

LESOTHO 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. The government provided extensive support for schools operated by religious groups, including by paying and certifying all teachers.

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

The U.S. government continued to discuss religious freedom with the government and maintained regular contact with religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.0 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the Christian Council of Lesotho, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian, including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, evangelical Christians, Methodists, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Pentecostals. The remaining 10 percent is Muslim, Hindu, Bahai, belongs to indigenous or other religious groups, or is atheist. Many Christians practice traditional indigenous rituals in conjunction with Christianity. There is a small number of Jews, most of whom are not citizens. Muslims live primarily in the northern area of the country. There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. These rights may be limited by laws in the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or protecting the rights of other persons, provided the limitations are the minimum necessary.

The government has no established requirements for recognition of religious groups. By law any group, religious or otherwise, may register as a legal entity

with the government, regardless of its purpose, as long as it has a constitution and a leadership committee. Most religious groups register, but there is no penalty for those that do not. The benefits of registration are administrative. It gives a group legal standing and formalizes its structure under the law. In the absence of registration, religious organizations may operate freely and tend to business as they see fit, but without any of the legal standing or protections of registered organizations.

The education ministry pays and certifies all teachers at government funded schools, including religious schools, and requires a standard curriculum for both secular and religious schools. The government does not mandate religious education in schools, and the constitution exempts students at any educational institution from requirements to receive instruction or attend any ceremony or observance associated with a religion not their own. All curricula, including for religious education classes, must be approved by the minister of education.

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Churches owned and operated approximately 80 percent of all primary and secondary schools. The Roman Catholic Church, the Lesotho Evangelical Church, the Anglican Church, and, to a lesser extent, the Methodist Church were the primary operators of religious schools, which were publicly funded. In practice, in any school offering religious education – including all religious schools and some secular schools – the subject was mandatory. Children continued to be permitted to attend schools run by a religious group other than their own, and some families chose this option. Others went to public schools or secular private schools.

The Christian Council of Lesotho continued to be regularly invited to open government ceremonies and meetings. On September 15, the government held its annual national independence prayer service in honor of Lesotho's 50th year of independence. For the first time, the government included Muslim leaders at the event.

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

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government, typically in the context of broader discussions about human rights. The embassy also maintained regular contact with religious leaders, including with representatives of the Christian Council of Lesotho, an umbrella organization of five Christian churches.