

NAURU 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 no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, affiliation, or practice; however, some elements of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities occasionally voiced discomfort with religious groups they viewed as unorthodox, in particular, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Although the U.S. government does not maintain a resident embassy in the country, the U.S. ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives of the embassy in Fiji discussed religious freedom in the context of discussions about human rights with the government.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2011 census, the total population of Nauru is 9,937. Christianity is the primary religion. Approximately two-thirds of Christians are Protestant and the remaining one-third is Catholic. Ethnic Chinese residents, estimated to constitute 5 percent of the population, are Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, or nonreligious. Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have small numbers of followers. The Australian government houses about 400 asylum seekers in Nauru of various religious groups from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. Under the constitution, the rights to freedom of conscience, expression, assembly, and association may be restricted by any law "which is reasonably required...in the interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health."

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There is no state religion.

Under the law, religious groups must register with the government to operate in an official capacity, which includes proselytizing, building churches, holding religious services, and otherwise practicing their religion. The Catholic Church, the Nauru Congregational Church (which includes the Kiribati Protestant Church), the Assemblies of God, and the Nauru Independent Church are officially registered to operate.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The legal counsel for the Mormon Church asserted that while the law permitted the government to recognize a religious denomination, it required such recognition only if a denomination's ministers wished to solemnize marriages. The Registrar of Births, Deaths, and Marriages confirmed this assertion. Representatives for the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that although they have not registered, they have not had any problems with the government granting visas to their missionaries. Neither the Mormons nor the Jehovah's Witnesses attempted to register. There were no reports that the government interfered with religious services.

The government had in the past cited the restrictive provision in the constitution as a basis for preventing foreign churches from proselytizing native-born citizens but did not do so 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.

Missionaries representing several Christian groups were active and operated freely. Economic problems resulting from sharply declining income from the phosphate mining industry led to social strains, including between the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities, as well as religious groups perceived as foreign, in particular Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses; however, these latter groups stated that their missionaries have not faced any social hostility.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Although the U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in the country, the U.S. ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives of the embassy discussed religious freedom with the government in the context of their discussions about human rights. The embassy placed opinion pieces on religious freedom and tolerance with regional media that were read by Nauruans.