

# VANUATU

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Although the U.S. government does not maintain a resident embassy in the country, the U.S. ambassador to Papua New Guinea is also accredited to the government of the country. Representatives of the embassy in Papua New Guinea periodically discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

Approximately 83 percent of the population is Christian; an estimated 30 percent is Presbyterian, 12 percent Roman Catholic, 15 percent Anglican, and 13 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups that together constitute 15 percent include the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, and other Protestant denominations. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group with its own political party, is centered on the island of Tanna and includes less than 1 percent of the population. Judaism comprises 6 percent of the population, and other religious groups include the Baha'i Faith, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). There are believed to be members of other religious groups within the foreign community; they are free to practice their religions but are not known to hold public religious ceremonies.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to “traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles.”

Religious organizations are required to register with the government; however, this law was not enforced.

The government interacted with churches through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Vanuatu Christian Council. Aside from the activities of the ministry, use of government resources to support religious activities typically is not condoned (although no law prohibits such support).

Government oaths of office customarily are taken on the Bible.

The government provides grants to church-operated schools and pays teachers' salaries at church-operated schools that have been in existence since the country's independence in 1980. These benefits are still not available to the few non-Christian religious schools in the country.

Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of council churches, using materials those churches produce. There is no uniform standard time for religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that students in years seven through 12 be allocated one hour a week for religious instruction. The Education Act allows parents to have their children excused from religion classes, although in practice, the schools' day-long responsibility for students required their presence in class at all times.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Father Lini Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension, Assumption, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the year.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision-making predominates. If a member of a community proposes to introduce a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the chief and the rest of the community must agree. If such a group is established without approval, the community views the action as a threat to community solidarity and a gesture of defiance by those who join the new group. However, religious tension generally is resolved through appeals from traditional leaders to uphold individual rights.

Religious representation at national events was organized through the Vanuatu Christian Council. Ecumenical activities of the council were limited to the interaction of its members.

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

Although the U.S. government does not maintain a resident embassy in the country, the ambassador to Papua New Guinea also is accredited to the government. Representatives of the embassy in Papua New Guinea periodically discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations as part of an overall policy to promote human rights.