

FIJI 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Despite the abrogation of the constitution in April 2009 the country's other laws and policies generally protected religious freedom for most groups. The government's respect for religious freedom improved slightly as a result of a constitution enacted during the year. The new constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of church and state.

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

In meetings with the government, U.S. embassy officials advocated abolishing meeting-permit requirements for religious and other organizations. Embassy officers advocated for religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to interfaith and civic dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 897,000 (July 2013 estimate). Approximately 64 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, and 6 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church, which claims approximately 290,000 members, more than one-third of the population. Other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church also have significant membership. The majority of the country's chiefs support the Methodist Church, and it remains influential in the ethnic Fijian community, particularly in rural areas. There are also a small number of active nondenominational Christian groups and small but active communities of Bahais and Sikhs.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. Most indigenous Fijians, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. Most Indo-Fijians, who account for 37 percent, are Hindu, while roughly 20 percent of the Indo-Fijians are Muslim and 6 percent are Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The very small western community is predominantly Christian.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The new constitution signed by the president September 6, establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The new constitution does not ban proselytizing, but places limitations on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions.

Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. Religious groups are required by law to register with the government through trustees, who may hold land or property for the groups.

The law allows religious groups the right to establish, maintain and manage places of education whether or not it receives financial assistance from the state, provided that the educational institution maintains standards prescribed by law. The new constitution also provides that religious belief may not be asserted as a reason for disobeying the law.

The government does not restrict foreign clergy or foreign missionary activity, but the police may require permits for meetings of religious groups.

Government Practices

The government's respect for religious freedom improved slightly during the year due to increased protections in the new constitution.

The government limited the Methodist Church's annual conference to four days. The limited time permitted did not allow the church to hold its annual choir competitions and fundraising bazaar. Some members stated the time limit caused financial difficulties for the church. The conference, which normally met for seven days, had been banned for several years due to allegations that the Methodist Church had become too political

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Authorities reported and investigated the vandalism of a Hindu temple on November 17 and desecration of the prayer hall and worship ornaments.

Religious groups viewed as outside the mainstream that sought to establish congregations in villages and on outer islands encountered problems. New Pentecostal denominations sometimes faced difficulties in proselytizing and establishing congregations in villages and on outer islands. They reported harassment and intimidation in some instances. Traditional chiefs on Kioa Island, owned by a tribe from Tuvalu, continued to ban proselytizing by all other religious groups except the Church of Tuvalu.

The Adventist, Anglican, Catholic, Hindu, Methodist, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Muslim, and other communities operated numerous schools, including colleges, which the government did not subsidize. The Hindu and Muslim communities maintained a number of active religious and cultural organizations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In meetings with government officials, U.S embassy officers encouraged the government to remove permit requirements for church meetings and place fewer restrictions on religious organizations. The embassy also discussed religious freedom with the government and NGO representatives as a part of efforts to foster interfaith dialogue. The embassy shared opinion pieces and articles on religious freedom and tolerance with popular national and regional media outlets.