

PALAU 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits the government from taking any action to compel, prohibit, or hinder the exercise of religion.

Muslim leaders expressed concern that they continued to be unable to bring an imam into the country to lead worship due to legal restrictions on visa issuance, and that they had not been able to find an appropriate place of worship due to land use restrictions. As in years past, in January the government recognized an official National Day of Prayer. According to the government, the program welcomed all expressions of religion, no matter what expression a person chose and without reservation or reproach.

There were no reports during the year of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy engaged with members of religious groups and organizations during the year. U.S. Department of Defense chaplains engaged Christian and Muslim communities on religious freedom and other issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 21,695 (midyear 2022). According to the 2015 national census, approximately 45 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups include the evangelical Christians (26.4 percent); Seventh-day Adventists (6.9 percent); Modekngai, an indigenous religious group embracing both animist and Christian beliefs (5.7 percent); and Muslims (3 percent), primarily Bangladeshi nationals. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Baptists, adherents of the Assemblies of God, and other religious groups combined make up approximately 13 percent of the population. There are also small numbers of Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews. Within the foreign community of approximately 6,000, more than half are Filipino Catholics. The next largest group are Bangladeshis, who are predominantly Muslim. The remainder hold diverse religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits the government from taking any action to compel, prohibit, or hinder the exercise of religion. It stipulates there shall be no state religion.

Religious groups may obtain charters as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from the registrar of corporations in the Office of the Attorney General. As NGOs, religious groups and mission agencies are exempt from paying taxes. To obtain a charter, a group must submit a written petition to the registrar of corporations and pay a filing fee of \$250. The registrar of corporations reviews the application for statutory compliance and then requests the President sign a charter for the NGO.

The law empowers the President to proclaim and designate any day in January of each year as a National Day of Prayer.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. Representatives of any religious group, however, may request government financial support for private religious schools. The government earmarks funds for nonreligious purposes for recognized private schools operated by Moudkngel, Catholic, evangelical, and Seventh-day Adventist groups. The amount earmarked is based on the number of students attending a particular school. Private schools, including religious ones, do not pay gross revenue tax but pay a flat port clearance fee of \$3 for imported school supplies.

Foreign missionaries must obtain permits from the Division of Immigration, which is under the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection of the Ministry of Finance; there are no application fees. Applicants must provide police and medical clearances, and applications must include letters from the assigning church in the sending foreign country and the local accepting church. The permits are valid for a maximum of two years and may be renewed.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Muslim leaders (immigrants from Bangladesh) stated that their community continued to be unable to obtain visa application approval for an imam to work in the country, and that they also continued to face challenges finding an appropriate place for prayer due to land use/lease restrictions. By law, persons from Bangladesh are not eligible for visas other than guest-worker visas.

In January, the government recognized an official National Day of Prayer, an annual practice. According to the government, the program welcomed all expressions of religion, no matter what expression a person chose and without reservation or reproach.

The government provided funding to parochial schools that was equitably distributed based on the number of students attending a school, to be used for nonreligious purposes.

The government continued to require missionaries or employees of religious missions to earn \$15,000 annually in order to bring dependents to the country. A couple serving in a mission who jointly earned \$15,000 annually was also eligible to bring dependents to the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports during the year of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials engaged with religious leaders at embassy events, such as the Independence Day celebration and during the U.S. military's annual Christmas drop of humanitarian supplies and gifts. The Chargé d'Affaires attended the annual prayer breakfast as part of the National Day of Prayer and met with members of religious groups. U.S. Department of Defense chaplains reached out to other Christian communities during military exercises. Military chaplains from Joint Region Marianas engaged with the government, including the office of the Vice President/Ministry of Justice, and communities to address issues of suicide

and bullying. The USAID Country Coordinator and U.S. Army Oceania Engagement Team Commander also attended an interfaith prayer breakfast at which local pastors and military chaplains addressed human trafficking. A U.S. army chaplain met with Muslim leaders from the Bangladesh community and discussed religious freedom issues impacting their community.