

# **TONGA 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.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The U.S. government did not maintain a resident embassy in the country. The Ambassador in Suva, Fiji, is accredited to the government.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 106,000 (July 2013 estimate). According to more detailed 2011 census data, membership in major religious groups includes: the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga 36 percent, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) 18 percent, the Roman Catholic Church 15 percent, the Free Church of Tonga 12 percent, and the Church of Tonga, 7 percent. Other Christian denominations in total account for approximately 10 percent, including the Tokaikolo Church, the Constitutional Church of Tonga, and the Church of Tonga (all local offshoots of the Methodist Church), and Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Gospel Church, Anglicans, other Pentecostal denominations, the Salvation Army, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Bahais, Muslims, Hindus, observers of Chinese traditional festivals, and Buddhists together constitute approximately 2 percent of the population. The remaining 1 percent declined to state a religious affiliation.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

There is no state religion. The government recommends that church groups register for tax purposes but does not require them to do so. The government

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permits all religious groups to import goods intended for religious purposes duty-free but does not subsidize any religious group or grant tax-exempt status.

The constitution states that Sunday as the Sabbath day is to be “kept holy” and no business can be conducted on that day “except according to law.” The government makes an exception for hotels and resorts that are part of the tourism industry but not for any other businesses, regardless of a business owner’s religion.

Religious groups may operate schools and a number do so including Mormons, members of the Free Wesleyan Church, Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists, and Bahais.

### **Government Practices**

The government generally respected religious freedom. Nevertheless, it favored mainstream Christianity over other religions.

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) maintains policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines stated that in view of “the character of the listening public,” those who preach on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga must confine their preaching “within the limits of the mainstream Christian tradition.” There were no reports, however, of the TBC denying any group’s request to broadcast on public channels. All religious groups were permitted to participate in broadcasting one free hour of church service on the radio each Sunday. TV Tonga charged fees for church broadcasts and Radio Tonga charged fees for broadcasts beyond the free hour. Notices of activities of all churches were broadcast on Radio Tonga, TV Tonga, and on privately-owned radio and television stations.

Foreign missionaries were active in the country and operated freely.

### **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.

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

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom during meetings with the government and NGOs. The U.S. government did not maintain a resident embassy

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in the country. The Ambassador in Suva, Fiji, is accredited to the government. The embassy placed opinion pieces and articles on religious freedom and tolerance in regional media outlets.