

NAURU 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws provide for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, and for freedom to change one's religion or beliefs. Smaller churches continued to find the 750-member requirement for registration difficult to meet, although religious groups stated they could conduct most normal functions without registration.

A government official stated that local communities "fear that refugees could overrun the tiny island nation." He said Nauruans would not tolerate the Muslim refugees constructing mosques or houses of worship, although generally the population had no issue with Muslim refugees practicing their religion in private.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Officials from the U.S. embassy in Suva discussed religious pluralism, tolerance, and registration requirements during visits with government officials and civil society in August and October.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 national census, approximately 95 percent of the population is Christian. The Nauru Congregational Church (which includes the Nauru Protestant Church) is the largest Christian group, constituting 36 percent of the population, followed by the Roman Catholic Church at 33 percent, the Nauru Independent Assembly of God at 13 percent, and the Nauru Independent Church at 10 percent. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) each constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Two percent of the population reports no religious affiliation. Ethnic Chinese residents, estimated to constitute 5 percent of the population, are Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, or nonreligious.

In addition, according to several nongovernmental organizations and the Australian government, approximately 1,000 persons fleeing their home countries lived in the country at the beginning of the year, although the number declined to approximately 300 at year's end due to resettlement. Sources stated the number was even fewer because many who were moved from the country to Australia for

temporary medical treatment were still legally considered to be in the country, even if they physically were not. Most of those coming to the country were from Muslim majority countries, although many were Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom of conscience, expression, assembly, and association, and for freedom to change one's religion or beliefs. These rights may be restricted by any law that is "reasonably required" in the interests of defense or public safety, order, morality, or health.

Under the law, religious groups must register with the government to operate in an official capacity, which includes proselytizing, building houses of worship, holding religious services, and officiating at marriages. A 2014 cabinet memorandum sets out requirements for registration of new religious groups, including having at least 750 enrolled members, land, and a building in the country, and leadership by a Nauruan member of the clergy, who must reside in the country. The Catholic Church, Nauru Congregational Church, Assemblies of God, Nauru Independent Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church are officially registered.

Religious groups may operate private schools, and a number do so. In public schools, the government allows religious groups to have a weekly religious education program with students during school hours, but it does not require schools to offer such education. In schools where religious education is provided, students are required to attend the program led by the representative of their respective religious group. Students whose faith is not represented are required to undertake independent study during the class time devoted to religious education.

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

Government Practices

Although the law requires registration for religious groups to conduct a full range of activities, local religious leaders stated the government continued to require such recognition only if a denomination's clergy wished to officiate at marriages. Religious groups stated they could conduct most normal functions without registration. There were no reports the government discriminated in the

registration process, although leaders of churches with smaller congregations continued to express concerns that the 750-member requirement implemented in 2014 was difficult to meet. The registration applications for the Baptist Church and the Church of Jesus Christ, which did not have 750 members, remained pending at the end of the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A government official stated that local communities “fear that refugees could overrun the tiny island nation.” He said Nauruans would not tolerate the Muslim refugees constructing mosques or houses of worship, although generally the population has no issue with Muslim refugees practicing their religion in private.

Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize intolerance toward refugees as being based solely on religious identity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government; the U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in Nauru. In August and October embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and registration requirements during meetings with senior government officials and civil society.