

# **SAMOA 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. Implementation of Christian-oriented educational policies demonstrated a clear government preference for Christian ideology and teachings.

There were occasional reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders emphasized the country's Christian principles in public statements.

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and maintained contacts with representatives of the country's various religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the 2011 census (the most recent available), the population is approximately 188,000. The major religious groups in the country are Congregational Christian, 32 percent; Roman Catholic, 19 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 15 percent; Methodist, 14 percent; Assemblies of God, 8 percent; and Seventh-day Adventist, 4 percent. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Congregational Church of Jesus, Nazarene, nondenominational Protestant, Baptist, Worship Centre, Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, Elim Church, and Anglican. A comparison of the 2006 and 2011 censuses shows a slight decline in the membership of major denominations and an increase in participation in nontraditional and evangelical groups. Although there is no official estimate, there are reportedly small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews, primarily in Apia. The country has one of the world's seven Bahai Houses of Worship. There is a small Muslim community and one mosque.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change the religion of

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one's choice. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private as well as government actors.

The preamble to the constitution describes the country as “an independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions.” Although the constitution favors Christianity and public ceremonies typically begin with a Christian prayer, there is no official state religion.

The government does not require religious groups to register.

The constitution provides freedom from unwanted religious education in schools and gives each religious group the right to establish its own schools. Nevertheless, a 2009 education policy, enforced since 2010, makes Christian instruction compulsory in public primary schools and optional in public secondary schools. This policy is a violation of the constitution but reflects a government decision that Christian beliefs should be taught in schools. The government institutes the policy inconsistently in government schools across the country with little if any public concern or opposition. Church-run pastoral schools in most villages traditionally provide religious instruction after school hours.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, White Monday (Children's Day), and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

A government-established commission charged with recommending possible constitutional amendments concerning religious freedom completed its collection of public submissions at the end of 2010. By the end of 2012, the government had not publicly released the report or tabled it in parliament

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

There were occasional reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In addition prominent societal leaders repeatedly publicly emphasized that the country was Christian. Public discussion of religious issues often included negative references to non-Christian religions.

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Traditionally, villages tended to have one primary Christian church. Village chiefs often chose the religious denomination of their extended families. Many larger villages had multiple churches serving different denominations and coexisting peacefully. However, new religious groups sometimes faced resistance when attempting to establish themselves in some villages.

There remained minor tensions between Fa'a Samoa (the Samoan way) and individual religious rights. One of the elements of Fa'a Samoa was the traditional, tightly knit village community. Often village elders and the community at large were not receptive toward those who attempted to introduce another denomination or religion into the community. While underreported, observers stated that in many villages throughout the country, leaders forbade individuals to belong to churches outside of the village or to exercise their right not to worship. Villagers in violation of such rules faced fines and/or banishment from the village.

There was a high level of religious observance and strong societal pressure at village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities, and to support church leaders and projects financially. In some denominations, financial contributions often totaled more than 30 percent of family income. This issue gained media attention as some members of parliament spoke out about pressure on families to give disproportionate amounts of their incomes to churches.

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

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and maintained contacts with representatives of various religious groups.

In March the ambassador hosted a lunch for representatives of five prominent religious groups. Embassy staff participated in a religious freedom and diversity conference organized by The National University of Samoa, Victoria University, the International Center for Law and Religion at Brigham Young University, and UNESCO. During the year the charge d'affaires visited the Bahai temple and met with Bahai representatives. The embassy provided a grant to renovate the National Council of Churches community center, an interfaith gathering place used to promote cooperation among religious organizations throughout Samoa.