



Nauru

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted this right in some circumstances.

The status of respect for religious freedom by the Government improved during the period covered by this report. The Government lifted some restrictions on the practice of religious and missionary work by the Jehovah's Witnesses, whose missionaries had previously been denied entry visas. There were indications that representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), also previously barred, may also be issued visas.

There were no indications of widespread societal discrimination against particular religious denominations; however, some elements of the Nauru Protestant and Roman Catholic communities occasionally voice discomfort with religious groups perceived as foreign, in particular the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. officials raised the issue of visa denial for religious leaders with Government officials in Nauru in February 2007.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 8 square miles and a population of 9,200. Christianity is the primary religion. According to the 2002 census, approximately two-thirds of Christians are Protestant, and the remainder are Catholic. The ethnic Chinese on the island, approximately 3 to 4 percent of the population, may be Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, or nonreligious. The largely Christian communities of Tuvaluan and I-Kiribati expatriates were repatriated in late 2006 following the near cessation of phosphate mining in the country. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons said they had small numbers of followers among the native population.

Foreign missionaries introduced Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are a few active Christian missionary organizations, including representatives of Anglicanism, Methodism, and Catholicism.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, until recently the Government restricted this right in some circumstances. Under the Constitution, the rights to freedom of conscience, expression, assembly, and association may be restricted by any law "which is reasonably required ... in the interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health." The Government cited this provision as a basis for preventing foreign churches from proselytizing native-born citizens.

There is no state religion.

Officials of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons have been informed that, under the provisions of the Birth, Death, and Marriage Ordinance, their churches must register with the Government to operate in an official capacity, which includes proselytizing, building churches, holding religious services, and otherwise practicing their religion. Only the Catholic Church and two long-standing Protestant denominations, the Nauru Congregational Church and the Kiribati Protestant Church, are officially registered to operate. The Kiribati Protestant Church catered mainly to the I-Kiribati population on Nauru, much of which has been repatriated. A third, small, breakaway Protestant congregation, catering principally to expatriate workers, is not registered. The legal counsel for the Mormons asserted that, while the ordinance in question

permits the Government to recognize a religious denomination, it only requires such recognition if a denomination's ministers wish to solemnize marriages. The Mormons reported that it submitted a registration request in 1999; however, the Government has not responded either to the original request or to follow-up inquiries. Officials of Jehovah's Witnesses have not submitted a request for registration.

Christmas and Easter are official religious holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

From 2000 until mid-2007, foreign ministers and missionaries from the Jehovah's Witnesses were not permitted to enter the country. Mormon officials were similarly refused entry. Although local adherents could practice their religious beliefs privately, they were discouraged from any form of proselytism among native-born citizens. As a justification for such restrictions, the Government cited concerns that outside churches might break up families through their proselytizing activities.

In the first half of 2007, a foreign representative of the Jehovah's Witnesses was issued a visa to visit the country and meet with local coreligionists. Representatives of the Mormons said they would also apply to visit for religious purposes.

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 Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of general societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who visited the country said they experienced no social hostility. However, economic problems resulting from sharply declining income from the country's phosphate mining industry have led to social strains, and some elements of the Nauru Protestant and Roman Catholic communities occasionally voice discomfort with religious groups perceived as foreign, in particular the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Although the U.S. Government does not maintain an embassy in the country, the U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is also accredited to the Government of Nauru. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Suva, Fiji, discussed religious freedom issues, including restrictions on religious freedom, with representatives of the Government in Suva.

The Embassy actively supports efforts to improve and expand governmental and societal awareness and protection of human rights, including the right to freedom of religion.

Released on September 14, 2007

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