



Tonga

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country is an archipelago with a land area of 288 square miles and a population of 101,200. According to the last official census in 1996, membership by percentage of population of major religious groups was: Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 41 percent; Roman Catholic Church, 16 percent; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 14 percent; Free Church of Tonga, 12 percent; and all other groups, 17 percent. However, both Roman Catholics and Mormons state that the number of their adherents is higher than reported, and a 2006 survey conducted by the Free Wesleyan Church revealed its membership comprised only 35 percent of the population. The Tokaikolo Church (a local offshoot of the Methodist Church), Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Anglicans, the Baha'i Faith, Islam, and Hinduism have small numbers of adherents.

Foreign missionaries are active in the country and operate freely.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion. Registration of religious groups is recommended by the Government for tax purposes, but is not required. All religious groups are permitted duty-free entry of goods intended for religious purposes, but no religious group is subsidized or granted tax-exempt status.

The Constitution states that Sunday, the Sabbath day, is to be "kept holy" and that no business can be conducted, "except according to law." Although an exception is made for hotels and resorts that are part of the tourism industry, the Sabbath day business prohibition is enforced strictly for all other businesses, regardless of a business owner's religion.

There were a number of schools operated by Mormons and by the Free Wesleyan Church.

Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas Day are official holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) maintains policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines state 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." All religious groups are permitted to host programs on Radio Tonga and TV Tonga, but discussions of the basic tenets of non-Christian religions are not permitted. Notices of activities of all churches were broadcast on both Radio Tonga and TV Tonga as well as on privately owned radio and television stations.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government did not maintain a resident Embassy in the country; the U.S. Ambassador in Suva, Fiji, is accredited to the Government of Tonga. The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Officials from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji held discussions with Wesleyan, Mormon, Catholic, and Baha'i officials as well as nongovernmental organizations, such as the Catholic Women's League, during visits to the country.

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