

TONGA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants freedom to practice, worship, and assemble for religious services. The constitution requires the Sabbath, which the government defines as Sunday, be “kept holy” and prohibits commercial transactions and many recreational activities on Sunday, except as permitted by law. The law does not require registration of religious groups. A religious group, however, must register to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers and tax exemptions.

The Forum of Church Leaders, comprising only Christian leaders, met to discuss social issues in the country. The secretariat compiled and submitted reports on these issues to the cabinet.

During regular visits, officials from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji discussed the need to protect religious freedom and tolerance with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor; and Tonga National Council of Churches, as well as with other institutions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 106,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to 2016 local census data, membership in major religious groups includes the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 35 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 19 percent; Roman Catholic Church, 14 percent; Free Church of Tonga, 12 percent; and Church of Tonga, 7 percent. (The latter two are local affiliates of the Methodist Church.) Other Christian groups account for approximately 9 percent and include the Tokaikolo Church, Mo’ui Fo’ou ‘ia Kalaisi, Constitutional Church of Tonga, Seventh-day Adventists, Gospel Church, Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, other Pentecostal denominations, Anglicans, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Reportedly, 60 individuals identified as Buddhist, while approximately 750 reported that they followed the Baha’i Faith. Approximately 600 individuals reported no religious affiliation or did not answer the census question. Approximately 900 individuals identified as belonging to other faiths, including Islam. According to the government-run secretariat for the Forum of Church Leaders in Tonga, the fastest-growing religious group is the Church of Jesus Christ.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution allows 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 requires that the Sabbath, which the government recognizes as Sunday, be “kept holy” and prohibits commercial transactions on the Sabbath, except essential services after approval by the minister of police. The law also prohibits many recreational activities and sports on the Sabbath.

The law does not require registration of religious groups. Any group of individuals may gather together, worship, and practice their faith without informing the government or seeking its permission. A religious group, however, must register to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers, tax exemptions on nonbusiness income, importation of goods for religious purposes, fundraising, protection of a denomination’s name, and access to broadcasting on public channels. Registration as a religious group requires an application to the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor, accompanied by certified copies of the group’s rules and constitution, a declaration detailing any other trust in which the applicant holds assets, a witness’ signature, and a 115 pa’anga (\$52) application fee. It is a legal requirement that if a group elects to register with the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor, it must also register with the Ministry of Revenue and Customs as a nonprofit organization. There are no additional requirements to register with the Ministry of Revenue and Customs once a group is registered as a separate legal entity with the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor.

The law allows religious leaders to legalize marriages. According to the law, only marriages solemnized by church ministers are legally recognized, and no other marriage is valid.

Religious groups may operate schools, and a number do so. In public schools, the government allows religious groups to offer an hour-long program of religious education with students once per week but does not require schools to do so. In public schools where religious education is provided, students are required to attend the program led by the representative of their respective denomination. Students whose faith does not send a representative are required to take a study period during the hour devoted to religious education.

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

Government Practices

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC), a 24-hour service, 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. The government permitted all Christian groups to participate in broadcasting one free hour of services on the radio each Sunday. All churches were able to broadcast notices of their activities on six FM radio stations and three television stations, namely Television Tonga, Digi TV, and the Christian station Doulos Television Radio.

Foreign Christian missionaries were active in the country and operated freely.

The government continued to enforce a ban that prohibits bakeries from operating on Sunday to comply with the constitution’s prohibition of commercial activity on the Sabbath. By special permit, the government continued to allow hotels and resorts to operate on Sunday for tourists. These special permits are granted by the minister of police in accordance with the set requirements. The Forum of Church Leaders continued to express concern about the exemption for hotels and resorts.

The Education Ministry continued to give permission to the Scripture Union and Sisu koe Fetu’u Ngingila, two private Christian NGOs, to provide Bible study and other activities for students of different faiths throughout the year for one hour per week. Students who did not wish to participate were allowed to study independently in school libraries.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Forum of Church Leaders, under its secretariat at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, met to discuss social issues in the country, such as suicide, crime, drugs, healthy lifestyles, deportees, climate change issues, and teenage pregnancy. The secretariat compiled and submitted reports on these issues to the cabinet.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Fiji met with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor to discuss religious freedom. Embassy officials also met with the Tonga National Council of Churches and representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ and discussed the need to protect interfaith tolerance.

The embassy utilized social media to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, including highlighting comments by the U.S. Vice President and posts in support of International Religious Freedom Day.