

SEYCHELLES 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds and forbids any laws establishing any religion or imposing any religious observance. It provides for freedom of religion, including the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religion.

In March, the government amended the law regulating religious groups and associations (the Registration Act) to introduce new criteria for registering heads of religious groups and to establish mechanisms to detect financial fraud, terrorist financing, and money laundering through religious groups. The Seychelles Interfaith Council (SIFCO) supported the amendment to the Registration Act out of concern that without tighter regulations, fraudulent religious groups could too easily register as associations. The government consulted with SIFCO, which includes Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, and other religious groups present in the country, on issues affecting religious groups. President Wavel Ramkalawan met with various religious groups during the year, including the new executive council of the Hindu Kovil Sangam; he also participated in the Vinayagar Charthurti festival with the Hindu community in September. In October, the Minister for Youth, Sports, and Family hosted an interfaith discussion with religious group representatives on how the government and faith groups could work together to inculcate spiritual values in the country.

In June, the Catholic Cathedral in the capital Victoria was vandalized. President Ramkalawan and cabinet members visited the site, and the President offered a reward for information leading to the arrest of the perpetrators. A criminal investigation was ongoing at year's end. SIFCO members participated in national events, including special interfaith prayers for COVID-19 victims, prayers for the country's journey through the pandemic, as well as prayers with multiple religious leaders on the country's national day, June 29.

The U.S. Embassy in Mauritius monitored religious freedom in Seychelles and an embassy officer met three times there with the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Port Victoria, Alain Harel, and discussed the impact of COVID-19 on religious

services, plans for Easter celebrations, and incidents of vandalism against churches.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 97,017 (midyear 2022). According to the 2010 census conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, (the most recent), approximately 76 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups include Anglicans (6 percent), Hindus (2.4 percent), and Muslims (1.6 percent). Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Brahma Kumaris, and Christian groups, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, Nazarites, Orthodox, and Jehovah's Witnesses. A small number of Rastafarians reside in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds and forbids any laws establishing any religion or imposing any religious observance. The constitution permits limitations on freedom of religion only "as prescribed by a law and necessary in a democratic society" in the interest of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health as well as to protect the rights and freedoms of other persons. It provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right of individuals to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate their religion in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community with others, in public or private. These rights may be subject to limitations stated in the constitution. The constitution stipulates individuals shall not be required to take a religious oath counter to their religious beliefs or profess any religion as a prerequisite for public office.

The law requires registration for all religious groups as either corporations or associations. Since March, religious groups must also comply with the 2020 Beneficial Ownership Act by providing up-to-date lists of their membership to a centralized government database and financial information to the government's Financial Intelligence Unit. To register, a group must submit to the Registrar of Associations its name, location, rules, and list of assets; the name, occupation,

and addresses of officers and at least seven members; and the resolution appointing its officers. A minimum of seven members is required to register an association. To receive tax benefits, including tax exemptions on the importation of goods and for projects that are considered to advance the country's socioeconomic goals and meet certain other criteria, religious groups must also register with the Finance Ministry. The government recognizes the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, Islamic groups (Quran and Sunnah Society of Seychelles, Islamic Society of Seychelles, and Islamic Foundation of Seychelles), and the Baha'i local spiritual assembly through individual acts of incorporation.

According to the penal code, any act or words that deliberately incite hatred, contempt, or disaffection against individuals or groups are misdemeanors and carry a penalty of imprisonment for one year.

Although no penalties are prescribed for unregistered groups, only those registered as corporate bodies or associations have legal status and certain rights, such as to airtime for religious programming on the national broadcast media, Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), or permission to provide spiritual counsel in prison.

The constitution prohibits compulsory religious education or participation in religious ceremonies in state schools but permits religious groups to provide religious instruction in those schools during school hours. The Catholic and Anglican Churches provide that instruction. No faith-based schools are present in the country.

The law prohibits religious groups from obtaining commercial radio or television licenses. The SBC provides airtime to registered religious groups on national radio and on national television for a daily early morning program and to broadcast religious services upon request. Since June, the SBC's policy grants equal access to radio and television programming for all registered faith-based groups. Religious groups may publish newspapers.

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

Government Practices

In March, the government amended the Registration Act to introduce new criteria for registering heads of religious groups and to establish mechanisms to detect financial fraud, terrorist financing, and money laundering through religious groups, which the government said were potentially at risk for such violations. The amendment required all associations, including religious associations, to submit new documentation and financial returns by July 31, maintain up-to-date registries of their membership, and retain their financial records for seven years. It also required the Registrar of Associations to maintain a publicly available list of all registered associations, including religious ones. The government stated the amendment modernized the Registration Act, improved its transparency, and put it in compliance with the 2020 Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism Act. SIFCO members said they supported the amendment out of concern that without tighter regulations, fraudulent religious groups could too easily register as associations. SIFCO members continued to express concern that the relatively large number of registered religious groups (currently more than 100) in a country with a small population was a sign of division. SIFCO also continued to express concern about the registration process itself, by which some religions are registered as corporate bodies and others as associations, with differing requirements for registration.

The SBC continued to broadcast religious programming for holidays such as Christmas, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and the feast of the Immaculate Conception. The SBC also continued to broadcast 90-minute Catholic and Anglican services weekly on the radio, and it opened its television channels to all other groups for prayer services, including regular Friday prayers for Muslims. The SBC continued to review and approve all religious programming to ensure hate speech was not broadcast. Other religious programming consisted of 15-minute prerecorded prayers by Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Seventh-day Adventist, Catholic, and Anglican groups every two weeks. All faith-based groups seeking to broadcast on the SBC were required to produce their own content, but not all did so during the year due to lack of capacity and/or resources. Private radio and television stations did not feature religious programs.

President Ramkalawan, who is also an Anglican priest, met with representatives of several religious groups throughout the year, including Catholic leaders, members of the Seychelles Bible Society, leaders of the Hindu Kovil Sangam group

as well as the new Chairman of SIFCO, Reverend Danny Elizabeth. The President also participated in the Vinayagar Charthurti festival with the Hindu community in September.

On February 27, the President hosted the second annual interfaith prayer service. The event was titled, “Let us remember and give thanks,” and aimed at remembering the country’s journey through the COVID-19 pandemic and giving thanks for the “blessings and protection showered” over the country during that time. The prayer service was held at State House, the President’s executive office. All members of the Cabinet, the First Lady, and representatives of all the SIFCO member faith groups attended, and the event was broadcast live on television and radio. All remaining COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted in July.

On October 21, Minister for Youth, Sports, and Family Marie-Celine Zialor hosted an interfaith discussion with representatives from the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Pentecostal Church, Everlasting Love Ministry, Redeem Christian Church, Nazarite Christian Church, the Hindu community, and the Muslim community to discuss how the government and faith groups could work together to inculcate spiritual values in Seychellois families.

Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, non-Catholic students in some public schools providing Catholic instruction were not offered alternative activities during those classes, according to parents.

Various religious groups stated they continued to engage with prison authorities to carry out spiritual and religious activities in prisons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 9, the Cathedral in Victoria, the main Catholic church in the country, was vandalized in the middle of the night, with many of the 100-year-old statues and artifacts destroyed. President Ramkalawan and his cabinet visited the cathedral that morning to offer support and solidarity to the Catholic community. He condemned the incident in the strongest terms and offered a reward of Seychelles Rupee (SR) 100,000 (\$7,800) for information leading to the arrests of those responsible. At year’s end, the investigation into the case was ongoing.

Earlier, on January 9, the President also condemned acts of vandalism at the St. Francis Church of Baie Lazare and the Pointe Au Sel Chapel, both Catholic facilities. The President said, “For a small nation with a close-knit community, the country’s diversity and tolerance of the beliefs of everyone are important components of the peaceful existence that kept all citizens united.” He called on all citizens to respect each other’s religions. According to President Ramkalawan, neither incident was religiously motivated.

SIFCO members participated in national events, including a special interfaith service for COVID-19 victims, prayers for drug victims, and prayers for the nation with multiple religious leaders on the country’s national day, June 29. At SIFCO’s 10th annual general meeting on November 13, chairman Danny Elizabeth called for forgiveness for past injustices committed by various faith groups, such as not objecting to human rights abuses carried out by previous governments. He said there was a need for the country to repent past injustice and heal from past divisions. He said that although many facts had been revealed by the Truth, Reconciliation, and National Unity Commission (TRUNC) established in 2018 to investigate human rights abuses carried out during the 1977 coup in the country, many “untold facts still haunt the population.” Elizabeth proposed that SIFCO, which provided counselling and support to victims who testified before the TRUNC, become a “beacon of hope” for the country by encouraging national unity and taking actions such as building an interfaith center on land provided by government. According to SIFCO, the center will cost SR40 million (\$3.1 million), for which the organization was seeking donations.

As part of the national debate on the legalization of cannabis, advocated by Rastafarians for their religious observance, SIFCO stated it supported the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes only and that children should be protected from cannabis.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy in Port Louis, Mauritius is accredited to Seychelles and continued to monitor religious freedom and related issues. An embassy officer traveled to the Seychelles and met with the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Port Victoria, Alain Harel, in April, May, and October; they discussed issues related to the COVID-19

impact on religious services, the plans for Easter services, and the possible motivations for the vandalism against the Victoria Cathedral and St. Francis Church.