

FIJI 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The 2013 constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of church and state. In August the government lifted all remaining restrictions on the Methodist Church's annual conference, fundraising bazaar, and choir competition. In September, however, the prime minister accused the church of conducting political activities in opposition to his government.

There were reports of societal harassment of religious groups viewed by some citizens as outside the mainstream.

In meetings with the government, U.S. embassy officials advocated for religious freedom and abolishing meeting permit requirements for religious and other organizations. Embassy officers discussed religious freedom with various religious groups, and encouraged nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to interfaith and civic dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 903,000 (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2007 census, approximately 64 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, and 6 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church which, according to the 2007 census, has approximately 290,000 members, about one-third of the population. Other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church also have significant membership. The majority of the country's traditional chiefs support the Methodist Church, and it remains influential among indigenous Fijians, particularly in rural areas where 49 percent of the population lives. There are also a small number of nondenominational Christian groups and small communities of Bahais and Sikhs.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most indigenous citizens, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. Most Indo-Fijians, who account for 37 percent, are Hindu, while roughly 20 percent of the Indo-Fijians are Muslim and 6 percent are Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The very small western community is predominantly Christian.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The new constitution signed by the president in 2013 establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. These rights may be limited by law due to necessity, to protect the freedoms of others, or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, or nuisance. Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution also provides that religious belief may not be asserted as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution does not ban proselytizing, but places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions.

Religious groups are required by law to register with the government through trustees, which allows the trustees to hold land or property for the groups. The law allows religious groups the right to establish, maintain, and manage places of education, whether or not they receive financial assistance from the state, provided the institution maintains educational standards prescribed by law.

The government does not restrict foreign clergy or foreign missionary activity.

Permits are required for any public meeting, including for religious groups.

There is no required religious instruction under the law. Schools owned and operated by various religious denominations offer some religious instruction. These schools may not require students to take religious instructions.

Government Practices

The government lifted 2012 restrictions that had limited the duration of the Methodist Church’s annual conference, due to previous allegations that the church had become too political. The prime minister subsequently criticized the church for its letter, cautioning followers against the notion of a secular state and encouraging them to exercise their vote wisely in the September elections. The

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church responded that the letter simply set out the resolutions agreed upon during the annual conference, and that the church fully supported the newly-elected government.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Authorities reported and investigated the vandalism of a Hindu prayer hall, including worship ornaments, at the Nadi Arya Samaj Primary School on April 12. Authorities are also investigating a theft in September from another temple.

Religious groups viewed by some citizens as outside the mainstream that sought to establish congregations in villages and on outer islands encountered problems. New Pentecostal denominations sometimes faced difficulties in proselytizing and establishing congregations in villages and on outer islands. They reported harassment and intimidation in some instances. On Kioa Island, which is owned by a tribe from Tuvalu, traditional chiefs continued to ban proselytizing by all other religious groups, except the Church of Tuvalu.

The Methodist Church leadership announced in March the church was apolitical, and that its clergy were not to preach on political matters from the pulpit or to endorse a political party or candidate. The church also required clergy and officials who wished to contest the September elections to resign from their positions.

The Adventist, Anglican, Catholic, Hindu, Methodist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Muslim, and other religious groups operated numerous schools, including colleges, which the government did not subsidize. The Hindu and Muslim communities maintained a number of religious and cultural organizations. NGOs actively brought together people from different religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, with the aim of building bridges of respect and understanding between different religious traditions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In meetings with government officials, U.S. embassy officers encouraged the government to remove permit requirements for church meetings and place fewer restrictions on religious organizations. The embassy also discussed religious freedom with various religious groups and NGO representatives as a part of efforts

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to maintain an active interfaith dialogue. The embassy posted articles and other commentary on religious freedom and tolerance on social media websites.