

TUVALU 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom to change religion or belief and the freedom to show and spread religious belief through worship, teaching, observance, or practice. Traditional island councils discouraged public meetings of several minority religious groups and religious bans by traditional leaders remained in place.

On some islands, traditional leaders reportedly worked actively against nontraditional religious groups. The Jehovah's Witness community on Nanumanga stated that it had experienced discrimination and a threat of violence.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government, and the embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance on social media and in meetings with the minister responsible for religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at approximately 11,000 (July 2015 estimate). Approximately 97 percent of the population belongs to the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu (Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu, which has historic ties to the Congregational Church and other churches in Samoa), 1.4 percent to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and 1 percent to the Bahai Faith. There are small populations of Muslims, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, 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 Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu. Most members of other religious groups are found in Funafuti, the capital, and some Bahais live on Nanumea Island.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu is by law the state church, and the State Church (Declaration) Act primarily affords its followers "the privilege of performing special services on major national events." The constitution otherwise provides for separation of religion and state. The constitution provides for

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“freedom of thought, religion, and belief” which may be limited by law for reasons such as avoiding divisiveness; protecting the rights of others; defense; and public order, safety, morality, and health. 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.”

By law any new religious group with adult members representing not less than 2 percent of the country’s total population (at the most recent census) must register with the government; failure to register could result in prosecution. The Ministry of Home Affairs requires religious groups seeking registration to submit a request signed by the head and supported by five other members of the organization. Information on and proof of the number of adherents, the name of the religious organization and approval from the traditional elder councils, known as *falekaupule*, are also required in the request. Under the law all religious groups, regardless of size, must register with and obtain approval from the *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 judged locally to “directly threaten the values and culture of the island community.” The law provides for unapproved groups to be fined up to 500 Australian dollars (\$365) if they engage in public meetings in violation of the law.

The law guarantees the right of individuals to worship freely within their own residences.

Government Practices

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 thought to be new. Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives reported the 2012 *falekaupule* religious ban on their group in Funafuti was lifted but the ban remained in place on the outer islands. Seventh-day Adventists were also banned in the outer islands.

Government ceremonies at the national level, such as the opening of parliament, and at the island-council level often included Christian prayers and clergy.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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On the main island of Funafuti, religious minorities reported they were able to function freely without restrictions from local authorities. On smaller islands, including Niu, Nukufetau, Nanumanga, Niutao, and Vaitupu Island, the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religious groups were reportedly perceived by residents as being outside of traditional norms. In some cases, local traditional leaders discouraged groups from proselytizing or holding meetings, stating nontraditional and minority religious groups might disrupt traditional societal structures. Many religious groups continued to operate without formal approval, especially in the outer islands, without penalty.

Jehovah's Witnesses on Nanumanga stated they had experienced discrimination and societal abuse, including a threat of violence related to a disagreement over funeral proceedings. Government representatives stated they were not aware of any reports of such abuses.

The Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu exerted considerable influence in the social, cultural, and political life of the country. For example, the Church limited activities on Sunday and encouraged a modest dress code in local villages.

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. The embassy used social media to promote religious freedom and tolerance.