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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Tonga

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

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

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among religions in society contribute to the free practice of religion.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The Constitution states that the "Sabbath day" (Sunday) "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 "Sunday ban" is enforced strictly. All religious groups are permitted duty-free entry of goods intended for religious purposes, but no religious group is subsidized or granted tax free status.

Religious Demography

According to the last official census (1996), the membership by percentage of population of major denominations is: Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 41 percent; Roman Catholic, 16 percent; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), 14 percent; Free Church of Tonga, 12 percent; others, 17 percent. However, both Roman Catholics and the Mormon Church state that from 30 to 40 percent of all citizens are members of their faiths. Members of the Tokaikolo Church, Seventh-Day Adventists, Assembly of God, Anglicans, the Baha'i Faith, Islam, and Hinduism are represented in much smaller numbers.

Western missionaries, particularly members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and other Christian denominations, proselytize freely. There are a number of

schools operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and by the Wesleyan Church.

There are no government-sponsored ecumenical activities.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) maintains policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines state that in view of "the character of the listening public" those who preach on Radio Tonga must confine their preaching "within the limits of the mainstream Christian tradition." Due to this policy, the TBC does not allow discussions by members of the Baha'i Faith of its founder, Bahauallah, by name, or of the tenets of their religions. Similarly, the TBC does not allow the Mormon Church to discuss its founder, Joseph Smith, and the Book of Mormon by name. This policy applies to all churches. Mormons utilize Radio Tonga for the announcement of church activities and functions. The church appears to be thriving. Members of the Baha'i Faith utilize a privately owned radio station for program activities and the announcement of functions.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

In general there are amicable relations among the religious communities.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights. Officials from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji meet with religious officials and nongovernmental organizations during visits to the country.

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[East Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Index](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [International Religious Freedom](#) | [Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) |