

TONGA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants freedom to practice, worship, and assemble for religious services. The law does not require registration of religious groups. A religious group, however, needs to register in order to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers and tax exemption. The constitution requires the Sabbath be “kept holy” and no business can be conducted on that day except according to the law. In July authorities began to enforce a ban on bakeries operating on Sunday after churches said such sales were unconstitutional. Bakeries and some citizens protested the ban, stating the churches had stepped too far into public life.

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

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 106,500 (July 2016 estimate). According to 2011 census data, the most recent available, membership in major religious groups includes the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 36 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 18 percent; the Roman Catholic Church, 15 percent; the Free Church of Tonga, 12 percent; and the Church of Tonga, 7 percent. (The latter two are local affiliates of the Methodist Church). Other Christian groups account for approximately 10 percent and include the Tokaikolo Church, the Constitutional Church of Tonga, Seventh-day Adventists, Gospel Church, the Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, other Pentecostal denominations, Anglicans, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Bahais, Muslims, Hindus, observers of Chinese traditional festivals, and Buddhists together constitute approximately 2 percent of the population. The remaining 1 percent declined to state a religious affiliation. According to reports from local church officials, the fastest growing religious groups are the Pentecostal and Gospel churches.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for 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 prohibits commercial transactions on the Sabbath, except according to law, and provides that agreements made on the Sabbath are void. The government views Sunday as the Sabbath.

The law does not require registration of religious groups. Any group of people may gather together, worship, and practice their faith without informing the government or seeking its permission. A religious group, however, needs to register in order to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers, tax exemptions on nonbusiness income and importation of goods for religious purposes, fundraising, and protection of a denomination’s name. Registration for religious groups requires an application to the Ministry Commerce 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 Tonga pa’anga (\$53) application fee. It is a legal requirement that if a group elects to register with the Ministry of Commerce 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 Ministry of Revenue and Customs once a group is registered as a separate legal entity with Ministry of Commerce and Labor.

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 schools where religious education is provided, students are required to attend the program led by the representative of their respective denomination. Students whose faith is not represented are required to undertake a period of quiet study in the library 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 permitted all registered religious groups to import goods intended for religious purposes duty-free.

On July 3, the police began enforcing a ban on bakeries operating on Sundays to comply with the constitution. Church leaders had advocated for enforcement of the ban, and following its implementation, bakers and some other individuals complained in the press about what they said was the churches' influence over public life. By special permit, the government continued to allow hotels and resorts to operate on Sunday for tourists.

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) 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. All religious groups were permitted to participate in broadcasting one free hour of services on the radio each Sunday. Notices of activities of all churches were broadcast on Radio Tonga, TV Tonga, and on privately owned radio and television stations.

Foreign missionaries were active in the country and operated freely.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

During meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Labor and Commerce, and the Tonga National Council of Churches, U.S. embassy officials discussed the importance of religious freedom as a universal human right and ongoing efforts by the country's Muslim community to register as a charitable trust. Embassy officials highlighted the need to protect religious freedom.