

VANUATU 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.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea is also accredited to the government of the country. Representatives of the embassy in Papua New Guinea met with members of the Catholic Church among other religious leaders, and periodically discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 262,000 (July 2013 estimate). Approximately 75 percent is Christian, of which an estimated 25 percent is Presbyterian, 11 percent Roman Catholic, 13 percent Anglican, and 11 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups comprising 15 percent of the population include the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, other Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Six percent of the population is Jewish. Other religious groups present include Bahais and Muslims. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group with its own political party, is centered on the island of Tanna and constitutes less than 1 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to "traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles." There is no state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government, but this law is not enforced. The religion law requires that every religious body apply for a certificate

VANUATU

of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$10), and obtain the final approval of the minister for internal affairs to operate in the country. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$524).

The government interacts with religious groups through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Vanuatu Christian Council. Aside from the ministry's activities, government resources are not typically used to support religious activities, although no law prohibits such support.

Government oaths of office customarily are taken on the Bible.

The government provides grants to church-operated schools and pays the salaries for teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. These benefits are not available to the few non-Christian religious schools.

Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of council churches, using materials those churches produce. There is no uniform standard amount of time for religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that students in years seven through 12 receive one hour of religious instruction per week. By law parents may have their children excused from religion classes.

Government Practices

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

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.

In rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision-making predominated. In general, if a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action would require agreement by the chief and the rest of the community. Religious tensions were generally resolved through appeals from traditional leaders to uphold individual rights.

VANUATU

Religious representation at national events was organized through the Vanuatu Christian Council.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government. Representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Papua New Guinea met with members of the Catholic Church, the leadership of the Church of Melanesia (Anglican), and the Vanuatu Christian Council, among other religious leaders, and periodically discussed religious freedom with representatives of government and nongovernmental organizations.