

SWAZILAND 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including a general mistrust of non-Christian religious groups, especially in rural areas.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution, including of thought, conscience, and religion. The U.S. embassy routinely engaged with communities of faith.

Section I. Religious Demography

The government estimates the population is 1.1 million. Religious leaders estimate 90 percent of the population is Christian, about 2 percent Muslim, and under 10 percent belongs to other religious groups. Most Christians are either Roman Catholics or Zionists, who practice a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship. There are also Anglicans, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and small numbers of Jews and Bahais. Zionism is widely practiced in rural areas.

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, and religion. The constitution also protects the right to religious practice by providing for the freedom to worship, either alone or in community with others.

Traditional laws and customs, interpreted by traditional courts and approximately 360 chiefs, provide less protection to minority religious groups. Chiefs may direct

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community pressure against a religious group if the chiefs determine that the group's practices conflict with tradition and culture.

Religious groups must obtain government permission for construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and the appropriate chief's permission in rural areas.

The law requires new religious groups or churches to register with the government upon organizing. Groups other than indigenous religious groups must apply through one of the country's three umbrella religious bodies (the League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches) for a recommendation, which is routinely granted. Upon receipt of the recommendation, the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs registers 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.

Religious instruction is mandatory in primary school and an elective subject in secondary schools. Although schools teach religion predominantly from a Christian perspective, the education ministry includes a multi-religion 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.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom; however, the government imposed restrictions on minority religious groups.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, supported many Christian activities. The government provided free transportation to Christians attending certain religious activities. The king, the queen mother, and other members of the royal family commonly attended evangelical programs, including Good Friday and Easter weekend services. At such services the host church often extended the king an invitation to preach.

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Government-owned television and radio stations carried Christian programming, but minority religious groups complained that non-Christian religious groups did not receive airtime.

There were no reports that the government denied any applications for registration, and unregistered groups reportedly operated freely.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Although there was broad societal respect for the rights of minority religious group members to practice their religion, rural communities in particular were sometimes suspicious of non-Christian religious groups. Teachers sometimes did not permit Muslim children to leave school early to attend Friday prayers at a mosque. Some Christian citizens reportedly declined to patronize businesses that Muslims owned.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy encouraged the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution, including freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion, through regular interaction with religious leaders and religious groups. The ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss their concerns with respect to religious freedom.

The embassy hosted multiple events aimed at facilitating interaction and dialogue among religious groups. Members of Christian, Muslim, and Bahai groups attended a February roundtable event focused on the role of faith-based organizations in working for social justice.

The ambassador hosted an iftar for members of the Muslim community and government and civil society representatives.