



## Samoa

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,133 square miles and a population of 189,000. There are two main islands and seven islets in the group, with the majority of the population residing on the island of Upolu, where Apia, the capital, is located. The 2006 census revealed the following distribution of major religious groups: Congregational Christian, 33.6 percent; Roman Catholic, 19.4 percent; Methodist, 14.3 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 13.2 percent; Assemblies of God, 6.9 percent; and Seventh-day Adventist, 3.5 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Congregational Church of Jesus, Nazarene, nondenominational Protestant, Baptist, Worship Centre, Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, Elim Church, and Anglican. A comparison of the 2001 and 2006 censuses shows a slight decline in the membership of major or "mainline" denominations and an increase in participation in nontraditional and evangelical groups.

Although there is no official data, it is generally believed that there are also some practicing Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews in the country, primarily in Apia. The country has one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship; there is also a Muslim community that meets in a private home.

All religious groups are multiethnic; none is exclusively comprised of foreign nationals or native-born (Western) Samoans. There are no sizable foreign national or immigrant groups, with the exception of U.S. nationals from American Samoa. In recent years, there has been an increase in immigration of Chinese, Filipinos, and Fijians (mainly Indo-Fijians), often as service workers in local business or as contactors for building projects funded by foreign governments.

#### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change 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.

The preamble to the Constitution describes the country as "an independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions." Although Christianity is favored constitutionally and public ceremonies typically begin with a Christian prayer, there is no official state religion. In practice village chiefs often choose the religious denomination of their extended families.

There are no requirements for the recognition of a religious group or for licenses or registration.

The Constitution provides freedom from unwanted religious education in schools and gives each religious group the right to establish its own schools. Public schools do not include religious instruction as part of their curriculum. Church-run schools in most villages provide religious instruction following school hours.

Missionaries operated freely within the country.

The Government observes Good Friday, Easter Monday, White Monday (Children's Day), and Christmas as national holidays.

In May 2009 the Samoa Censor Board banned the film *Angels and Demons*, on the grounds that the film could engender discrimination against Catholics. The Board also banned the screening of *The Da Vinci Code* when it was due for release in 2006. According to media reports, the decision was made after church leaders, including senior leaders of the Samoan Catholic Church, were invited to screen the film and offer an opinion on whether it should be shown in the country. The ban included cinema screenings, any television airing, and distribution of DVDs.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners 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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religion freedom.

Traditionally, villages tended to have one primary Christian church. Now many larger villages have multiple churches serving different denominations that coexist peacefully. However, some newer, nontraditional groups face resistance when attempting to establish a foothold in a given village.

There remain minor tensions between Fa'a Samoa (the Samoan way) and individual religious rights. Such issues

were debated and discussed at a major symposium in December 2008, which brought together the public and included the Head of State, Chief Justice, Deputy Prime Minister, religious leaders, political leaders, and academics.

Religious observance remains high throughout the country. There is strong societal pressure at the village and local level to participate in church services and other activities and to financially support church leaders and projects. In some denominations such financial contributions often total more than 30 percent of family income. In late 2008 the Government established a taskforce to encourage religious communities to reduce societal pressure to make donations that result in financial hardship.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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. The Embassy met with a number of religious groups during the reporting period on visa issues related to their workers traveling to the mainland United States for study, mission work, or other projects.