

LESOTHO 2015 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 1.9 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the Christian Council of Lesotho, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian, including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, evangelicals, 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, or public safety, order, or morality, or protecting the rights other persons, provided the limitations are the minimum necessary.

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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.

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.

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

In June the Christian Council of Lesotho was involved in brokering talks between the government and opposition leaders in exile, but its efforts did not resolve the impasse.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government. 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.