

# **SOLOMON ISLANDS 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for religious freedom, including the freedom to change religions, proselytize, and establish religious schools. Laws “reasonably required” to achieve certain listed public goals may restrict these rights.

Government officials said the proposed constitutional amendment to declare the nation a Christian country had not advanced from the constitutional review committee in parliament, while members of minority faiths expressed concern that most citizens, who are predominantly Christian and Protestant, would likely support the proposed amendment. On a different constitutional issue, the Prime Minister’s Office also sought to extend the four-year term of parliament to five, via a separate constitutional amendment, thus postponing the April 2023 elections to 2024, stating that the country could not afford to pay for an election and host the two-week 2023 Pacific Games in the same year. Religious groups opposed this effort to extend elections, stating they feared further civil unrest, following the 2021 riots in the capital. The Prime Minister’s Office responded by publicly reprimanding religious groups for their opposition.

There were reports of rumors spread by dominant religious groups denigrating the reputation of minority religious groups.

Representatives of the U.S. Mission in Solomon Islands discussed religious tolerance and the proposed constitutional amendment to declare Solomon Islands a Christian country with government officials during the year. Mission officials discussed with religious minorities whether groups believed they could freely exercise their religious beliefs. In April, a visiting senior White House delegation met with religious leaders and discussed the role of religion in the country.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 703,000 (midyear 2022). According to the 2019 government census and independent sources, the largest religious groups are the Anglican Church of Melanesia, 32 percent; Roman Catholics, 20 percent; South Seas Evangelicals, 17 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 12 percent; and United Methodists, 10 percent. An estimated 5 percent of the population, consisting primarily of the Kwaio ethnic community on the island of Malaita, adheres to Indigenous, animistic religions. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Muslims, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and members of Indigenous churches that split from major Christian denominations, such as the Christian Fellowship Church, which separated from the United Methodist Church in 1960.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of thought and of religion. This includes the freedom for individuals to change religion or belief, to proselytize, and to worship, teach, practice, and observe one's religion in public or in private, either alone or with others. The constitution also provides for the freedom to establish noncompulsory religious instruction. These provisions may be restricted by laws "reasonably required" to protect the rights of others, for defense, or for public safety, order, morality, or health. The Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace, and Ecclesiastical Affairs (MTGPEA) delivers ecclesiastical programs in partnership with faith-based organizations, engages with religious leaders to support peace initiatives, and manages government grants to churches.

All religious groups must register with the government. Religious groups must apply in writing to the Registrar of Companies for a certificate of registration. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) may register as charitable organizations. To register, a group must submit the required documentation to the Registrar of Companies; the application fee of 1,250 Solomon Islands dollars (SBD) (\$160) is waived for religious groups. Documentation required for the application process includes a description of the group, a list of board members, and a constitution that states how the group is

governed and how members are chosen. The registrar issues a certificate when satisfied that the requirements have been met and that the nature, extent, objectives, and circumstances of the applicant are noncommercial.

The public-school curriculum includes an hour of weekly religious instruction, the content of which is agreed upon by member churches of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA), an ecumenical organization comprising the country's five largest churches. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Government-subsidized church schools are required to align their nonreligious curricula with governmental criteria. Non-Christian religious instruction is provided in schools upon request. Ministers or other representatives of the religion provide these classes. Anyone found to be preventing religious instruction faces imprisonment of up to one year or a fine of up to SBD 500 (\$63).

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

### **Government Practices**

As of year's end, the Constitutional Review Committee had not finalized draft constitutional changes intended to implement a 2017 parliamentary motion to explore the possibility of amending the preamble of the constitution to declare the country a Christian nation. Ministry of Justice officials said the proposal had not advanced from the constitutional review committee in parliament. According to these officials, parliamentarians in the new government did not take up the proposal since its original submission and the proposal was unlikely to be reviewed during this term. Members of minority faiths expressed concern that most citizens, who are predominantly Christian and Protestant, would likely support the proposed amendment.

Multiple religious groups, including Christian, Jewish, and Islamic groups, were registered in the country. Government sources stated there were no pending registrations for other groups. Officials said that some groups were able to register as NGOs or charities without being required to reveal any religious affiliation, which the groups hoped might offer some more freedom to operate.

The Ministry of Home Affairs and the MTGPEA continued to interact with religious groups. The Ministry of Home Affairs characterized its role as maintaining a balance between constitutionally protected rights of religious freedom, free speech, and free expression, and maintaining public order. The MTGPEA provided funding to churches to carry out social programs, such as a Christian care center for victims of domestic violence administered by the Anglican Church of Melanesia, and for the maintenance of church buildings.

The government subsidized most of the schools and health centers administered by the Catholic Church, Anglican Church of Melanesia, United Methodist Church, South Seas Evangelical Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church. It allocated these subsidies proportionally based on the number of students at the schools and the size of the health centers. The government closed all religious and government schools until May under a COVID-19 Health State of Emergency and according to media accounts, it did not have an effective distance education replacement program.

The government customarily continued to use the Bible to administer oaths of office, but this was not compulsory. The Prime Minister included Bible verses in most of his public speeches and parliamentary addresses. In October, as the guest of honor at the 30th anniversary of the All Pacific Arise and Sukkot 2022 religious gathering, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare said, “God is the leader of the country, and as God’s servant, he (the Prime Minister) is only a custodian of the highest position of the land.”

In June and September, SICA joined other civil society groups and spoke out against the government’s plan to extend the current parliament’s term by one year to 2024 through a constitutional amendment. The group stated that the government could not afford to pay for both an election and hosting the Pacific Games during 2023, and that extending the election by a year would allow the country to host the Pacific Games in 2023. This proposed amendment was separate from the proposed amendment on declaring the country a Christian nation. SICA expressed concern that attempts to extend the four-year term to five years through a constitutional amendment could generate additional unrest following the 2021 riots in the capital and widespread media criticism of religious leaders for not exercising sufficient and timely moral leadership and authority during that period. SICA said, “The experiences encountered during the burning

and looting of China Town in November 2021 and previous unrest made the churches feel that it should make this statement, because we [the churches] would not like to see any more civil unrest in this peaceful nation.” SICA also noted that constitutional provisions regarding preserving the four-year term of parliament should have priority, stating, “If weighed on a scale, the national constitution would have more weight than the Pacific Games.” The Prime Minister’s Office reprimanded religious groups for opposing the amendment, which, according to media reports, was regarded as part of the government’s broader rejection of western governments in favor of a closer relationship with the People’s Republic of China.

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

The five largest religious groups that comprise SICA continued to play a leading role in civic life, organizing joint religious activities and encouraging religious representation at national and religious events organized by the country.

Members of minority faith groups said that members of dominant religious groups ridiculed their beliefs, publicly shamed them, and spread rumors alleging violence in order to stoke fear within society. Members of the Chinese community stated that some Christians criticized them, saying they were anti-Christian and faithless.

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

U.S. Mission in Solomon Islands representatives discussed religious tolerance and the proposed constitutional amendment to declare Solomon Islands a Christian country with senior government officials, the role of faith-based organizations in disaster response operations such as during a pandemic, and the inclusion of minority faith groups in government programs supporting religion.

Mission representatives discussed with religious minorities (essentially any group outside SICA and SIGFA) their perceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Mission representatives exchanged ideas with leaders of various religious groups, civil society organizations, and government agencies on the importance of religious freedom, regardless of religious affiliation.

In April, a visiting senior White House delegation met with religious leaders and discussed the role of religion in Solomon Islands. In September, the USNS MERCY, under Pacific Partnership 22, visited the country for two weeks with an advance team on the ground two months earlier. U.S. Navy chaplains and volunteers engaged with religious leaders and congregations through participating in religious services, providing support in religious schools, and engaging in community outreach events in underserved and at-risk areas of greater Honiara.