

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely. In February soldiers on Manus Island allegedly attacked three asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan, which required the victims to seek medical attention. There was no public information on an investigation into the incident or any arrests. Since religion, national origin, and refugee status are often closely linked, it was difficult to characterize the incident as being based solely on religious identity. The Constitutional Review Commission and the minister for community development, youth, and religion continued considering the possibility of defining the country as Christian. The minister of education stated that Christian-based religious education in public schools would be compulsory starting in 2019. The government continued to fund churches to deliver health and education services through the Church-State Partnership Program. The speaker of parliament began to implement a 2016 national court order to reinstall indigenous cultural artifacts to the parliament house. The previous speaker had planned to replace the artifacts with Christian symbols.

According to media reports, local residents on Manus Island attacked at least four refugees and/or asylum seekers, three of whom were from Muslim-majority countries, although observers stated that xenophobia as well as religious identity played a role in these attacks. There continued to be reports that established churches criticized the role of new Christian and missionary groups. The Papua New Guinea Churches Council (PNGCC) organized dialogues among its members and fostered cooperation on social welfare projects.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom and government funding of religious groups with the government, including at a church-state partnership forum in June, where they encouraged the government to be more inclusive of which churches received government funding as development agents and ensuring the freedom of religion as guaranteed in the constitution. The Ambassador and other officials met with local religious leaders and provided support to religiously affiliated clinics working in health care management.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.0 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 98 percent of citizens identified as Christian. Approximately 26 percent of the population is Roman Catholic; 18 percent, Evangelical Lutheran; 13 percent, Seventh-day Adventist; 10 percent, Pentecostal; 10 percent, United Church (an offspring of the London Missionary Society, Australian Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand); 6 percent, Evangelical Alliance; 3 percent, Anglican; and 3 percent, Baptist. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Kwato Church, and the Salvation Army together constitute 9 percent. There are approximately 60,000 Baha'is, making up less than 1 percent of the population, and 2 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Newer self-identified fundamentalist Christian religious groups are growing, and there is a growing Jewish community in Port Moresby. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with indigenous beliefs and practices. The Muslim community numbers approximately 5,500 and includes approximately 2,220 local converts as well as 500 refugees and asylum seekers residing at the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre on Manus Island. Most Muslim expatriate workers are centered in Port Moresby. Most local Muslim converts live in Port Moresby or villages in the Highlands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides the individual the right to “freedom of conscience, thought and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs” except where that practice infringes on another person’s rights or where it violates a public interest in “defence, public safety, public order, public welfare, public health, the protection of children and persons under disability, or the development of under-privileged or less advanced groups or areas.” The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the constitution, which refers to “our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours.” There is no state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government in order to hold a bank account, own properties in the religious group’s name, have limited individual liability, and apply to the Internal Revenue Commission for exemption on income tax and to the Department of Treasury for exemption of import duty. In order to register, groups must provide documentation including a list of board or executive committee members and a constitution.

According to the law, religious instruction in public schools is noncompulsory.

Foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. Religious workers receive a three-year special exemption visa from the government. Applications for the visa require a sponsor letter from a religious group in the country, an approved work permit from the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, and a 100 kina (\$30) fee, which is lower than other visa categories.

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

Government Practices

In February Defense Force soldiers attacked Iranian, Iraqi, and Pakistani asylum seekers on Manus Island; the three victims required medical attention. No arrests were made in relation to the attack, and there were no public statements or explanations from police. Since religion, national origin, and refugee status are often closely linked, it was difficult to characterize many incidents as being based solely on religious identity.

In April the police acted on a complaint from the minister for lands and arrested a prominent pastor of a Christian church. The minister alleged the pastor had fraudulently acquired land in a suburb of Port Moresby to build his church. The pastor told the court the police did not follow proper procedures during his arrest, and the court ruled in his favor. The pastor told media that his release was a victory for the people, who would now be able to assemble and worship freely.

In June the Department of Community Development, Youth, and Religion organized a two-day church-state partnership forum, with the theme of “Promoting an Inclusive Papua New Guinea Church-State Partnership.” According to the secretary of the department, the forum’s objectives were to identify the role of churches in addressing gender-based violence and sorcery-related violence and accusations, to gather the views of churches on proposals to declare the country Christian, to include compulsory religious education in the mainstream curriculum, and to establish a provincial church-state partnership program. Participants endorsed recommendations to declare the country as Christian, to include Christian religious education in all schools, and to consider using biblical principles and Christian prayer in the courts.

The Constitutional Review Commission continued work and consultation on a proposed constitutional amendment to declare the country Christian. According to media reports, the commission was working with the Department of Community Development, Youth, and Religion on the amendment.

In April a member of parliament asked the minister for community development, youth, and religion if the government would eradicate “cult movements” in his electorate (Finschhafen District). The minister stated there was a “mushrooming of religion or cult groups” in the country and was quoted as saying, “How do we define religion in the PNG [Papua New Guinea] context? Do we limit its growth because a Christian faith dictate[s] us to do it? Our traditional beliefs – where do those fit in? It is a big question.” In July the minister told parliament that he would submit a proposal to declare the country Christian. As of November the details of that proposal had not been made public, although work was proceeding.

Parliament sessions and most government meetings began and ended with Christian prayers. In Southern Highlands Province, authorities told public servants they had to attend morning devotions for 10-20 minutes every Wednesday morning. Pastors from different Christian denominations led the sessions.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools. Such instruction remained legally noncompulsory, although almost all students attended. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and there was no standard curriculum. Children whose parents did not wish them to attend the classes were excused.

In June the secretary of education told the media the government was finalizing plans to formalize compulsory religious education in schools. He stated that a religious education program, called Citizenship and Christian Values Education (CCVE), would “combine human ethics and Christian principles and be taught to students in prep [elementary] school right through to grade 12.” He stated the curriculum would be ready for a pilot program in 2019. In July the minister for education launched the CCVE teachers’ guide and syllabus and said that starting in 2019, CCVE must be taught in all schools, including government, private, and church-run institutions. In August the minister for higher education, research, science, and technology told the media that “Christian education is the fundamental pillar for early childhood education as students grow up with God-fearing and Biblical foundations in life.”

The education and health sectors continued to rely heavily on church-run institutions. Churches continued to operate approximately 60 percent of schools and health services in the country, and the government provided financial support for these institutions. The government subsidized their operation using a formula based on the schools and health centers each church runs. In addition, the government continued to pay the salary and provide benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff (generally members of the civil service) who worked at these church-administered institutions, as it did for teachers and health staff of national institutions. The facilities provided services to the general population irrespective of religious beliefs, and operations were not religious in nature.

Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituency to carry out development projects or religious activities. Nearly all of these institutions were Christian.

In June the government announced 10 million kina (\$3.05 million) funding for the Church-State Partnership Program, which was half of what was allocated in 2017. In announcing the funding, the minister for police stated the “unfavorable economic climate has impeded the progress of [the] partnership.” He noted that churches were one of the only “reputable systems working to serve our people” and that the funding was for the designated churches to provide health and education services. The formula used for the distribution of funds was based on the number of schools and health centers each church operated. In past years, some churches complained that the government did not deliver all of the money allocated. The seven churches included in the partnership were the Catholic Church, Salvation Army, Anglican Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptist Church, United Church, and Evangelical Lutheran Church. The assistant secretary for the Office of Religion noted there was a need to include other churches in the partnership, and that his office was working to expand the list of churches that would be eligible for funding.

In October the Department of Community Development, Youth, and Religion launched a Church Partnership database. The secretary of the department said the database would provide the government with information on the number of individual churches in the country, what services they provided, and where they operated. This information would be used for planning, budget allocation, capacity support, and partnership arrangements. The minister stated the database would help the government to know what other churches were doing so the government could also provide support to those churches. He added that his ministry would develop a new, more inclusive policy so that government grants reached all

churches in the country.

The PNGCC was using a December 2017 grant of 50,000 kina (\$15,200) from the minister for community development, youth, and religion under the Church-State Partnership Program to work with provincial governments to ensure that each provincial government established a provincial church council. These councils would “bring churches closer to the government.” The PNGCC included the Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, United Churches, and Salvation Army, as well as other churches and organizations as associate members.

The court-ordered reinstallation of indigenous cultural artifacts at the parliament house began in the middle of the year but was not complete as of the end of the year. In 2017 the speaker of parliament said he would comply with a 2016 national court order to reinstall the artifacts that his predecessor, an evangelical Christian, had ordered removed from the parliament house in 2013, saying they were demonic and “ungodly images and idols.” Many Christian groups said they supported the national court decision to reinstall the artifacts when it was handed down in 2016.

In October church leaders laid the foundation for a new “pillar of unity” to be installed in front of the parliament house and thanked the government for recognizing the role churches play in national development. The deputy speaker of parliament witnessed the laying of the foundation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media reports, there was ongoing tension between refugees and asylum seekers from Muslim majority countries living at three facilities on Manus Island and local inhabitants. According to reports, local residents assaulted men from Afghanistan, Sudan, and Iraq in four separate attacks. In all of the attacks, the men were hospitalized; in two of the cases, media reported that police arrested the attackers. Observers said that xenophobia as well as religious identity played a role in these attacks.

The refugees and asylum seekers had been housed at the Regional Refugee Processing Centre until it was closed, and they were removed in November 2017. They initially had refused to move from the center after its closure and told media at the time they feared for their safety from the local community. Since religion

and refugee status are often closely linked, it was difficult to characterize many incidents as being based solely on religious identity.

There continued to be reports that established churches criticized the role of new Christian and missionary groups.

The PNGCC continued its efforts at dialogue among its members. In addition, 16 church-affiliated organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participated in its activities. The council concentrated primarily on cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects.

Through the church-state partnership, religious leaders discussed working together to address social issues that affect congregation members such as education, health, gender equality, fragmentation of family values, and sorcery-related violence. Some participants proposed limiting cooperation to only "mainline" Christian churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed the issue of ensuring that a diverse range of religious groups received public funding from the government with government officials, including those with the Office of Religion.

Embassy representatives attended the June church-state partnership forum and actively participated in discussions on the role of churches in development and the importance of inclusion of all religious views. Embassy officials asked attendees to ensure that any moves to declare the country as Christian would still allow for the freedom of religion guaranteed in the constitution.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious tolerance, gender equality, and churches' role as health and educational service providers in regular meetings with the PNGCC and local religious leaders. The U.S. government, supported religious affiliated clinics in health-care management, including HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment for key populations.