

SWAZILAND 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, and the government generally respected religious freedom. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that traditional leaders discriminated against some non-Christian groups.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In particular, members of the larger religious groups sometimes discriminated against some non-Christian religious groups, especially in rural areas.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged the promotion and protection of religious freedom. The U.S. embassy routinely engaged with all communities of faith and the government to discuss religious concerns.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (July 2013 estimate). Religious leaders estimate 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent is Muslim, and the remainder belongs to other religious groups, including native African belief systems. Most Christians are either Roman Catholics or those who practice a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship known locally as Zionism, some of whom self-identify as evangelicals. There are also congregations of Anglicans, Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, 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 generally 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.

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Unwritten traditional laws and customs, however, which are recognized in the constitution and interpreted by traditional courts, allow approximately 360 chiefs working with their traditional councilors to restrict some rights of minority religious groups if the chiefs determine that the groups' 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. Registered indigenous and nonindigenous religious groups receive the same benefits, including exemption from taxation, but contributions to these groups are not tax deductible.

Religious instruction is mandatory in primary school and an elective subject in secondary school. 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 constitution guarantees religious groups the right to operate private schools and provide religious instruction for their students.

Government Practices

The government allowed Jehovah's Witnesses to exercise their constitutional right to abstain from participating in national elections without any discrimination or repercussions. The government generally allowed the Muslim community to take time off work as needed to fulfill religious requirements. There were reports,

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however, of at least three instances where teachers did not permit Muslim children to leave school early to attend Friday prayers at a mosque.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, supported many Christian activities. The government provided free transportation to Christians attending certain religious activities. These types of benefits were generally provided only to indigenous Zionists, some of whom also identify as evangelicals. 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 generally extended the king an invitation to preach.

Government-owned television and radio stations provided airtime for Christian programming free of charge. Minority religious groups stated 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.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that traditional leaders discriminated against some non-Christian groups.

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, members of the larger religious groups sometimes discriminated against non-Christian religious groups, particularly in rural areas. Some Christians reportedly declined to patronize Muslim-owned businesses. One Christian community openly criticized a Muslim individual in the press for establishing a restaurant that served halal food to members of the public, including the Christian community. The government-owned newspaper, the *Swazi Observer*, reported the criticism and published opinion pieces critical of the halal restaurant.

In September police were called to a combined school and orphanage to calm rioting students at the school amid reports that the teachers were imposing

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Buddhism on the students. The Japanese-funded school was conducting instruction about different religions, including Buddhism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy encouraged the promotion and protection of religious freedom through regular interaction with religious leaders, religious groups, and the government. The Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss their concerns with respect to religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy hosted a roundtable event for faith-based organizations in September, which included a discussion of religious tolerance.