

SAMOA 2013 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. Implementation of Christian-oriented educational policies demonstrated a clear government preference for Christianity.

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

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 196,000 (July 2013 estimate). 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, the Congregational Church of Jesus, the Church of the Nazarene, nondenominational Protestants, Baptists, the Worship Centre, the Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, the Elim Church, and Anglicans. A comparison of the 2006 and 2011 censuses shows a slight decline in the membership of major denominations and an increase 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 also 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 generally protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's

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religion. 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. The law makes Christian instruction compulsory in public primary schools and optional in public secondary schools, reflecting a government decision that Christian beliefs should be taught in schools. The government implements 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.

Government Practices

There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Prominent societal leaders repeatedly emphasized in public that the country was Christian. Public discussion of religious issues sometimes included negative references to non-Christian religions.

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.

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There remained minor tensions between *Fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way) and individual religious rights. One of the elements of *Fa'a Samoa* is 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. Observers stated 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 from time to time, as members of society occasionally spoke out about pressure on families to give large 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 April the U.S. Consul General in Auckland, New Zealand met with senior members of the Samoa National Council of Churches as part of an outreach effort to faith-based organizations. The Charge d'Affaires hosted a lunch for the Holy See's Apostolic Nuncio, a senior representative of the Roman Catholic Church. There were also various engagements between the U.S. Navy and churches during a stop in June, including a visit by U.S. sailors to a home for the elderly run by the Catholic Church. In August the embassy sponsored a U.S. religious gospel choir that performed at a number of churches and church-operated schools around Samoa. In October the Ambassador hosted a working luncheon for the leaders of the six major religious denominations to discuss matters of common concern.