

SWAZILAND 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion, including the right to worship and to change religion. Although the law requires new religious groups to register, unregistered groups were able to operate freely. Non-Christian groups reported some government benefits made available to Christians, such as free transportation to religious activities for Zionists and airtime on state television and radio for Christians, were generally not made available to them.

Religious leaders and media reports stated members of larger Christian groups sometimes discriminated against non-Christian religious groups, especially in rural areas where people generally held negative views on Islam. Many non-Muslims rejected Muslim-owned businesses, and there were periodic calls in newspapers for their closure. A community ousted an elementary school principal, reportedly because of her Evangelical faith.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged the promotion and protection of religious freedom in meetings with government officials and religious groups, and routinely engaged with religious leaders to discuss their religious freedom concerns.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (July 2014 estimate). Religious leaders estimate 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent is Muslim, and the remainder belongs to other religious groups, including those with native African beliefs. According to anecdotal reports, approximately 40 percent of the population practices a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship known locally as Zionism (some adherents of which self-identify as Evangelicals), while another 20 percent is Roman Catholic. There are also Anglicans, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and small Jewish and Bahai communities. Zionism is widely practiced in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

SWAZILAND

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief.

The constitution affords unwritten traditional laws and customs, which are interpreted by traditional courts, equal status with codified laws and prohibits the parliament and national courts from changing or regulating them. These traditional laws and customs allow approximately 360 chiefs working with their traditional councilors to restrict some rights of minority religious groups within their jurisdictions if the chiefs determine the groups' practices conflict with tradition and culture.

The law requires religious groups to register with the government. Christian groups must apply through one of the country's three umbrella religious bodies (the League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches) for a recommendation, which is routinely granted. Upon receipt of the recommendation, the ministry of justice and constitutional affairs registers the organization. For indigenous religious groups and non-Christian religious organizations, authorities consider proof of a religious leader, a congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant organized status. Organized religious groups are exempt from taxation, but contributions to these groups are not tax deductible. Unregistered groups report they are able to operate freely.

Religious groups are required to obtain government permission for the construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and must obtain the appropriate chief's and the chief's advisory council's permission for new buildings in rural areas.

Religious instruction is mandatory in primary school and an elective subject in secondary school. Although schools teach religion predominantly from a Christian perspective, the education ministry includes a multi-religion component in the religious curriculum. According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, the only organized religious youth clubs permitted to operate in schools are Christian. Voluntary Christian school clubs conduct daily prayer services in many public schools and are permitted to raise funds for their clubs. The constitution provides religious groups the right to establish and operate private schools and to provide religious instruction for their students.

SWAZILAND

Government Practices

The government allowed members of the Muslim and Bahai communities to take time off work as needed to fulfill religious requirements. For example, religious leaders said the government protected the right of Muslim workers to attend Friday prayers at mosques. They also stated, however, that some schools did not allow Muslim pupils early departure to attend Friday prayers.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, supported many Christian activities. The government provided free transportation to Christians attending certain religious activities. Such benefits, however, were generally provided only to indigenous Zionists. The king, the queen mother, and other members of the royal family commonly attended Zionist programs, including Good Friday and Easter weekend services, where the host church usually invited the king to preach. Official government programs generally opened with a Christian prayer and several ministers held Christian prayer vigils, which civil servants were required to attend, to address social issues such as crime and increases in traffic accidents.

Government-owned television and radio stations carried Christian programming. Minority religious groups stated non-Christian religious groups did not receive airtime despite repeated calls from the non-Christian groups for inclusion in state television and radio programs.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders and the media reported instances when members of the larger Christian groups discriminated against non-Christians, particularly in rural areas. Some Christians reportedly declined to patronize Muslim-owned businesses. The government-owned newspaper, the *Swazi Observer*, and the independent *Times of Swaziland* both repeatedly published opinion pieces calling for Muslim-owned businesses to be evicted from rural areas so ethnic Swazis could take ownership of the businesses.

In August a community in Shiselwini forced a public primary school principal out of her office because of her religious beliefs. The community threatened her and demanded her office keys. According to media reports, community members, who were primarily Lutherans and Anglicans, told her they would not permit her, as a

SWAZILAND

member of an evangelical church, to lead the school. The principal transferred to another region.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy encouraged the promotion and protection of religious freedom through regular interaction with the government, religious leaders, and religious groups. Embassy officers also met with religious leaders to discuss their concerns with respect to religious freedom.