

FIJI 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of church and state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation and inciting hatred or “disaffection” against any religious group. Religious groups must register with the government. A law on education permits noncompulsory religious instruction in schools owned and operated by various religious denominations. The parliament and Office of Public Prosecutions took action against a politician, a media outlet, and others who made statements the government perceived as being antagonistic towards the country’s Muslim community. In September, the prime minister delivered a speech at a Hindu religious celebration praising interfaith tolerance and unity that was met with support by the Hindu minority community.

A spate of robberies around the country included break-ins at Hindu temples. Interfaith organizations frequently brought people together from different religious groups to build mutual respect and understanding.

Embassy officials held meetings with the government and various religious groups with the aim of encouraging and maintaining an active interfaith dialogue. The embassy used social media to highlight the country’s religious diversity.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 915,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2007 census, approximately 64.5 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, and 6.3 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church, which makes up approximately 34.6 percent of the population. Other Protestant denominations account for 10.4 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 9.1 percent, and other Christian groups 10.4 percent. There are also 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. The majority of the country’s traditional chiefs belong to the Methodist Church, and the Church remains influential among indigenous people, particularly in rural areas where 49 percent of the population lives. Most Indian Fijians, who

account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while roughly 20 percent are Muslim and 6 percent Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The small community of mixed European and Fijian ancestry is predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The government may limit these rights by law 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 based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution provides that individuals may not assert religious belief as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees who may then hold land or property for the groups. To register, religious bodies must submit applications to the registrar of titles office. Applications must include names and identification of the trustees signed by the head of the religious body to be registered, a copy of the constitution of the proposed religious body, land title documents for the land used by the religious body, and a registration fee of 2.30 Fiji dollars (\$1.10). Registered religious bodies may receive an exemption from tax after approval from the national tax agency on the condition they operate in a nonprofit and noncompetitive capacity. Under the law, religious bodies that hold land or property must register their houses of worship including their land and show proof of title. There is no mention in the law of religious organizations that do not hold land.

Permits are required for any public meeting on public property, outside of regular religious services and houses of worship, organized by religious groups.

There is no required religious instruction under the law. 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 law permits

noncompulsory religious instruction in schools, enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations to offer religious instruction. Schools may impart religious elements such as class prayer as long as they do not force teachers to participate, and students may be excused should their parents request it.

The country is not party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama continued to emphasize religious tolerance during public addresses at home and overseas, stating the country is a multifaith nation with religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution. As keynote speaker at a September 15 celebration for the Hindu Ganesh Utsav, the prime minister said “When people of all faiths come together in tolerance and understanding...peace, justice and prosperity flourish.” Representatives of the minority Hindu community expressed support for the prime minister’s message.

The prime minister criticized the Methodist Church for allowing opposition political leaders to serve as lay preachers and for not having its representatives attend an interfaith service for returning peacekeepers. The Methodist Church defended its political neutrality and asserted the rights of politicians of all faiths to practice their religion.

On August 17, the Office of Public Prosecutions charged three staff members of the *Fiji Times* newspaper and the author of a letter to the editor for violating the crimes decree that prohibits publishing articles that incite and cause dislike, hatred, and antagonism toward any community. The charges alleged the men incited communal antagonism against the Muslim community in a letter to the editor published on April 27 in the *Fiji Times* indigenous language edition. The letter said in part, “Muslims are not the indigenous of this country. These are people that have invaded other nations, for example, Bangladesh and India, where they killed, raped, and abused their women and children. Today they have gone to the extent of having a part in the running of the country.” The case remained pending as of the end of the year.

On September 29, the parliament voted to suspend opposition Parliamentarian Ratu Isoa Tikoca for two years for a speech he made on July 5, questioning the leadership of Attorney General and Minister of Finance Aiyaz-Sayed Khaiyum and other Muslims holding high-level positions in the government. The parliament’s

Privileges Committee ruled that Tikoca's comments breached a standing order that states, "It is out of order for a member...to use words that are likely to promote feelings of ill-will or hostility between communities or ethnic groups within Fiji." Non-Muslim opposition members criticized the length of the suspension.

Most schools in the country were established by community organizations and later came under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Private or religious groups sometimes owned or managed the school property but the Ministry of Education administered and regulated the curriculum and teachers. Some of these schools maintained a religious and/or ethnic origin, but they remained open to all students. The government provided funding and education assistance to public schools, including schools owned and operated by religious organizations.

Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize the government's actions as being solely based on religious identity.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) and Seventh-day Adventist Church, as well as Hindu and Muslim groups operated numerous schools, including secondary schools, which were eligible for government subsidies based on the size of the student population.

The Hindu and Muslim communities maintained a number of religious and cultural organizations. Interfaith organizations regularly 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.

During a spate of robberies around the country, three Hindu temples were broken into and desecrated in January, August, and September. One of the temples was broken into several times. The authorities arrested a man for one of the attacks and released him subject to curfew pending trial.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials held meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious leaders to discuss the importance of respect for religious freedom as a universal human right. The Ambassador visited local

temples, mosques, and religious schools to demonstrate U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy used social media to highlight the ambassador's religious outreach and demonstrate appreciation of and respect for the country's religious diversity.