

TUVALU 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and some other laws and policies protect religious freedom but, in practice, the government did not consistently respect religious freedom. Many religious groups continued to operate without formal approval.

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, on at least five islands. Traditional island councils enforced bans on public meetings of several religious groups and interfered with the free practice of religion.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives from the Embassy in Fiji discussed religious freedom with the government and faith-based nongovernmental organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is about 10,700 (July 2013 estimate). The Church of Tuvalu, with historic ties to the Congregational Church and other churches in Samoa, has the largest number of followers. Approximately 97 percent of the population belongs to the Church of Tuvalu, 1.4 percent to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and 1 percent to the Bahai Faith. There are small populations of Muslims, Baptists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

The nine island groups have traditional chiefs, all of whom are members of the Church of Tuvalu. Most members of other religious groups are found in Funafuti, the capital, although a relatively large number of Bahais live on Nanumea Island.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution protects religious freedom; however the law places limits on those freedoms. The Church of Tuvalu is by law the state church, but this status affords it primarily “the privilege of performing special services on major national events.” The constitution otherwise provides for separation of religion and state. The

preamble of the constitution states the country is “an independent State based on Christian principles, the Rule of Law, and Tuvaluan custom and tradition.” Government ceremonies at the national level, such as the opening of parliament, and at the island-council level, often include Christian prayers and clergy.

By law any new religious group with more than 50 members must register with the government; failure to register could result in prosecution. Under the law all religious groups in the country must also register with and obtain approval from the traditional elder councils, known as *falekaupule*, of any island on which they conduct services. The law prohibits joint or public worship by religious groups not approved by these councils. The law also allows the *falekaupule* to withhold permission from certain religious groups to meet publicly should they be locally judged to “directly threaten the values and culture of the island community.” At the same time, the law guarantees an individual’s right to worship freely within one’s own residence. Several observers have noted the law appears incompatible with the constitution, though there has not yet been a legal challenge to the act.

Government Practices

Traditional leaders reportedly exerted significant pressure on the central government to enforce *falekaupule* religious bans. The government sought to enforce *falekaupule* restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

The government continued to protect the right to choose freely and practice religion publicly and in private, but called for religious organizations to abide by the *falekaupule*’s restrictions on public worship and religious group meetings.

At the beginning of the year, the central government reportedly began seeking to enforce *falekaupule* bans on public meetings of several religious groups, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Brethren Church, the New Testament Church, Souljah, the Apostolic Church, Every Home, and Victory Church. Although the law provides only for monetary fines not to exceed 500 Australian dollars (\$446), the authorities reportedly threatened to arrest members of unapproved groups if they engaged in public meetings in violation of the law. Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups continued to meet publicly at their places of worship despite the threat from the police. There were no arrests or fines reported.

Missionaries practiced without restriction on some islands, but on other islands the *falekaupule* issued formal and informal bans on proselytizing by representatives of religious groups that were not already established or were thought to be new.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. On at least five islands, including Funafuti, Nukulaelae, Nukufetau, Nanumanga, and Vaitupu Island, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Brethren Church, and other religious groups were reportedly perceived as being outside of traditional norms. In some cases, local traditional leaders discouraged groups from proselytizing or holding meetings, claiming that "new" religious groups might disrupt traditional societal structures. Many religious groups continued to operate without formal approval, especially in Funafuti.

Societal abuse and discrimination, including acts and threats of violence, occurred against Brethren Church members on Nanumanga, prompting some group members to move to Funafuti.

The Church of Tuvalu exerted considerable influence in the social and political life of the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Fiji visited the country and expressed concern with the minister responsible for religious affairs about the status and effects on religious groups of the legal restrictions on public meetings.