

# SWAZILAND

## **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 several reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. A majority of the reports concerned the inability of religious groups to gain access to media outlets to broadcast their messages.

The U.S. government encouraged the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution, including freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The population is 40 percent Zionist, 20 percent Roman Catholic, 2 percent Muslim, and 38 percent other religious affiliations, including Anglican, Baha'i, Methodist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jewish. Zionism, a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship, is widely practiced in rural areas. An influential Roman Catholic, Church of the Nazarene, and Anglican presence includes many churches, hospitals, schools, and other infrastructure.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution states that individuals have a right to “freedom of thought, conscience, or religion.” The constitution protects the right to religious practice by providing for “[the] freedom [to] worship either alone or in community with others.” However, minority religious groups enjoy fewer protections under traditional laws and customs, which include traditional courts and the authority of approximately 360 chiefs. When a religious group’s practices conflict with tradition and culture as defined by chiefs, they may direct community pressure against the group.

Before religious groups may erect religious buildings, they must consult with the chiefs and obtain their approval.

Portions of the capital are zoned especially for places of worship. Government permission is required for the construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and permission is required from chiefs in rural areas. Religious groups that wish to construct new buildings may purchase a plot of land and apply for the required building permits.

The monarchy (and by extension the government) supports many Christian activities. It is common practice for the king, the queen mother, and other members of the royal family to attend evangelical programs, including Good Friday and Easter weekend services. At such services the host church organization will often extend the king an invitation to preach.

The Protection of Names and Badges Act requires new religious groups or churches to register with the government upon organizing. To be considered “organized,” the group generally must submit its application through one of the country’s three umbrella religious bodies: the League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches. After one of these bodies has recommended an organization, the Registrar General’s Office in the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs will register the organization. For indigenous religious groups, authorities consider proof of a religious leader, congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant organized status. Organized religious groups are exempt from taxation, although the government does not consider them tax-deductible charities.

Christian programming is available on both of the parastatal broadcast outlets, Swazi Broadcasting and Information Service (SBIS) and Swazi Television.

Religious instruction is mandatory in primary school and an elective subject in secondary schools. Although schools teach religion predominantly from a Christian perspective, the Ministry of Education includes a multireligion component in the religious curriculum. The only organized religious youth clubs reportedly permitted to operate in schools are Christian. Voluntary school clubs conduct daily prayer services in many public schools.

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

Sunday is not officially considered a national holiday, persons who work on that day receive holiday pay.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. According to local religious leaders, communities of faith practiced openly and without government interference. Muslim leaders expressed appreciation that the government facilitated visitation access to prisoners and patients in government-run hospitals. Leaders of the Baha'i community noted that the government accepted that Baha'i schools were closed on religious holidays even when they did not coincide with Swazi holidays.

Although the government preferred newly formed churches to be referred and recommended by one of the three major Christian bodies, it allowed religious groups that do not belong to any of these bodies to register.

Minority religious groups complained that government-owned television and radio stations did not grant non-Christian religious groups airtime for broadcasting. These groups claimed that SBIS did not respond to their request letters, that the Ministry of Home Affairs or SBIS told them they must receive permission from the Conference of Churches, and that the Conference of Churches and relevant government officials ignored their requests for meetings.

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

There were several reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Members of society often viewed non-Christian religious groups with suspicion, especially in rural areas. Teachers sometimes did not permit children wishing to attend Friday prayers at a mosque to leave school early. In general, however, there was broad societal respect for religious freedom.

A local imam noted specifically that Muslim shops closed for prayers during the day did not suffer from reduced business. Rather, he said many patrons were accustomed to the practice and made efforts to shop at other times.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Halls were present in other areas, adherents remained unable to build a church in Lomasha due to opposition by

the region's chief. The chief, whose consent is required for construction to begin on Swazi Nation Land (land held by the monarchy "in trust for the Swazi nation"), argued that the construction would not align with Swazi law and custom. However, Jehovah's Witnesses were allowed to use the national stadium for their annual convention.

The Council of Swaziland Churches, which includes the Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches and split from the Swaziland Conference of Churches in 1976, was unable to receive radio airtime due to opposition by the Swaziland Conference of Churches and the League of Churches. The three Christian umbrella organizations often had a contentious relationship due to differences over issues such as whether churches should take a stand on political problems or include traditional beliefs in church doctrine.

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

The U.S. government encouraged the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution, including freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion. Through active engagement with religious leaders, communities of faith, government, and civil society, the U.S. government promoted and facilitated freedom of religion and societal respect for religious freedom within the context of its broader human rights agenda.