

TONGA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

There were no reports of government actions affecting constitutional provisions for freedom of religious practice, freedom of worship, and freedom of assembly for religious services.

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

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 2014 estimate). According to 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 (both local offshoots of the Methodist Church), 7 percent. Other Christian denominations in total account for approximately 10 percent, including the Tokaikolo Church, the Constitutional Church of Tonga, 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 Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religious practice, freedom of worship, and freedom of assembly for religious services, provided these freedoms are not used "to commit evil and licentious acts" or "do what is contrary to the law and peace of the land." The constitution does not prohibit individuals from changing their faith.

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There is no state religion. The constitution, however, requires Sunday to be “kept holy” as the Sabbath day 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 continued to recommend that church groups register for tax purposes but did not require them to do so. The government permitted all registered religious groups to import goods intended for religious purposes duty-free but did not subsidize any religious group or grant them tax-exempt status.

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) maintained 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 services 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 significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom during meetings with the government and NGOs. The U.S. government did not maintain a resident embassy in the country. The Ambassador in Suva, Fiji is accredited to the government. The embassy posted content promoting religious freedom and tolerance on its website.