

# **TONGA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution grants freedom to practice, worship, and assemble for religious services but not to use this freedom to “commit evil and licentious acts” or “do what is contrary to the law and peace of the land.”

Registration of religious groups is not required by law. However, a church may choose to register in order to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers and tax exemption.

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

During periodic visits, officials from the U.S. embassy in Fiji discussed religious freedom with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Tonga National Council of Churches. Embassy officials discussed the International Religious Freedom Report and the need to protect religious freedom with Tongan contacts.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 107,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to 2011 census data, the most recent available, 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, Gospel Church, the Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, other Pentecostal denominations, Anglicans, 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**

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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. Registration of religious groups is not required by law. Any group of people may gather together, worship, and practice their faith without informing the government or seeking its permission. A religious group, however, may still choose to apply to register in order to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers, tax exemption, fundraising, and protection of denomination name. Registration for religious groups is governed by the Charitable Trust Act, which requires an application to the Ministry Commerce and Labor accompanied by: certified copies of the group’s rules/constitution, a declaration detailing any other trust on which the applicant holds assets, a witness’ signature, and a 115 Tonga pa’anga (\$54) application fee.

The constitution requires Sunday to be “kept holy” as the Sabbath day and no business can be conducted on that day “except according to law.”

Religious groups may operate schools and a number do so. In public schools the government allows religious groups to have an hour program of religious education with students once a week.

### **Government Practices**

The government continued to recommend that church groups register with the Ministry of Commerce and Labor for tax purposes. 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 continued to allow hotels and resorts to operate on Sunday, despite the constitutional requirement that the Sabbath must be “kept holy.”

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

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one free hour of services on the radio each Sunday. 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**

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom during meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Tonga National Council of Churches. Embassy officials discussed the content and purpose of the International Religious Freedom Report with contacts and highlighted the need to protect religious freedom.