

VANUATU 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The preamble to the constitution refers to traditional Christian values, but there is no state religion. The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or traditional belief. On penalty of a fine, the law requires religious groups to register, but the government does not enforce this requirement.

In January police arrested men on charges of arson for allegedly burning a church in Luganville. In rural areas, chiefs and traditional leaders exercised influence over communal decision making, including regarding the establishment of new religious groups.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Papua New Guinea met with members of various Christian denominations among other religious leaders, and periodically discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 272,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2009 census, approximately 82 percent is Christian. An estimated 28 percent of the population is Presbyterian; 12 percent, Roman Catholic; 15 percent, Anglican; and 12 percent, Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups comprising 15 percent of the population include the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, other Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Six percent of the population is Jewish. Other religious groups include Bahais and Muslims. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group with its own political party, is centered on the island of Tanna and constitutes less than 1 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to "traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles." There is no state religion. The

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constitution guarantees individual freedom of “religious or traditional beliefs,” including the freedom of conscience and worship subject “to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defence, safety, public order, welfare, and health.” Any individual who believes these rights have been violated may apply “independently of any other possible legal remedy... to the Supreme Court to enforce that right.” The Supreme Court is empowered to issue orders that it considers appropriate to enforce these rights if found violated, and to order payment of compensation.

Religious groups are required to register with the government. The law requires that every religious body apply for a certificate of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$9), and obtain the final approval of the minister for internal affairs to operate in the country. Registration allows the religious group to maintain a bank account. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$461), but the law is not enforced.

Government Practices

The government interacted with religious groups through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Vanuatu Christian Council. Aside from the ministry’s activities, government resources were not typically used to support religious activities.

Government oaths of office customarily were taken on the Bible.

The Department of Education proscribed discrimination, including on religious grounds. The government has provided grants to church-operated schools and paid the salaries of teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. Government schools scheduled time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of churches in the council using their own materials. There was no uniform standard amount of time dedicated to religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum required that students in years seven through 12 receive one hour of religious instruction per week. By law, parents were able to excuse their children from religion classes.

Religious representation at national events was organized through the Vanuatu Christian Council.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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According to media reports, police arrested eight men in January on arson charges for allegedly burning a church in Luganville. The men were reportedly hired by a local chief who sought retribution against his wife's church due to religious differences between faith groups in the area. In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision-making predominated. In general, if a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action required agreement by the chief and the rest of the community. Religious tensions were generally resolved through appeals from traditional leaders to uphold individual rights.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government. Officials from the Embassy in Papua New Guinea periodically discussed religious freedom with representatives of the government. Embassy representatives also met and discussed religious freedom with members of the Catholic Church, the leadership of the Church of Melanesia (Anglican), and the Vanuatu Christian Council, among other religious leaders, and with NGOs.