

VANUATU 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion or traditional belief. The preamble to the constitution refers to traditional Christian values, but there is no state religion. On penalty of a fine, the law requires religious groups to register; however, the government did not enforce this requirement. In March the minister for internal affairs called on all churches to conduct more “open-air crusades” around the capital city of Port Vila to combat crime. The interdenominational Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) received a 10 million vatu (\$88,700) annual grant from the government, which it said it would use for the administration of the VCC as well as to support various activities of the churches in the country.

According to the VCC, religious minorities were respected, and any tension between groups was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues. In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision making predominated on significant social changes, such as establishment of a new religious group. In November the VCC met with a delegation from the West Papua Council of Churches and encouraged the council to help establish a region-wide Melanesia church council.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador in Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government. In October the Ambassador visited the country and engaged with VCC leaders on social challenges, attended nondenominational religious services, and reinforced the importance of religious freedom in stable societies.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 293,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2009 census, the most recent, approximately 82 percent of the population is Christian. An estimated 28 percent of the population is Presbyterian; 15 percent, Anglican; 12 percent, Roman Catholic; and 12 percent, Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups, cumulatively comprising 15 percent of the population, include the Church of Christ, Neil Thomas Ministries, the Apostolic Church, and the Assemblies of God. Smaller Christian groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), which estimates its membership at nearly 9,000, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, which estimates its membership at 750. According to the census, approximately 13

percent of the population are followers of an estimated 88 other religious groups, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Muslims, and several newly formed groups. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group centered on the island of Tanna, constitutes approximately 3 percent of the population according to census data. In January the media reported that approximately 5,000 believers in the John Frum Movement had converted to Christianity in recent years.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for individual freedom of “religious or traditional beliefs,” including the freedoms of conscience and worship, subject “to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defense, 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 may issue orders it considers appropriate to enforce these rights if it finds a violation of such rights and to pay compensation. The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to “traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles,” but there is no state religion.

The law requires every religious body to apply to the government for a certificate of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$9), and obtain the final approval of the minister for internal affairs to operate. Registration allows the religious group to maintain a bank account. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$440); however, the law is not enforced.

According to law, children may not be refused school admission or be treated unfavorably because of their religion.

The Department of Education prohibits religious discrimination. Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by VCC representatives using their own materials. The government provides grants to church-operated schools and pays the salaries of teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. There is no uniform standard amount of time dedicated to religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that students in years seven through 12 receive one hour of religious instruction per week. Parents may request that students be excused from religious education classes in both private and public schools.

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

Government Practices

In March the minister for internal affairs called on all churches to hold more “open-air crusades” – as public preaching and religious events are known – as a way to combat crime around Port Vila. The minister, whom observers said was seeking to channel individuals’ attention towards morally good behavior and to reinforce values-based civic engagement, also said that because the country is predominantly Christian, citizens should attend church services and participate in church activities to reduce social problems. The minister issued a letter of instruction to the Port Vila Municipal Council to allow all churches and faith-based organizations to stage “open-air crusades” and community outreach programs within city limits. Churches welcomed the minister’s invitation. The Port Vila Municipal Authority supported the initiative but requested churches to inform the authority in advance of planned crusades and to end all events within authorized timeframes.

The government continued to interact with religious groups through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the VCC, the latter composed of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of Christ, and the Apostolic Church, with the Seventh-day Adventist and Assemblies of God Churches having observer status.

The Ministry of Health continued to cooperate with six churches, including Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, the Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, and the Church of Jesus Christ, to provide health, educational, economic, and disaster response assistance to needy local communities. In July the government, community organizations, and partner churches provided medical and health information, free medical consultations, and screened for common illnesses at a community health expo.

The VCC received a 10 million vatu (\$88,700) annual grant from the government. The VCC said it would use the funds for the administration of the VCC and to support the intertwined social, political awareness, and religious activities of the churches in the country. In June the VCC hosted an informational event for migrant workers on their way to Australia and New Zealand to increase awareness within the seasonal worker community of labor rights, the importance of health, and cultural sensitivity.

Government oaths of office customarily were taken on the Bible.

Ceremonial prayers at national events were organized through the VCC.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the main leader of the VCC, religious minorities were respected, and if there was tension between groups, it was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues.

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.

In November the VCC met with a seven-member delegation of the West Papua Council of Churches. Among other topics discussed, the VCC requested the West Papua Council of Churches to commit to further discussions on establishing a Melanesian council of churches that would include Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Fiji.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government. In October the Ambassador visited the country and engaged with VCC leaders on social challenges, attended nondenominational religious services, and reinforced the importance of religious freedom in stable societies.