

SAMOA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion, and it defines the country as a Christian nation.

Parliament debated repealing a 2017 law that required clergy to begin paying income taxes, from which they were previously exempt. In 2021, the government halted enforcement of the law. The government continued to use the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa's TV2 station to convey political messages.

There was reportedly strong societal pressure at the village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities and, in some cases, to give large proportions of household income to support church leaders and projects. Some local denominations continued to own and operate their own television stations, which were available to other religious groups and nonreligious organizations for broadcasting their organizations' messages.

The U.S. Chargé d'Affaires discussed the state of religious freedom with the ombudsman, the country's highest-ranking official responsible for human rights and religious freedom. A U.S. embassy official also met with representatives of various religious groups to discuss religious freedom and the role of religion in society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 206,000 (midyear 2022). According to the 2021 national census, Congregational Christians constitute 27 percent of the population; Roman Catholics, 19 percent; members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 18 percent; Methodists, 12 percent; and

members of the Assemblies of God, 10 percent. Groups together constituting less than 16 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Congregational Church of Jesus, Church of the Nazarene, nondenominational Protestants, Baptists, Worship Centre, Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, Elim Church, Anglicans, Baha'is, and small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews, primarily in Apia. Less than 1 percent stated no religion or did not select a religion.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion. This right may be subject to "reasonable restrictions" by law in the interests of national security or public order, health, morals, or protecting the rights and freedom of others. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private citizens, as well as government officials. The preamble to the constitution describes the country as "an Independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions." The constitution states, "Samoa is a Christian nation founded on God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The government does not require religious groups to register, but groups have the option to register as a charitable trust or incorporated society with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Labor. Registration is free. Becoming a registered entity entitles groups to receive tax exemptions and legal status. Unregistered religious groups may not formally buy property or pay employees. Individuals or groups may establish a place of worship on community or private land but must obtain approval from the extended family that has claims to the land, as well as from the village council.

The ombudsman is the country's highest-ranking official responsible for human rights, including religious freedom.

The constitution provides that no one may be forced to take instruction in a religion other than his or her own and gives each religious group the right to establish its own schools. There is no religious curriculum in public schools. Most non-Christian children attend private schools.

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

Government Practices

In September, parliament debated repealing an income tax law, passed in 2017 and effective in 2018, that required ministers of religion to pay income taxes. The Ministry of Customs and Revenue in 2021 halted enforcement of the law, and as of year's end, no new charges against pastors for failing to pay taxes had been filed.

Villages tend to have one primary Christian church. Village chiefs traditionally choose which church, based on the denomination of their extended families. Sources stated, however, that many villages, such as Vaitele and Vailima, had multiple churches serving different denominations and coexisting peacefully.

Chaplains representing the majority of Christian denominations in the country continued to be available to prisoners on a rotational basis. Prisoners of non-Christian faiths had access to counselors from their religion.

Although the constitution provides that no one may be forced to take instruction in a religion other than his or her own, sources said many public schools included Christian prayers in their daily routines.

The government continued to use the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa's TV2 station to convey political messages.

Public ceremonies typically began with a Christian prayer.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Community leaders reported there was strong societal pressure at the village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities in addition to supporting church leaders and projects financially. Social media posts suggested that financial contributions often totaled more than a third of family income.

Some local denominations continued to own and operate their own television stations, which were available to other religious groups and nonreligious organizations for broadcasting their organizations' messages.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In September, the Chargé d'Affaires discussed the state of religious freedom with the ombudsman. A U.S. embassy official also met with representatives of various religious groups to discuss religious freedom and the role of religion in society.