Some [of these] churches do not even have documents, and many people are pouring lots of money into them.” In addition, he stated that some of the targeted churches were “lying to the unaware public by claiming they can cure HIV/AIDS.”

In response to the church closures, on February 28, the NCFF, staged a demonstration in Ohangwena over what the group said was unfair treatment by police and the unconstitutional closure of some churches. The group demanded an apology from police. According to local media, NCFF leader Bishop Festus Thomas of the local Saint Ministry for Christ Church said, “We are tired of criticism of the revival churches and segregation. These accusations are made without any proof. [Authorities] are just looking for reasons to incriminate and close churches, which is unconstitutional unless there were court orders to do so.” Thomas also petitioned the government about the closures, stating that authorities were wrongly imposing the Witchcraft Suppression Proclamation 27 of 1933 to limit religious rights. Referring to the smaller independent religious groups, Thomas said the police were intent on eliminating “the poor religions operating without (their own) land” in the country.

In January, media reported that a local traditional court in the Kavango East region, where several of the “fake churches” were located, ordered the closure of a church led by a self-proclaimed prophet in November 2021. The closure followed allegations by two women church members that the church leader, self-proclaimed Prophet Sebarius Muronga, had impregnated them. In March, the church was reported open again.

The government periodically included religious leaders in discussions regarding issues affecting the country and national events. The government, including President Hage Geingob; the Minister of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication, and Child Welfare; the Minister of Home Affairs, Immigration, and State Security; and representatives from the Ministry of Labor, held formal, informal, and ad hoc consultations with leaders of major religious groups and the Interfaith Council to strengthen government-interfaith community cooperation in several areas, including humanitarian assistance for landless minority groups; efforts to combat human trafficking; strategies to combat gender-based violence; public health crises; and socioeconomic, human rights, and civil rights matters. The council represented the Evangelical Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, and Roman Catholic Churches, and the Muslim, Jewish, and Baha'i communities.

Religious leaders continued to state that they occasionally faced problems with the government regarding visas. Members of the Interfaith Council continued to report that religious volunteers sometimes had difficulty obtaining visas, but they said this was due to general visa difficulties and because their work did not clearly fall into any of the country's visa categories, rather than 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

Regarding the police closures of unregistered churches, the general secretary of the Council of Churches in Namibia said, "In terms of fake churches and fake prophets, the reality is true, because we always have complaints about them." The council called for discussions with the government on formulating a framework for regulation of all religious institutions.

The Interfaith Council continued to meet regularly and advocate that the government address the socioeconomic needs of its congregations. 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 combatting trafficking in persons so they could encourage religious

groups to provide community support and offer shelter to trafficking victims. The strategy review, begun in 2021, was still underway at year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives engaged with the Office of the Ombudsman and NAMPOL officials to discuss police intervention in “fake churches.” With religious leaders, including from the Salvation Army, embassy representatives discussed the plan of action to combat trafficking in persons, specifically the Salvation Army's role in related public awareness campaigns, especially in Christian communities.

Embassy representatives 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.