



Samoa

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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

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, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 comprises two major islands that have a total area of approximately 1,000 square miles. According to government statistics, the population was approximately 199,000 as of December 2003. Most live on the island of Upolu, where the capital, Apia, is located. Nearly 100 percent of the population is Christian. The 2001 population and housing census revealed the following religious distribution of the population: Congregational Christian Church, 35 percent; Catholic, 20 percent; Methodist, 15 percent; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 13 percent; and Assembly of God, 7 percent. These statistics reflect recent rapid growth in the number and size of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Assembly of God congregations and a relative decline in the membership of the historically larger denominations. In addition, there are small congregations of other Christian denominations, as well as members of the Baha'i Faith--the country hosts one of only seven Baha'i Houses of Worship in the world--and a few adherents to Islam. There are no reports of avowed atheists. This distribution of church members is reflected throughout the population, but individual villages, particularly small ones, may have only one or two of the major churches represented.

Foreign nationals and immigrants practice the same religions as native-born (Western) Samoans. There are no sizable foreign national or immigrant groups, with the exception of U.S. nationals from American Samoa.

The major denominations that are present in the country all have missionaries, as does the Baha'i Faith.

There is little or no correlation between religious differences and ethnic or political differences. Religious groups include citizens of various social and economic strata.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution provides for the right to practice the religion of one's choice, and the Government observes and enforces these provisions. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private as well as government actors, and laws are applied and enforced in a nondiscriminatory manner. Judicial remedies are accessible and effective.

The preamble to the Constitution acknowledges "an independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions." Nevertheless, although Christianity is favored constitutionally, there is no official or state denomination.

There are no requirements for the recognition of a religious group or for licenses or registration. Missionaries operate freely, either as part of one of the established churches, or by conducting independent revival meetings.

The Constitution provides freedom from unwanted religious indoctrination in schools but gives each denomination or religion the right to establish its own schools; these provisions are adhered to in practice. There are both religious and public schools; the public schools do not have religious instruction as part of their curriculum. Pastoral schools in most villages provide religious instruction following school hours.

Good Friday, Easter Monday, the day after White Sunday, and Christmas are national public holidays.

The Government takes steps to promote interfaith understanding by rotating ministers from various denominations who assist at government functions. Most government functions include a prayer at the opening.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Although the Constitution grants each person the right to change religion or belief and to worship or teach religion alone or with others, in practice the matai (village chiefs) often choose the religious denomination of the aiga (extended family). In previous years, despite constitutional protections, village councils--in the name of maintaining social harmony within the village--sometimes banished or punished families that did not adhere to the prevailing religious belief in the village. However, civil courts take precedence over village councils, and courts have ordered families readmitted to the village. The 1990 Village Fono Act gives legal recognition to the decisions of the fono (village councils) and provides for limited recourse of appeal to the Lands and Titles Courts and to the Supreme Court. In 2000, the Supreme Court ruled that the Village Fono Act could not be used to infringe upon villagers' freedom of religion, speech, assembly, or association. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports that villages banished persons due to their practicing religion differently from that practiced by the village majority.

In February, the Lands and Titles Court ordered the village council of Salamumu to readmit 3 families, comprising about 80 persons, who were banned from the village in 1998 for organizing Bible study classes with the intention of establishing a new church there. The families returned to Salamumu in February and have been living in the village since then without incident. The Court's order was the latest in a series of judicial decisions in recent years that affirmed that all laws, whether statutory or customary, are subject to the individual rights provided for in the constitution.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

There is strong societal pressure at the village and local level to attend church, participate in church services and activities, and support church leaders and projects financially. In some denominations, such financial contributions often total more than 30 percent of family income. A high percentage of the population attends church weekly.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy also maintains contacts with representatives of the country's various religious communities.

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