



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2003 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [Africa](#) » [South Africa](#)

South Africa

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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 Department of Education drafted a policy document entitled "Religion in Education," which reviews the instruction and observance of religions in public schools.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Concerns about Islamic extremism, fueled by past incidents of violence by People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD), subsided. There also has been a marked downturn, since 2000, in urban terror activity following a crackdown on urban terrorism and trials of numerous suspects.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 470,693 square miles, and its population is approximately 44.8 million. According to the latest available figures on religious demography from the 1996 census, approximately 84 percent of the population belong to the Christian faith. Approximately 3 percent of the population indicated that they belong to other religions, which include Hinduism (1.5 percent), Islam (1.5 percent), Judaism (0.2 percent), Buddhism, Confucianism, and Rastafarianism. Approximately 13 percent indicated that they belong to no particular religion or refused to indicate their affiliation.

The African Independent Churches make up the largest grouping of Christian churches. There are 4,000 or more African Independent Churches, with a total membership of more than 10 million. Although these churches originally were founded as breakaways from various mission churches (the so-called Ethiopian churches), the African Independent Churches consist mostly of Zionist or Apostolic churches and also include some Pentecostal offshoots. The Zion Christian Church is the largest African Independent Church with 10.7 percent of the population, and the Apostolic is the third largest with 9.8 percent of the population. The African Independent Churches attract persons from rural and urban areas.

Other Christian churches include the Dutch Reformed family of churches, including the Nederduits Gereformeerde, Nederduits Hervormde, and Gereformeerde Churches, which consist of approximately 2.8 percent of the population; the

Roman Catholic Church, which has grown steadily in numbers and influence in recent years and consists of approximately 9.5 percent of the population. Protestant denominations include the Methodist Church (7.8 percent), the Church of the Province of South Africa (Anglican, 4.4 percent), various Lutheran (2.9 percent) and Presbyterian churches (2.0 percent), the Congregational Church (1.2 percent), and Baptist churches (1 percent). The largest traditional Pentecostal churches are the Apostolic Faith Mission, the Assemblies of God, and the Full Gospel Church. A number of charismatic churches have been established in recent years. The subsidiary churches of the charismatic churches, together with those of the Hatfield Christian Church in Pretoria, are grouped in the International Fellowship of Christian Churches. The Greek Orthodox and Seventh-day Adventist Churches also are active.

Approximately 13 percent of the total population claim no affiliation with any formal religious organization. The majority of these persons adhere to traditional indigenous religions. A common feature of the traditional indigenous religions is the importance of ancestors. Ancestors are regarded as part of the community and as indispensable links with the spirit world and the powers that control everyday affairs. Ancestors are not gods, but because they play a key part in bringing about either good or ill fortune, maintaining good relations with them is vital. Followers of traditional indigenous religions also believe that certain practitioners may manipulate the power of the spirits by applying elaborate procedures that are passed down through word-of-mouth. Some practitioners use herbs, others use therapeutic techniques or supernatural powers; some are considered masters of "black magic" and engender fear. Many persons combine Christian and traditional indigenous religious practices.

An estimated 86 percent of Whites are Christian and almost 1.5 percent are Jewish. Nearly half of Indians are Hindus, and the remainder are either Muslim (23 percent) or Christian (20 percent). The majority of Muslims are Indian or belong to the multi-ethnic community in the Western Cape. More than 90 percent of Blacks are Christians. Almost 84 percent of Coloreds are Christian, while 7 percent are Muslim.

A number of Christian organizations, including the Salvation Army, Promise Keepers, Operation Mobilization, Campus Crusade, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), operate in the country doing missionary work, giving aid, and providing training. The Muslim World League also is active in the country, as is the Zionist International Federation.

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 Bill of Rights prohibits the Government from unfairly discriminating directly or indirectly against anyone on the ground of religion, and it states that persons belonging to a religious community may not be denied the right to practice their religion and to form, join, and maintain religious associations with other members of that community. Cases of discrimination against a person on the grounds of religious freedom may be taken to the Constitutional Court.

Christianity is the dominant religion in the country, but no religion is declared the official state religion by law. Leading government officials and ruling party members adhere to a variety of faiths, including various Christian denominations, Islam, and Judaism.

Religious groups are not required to be licensed or registered.

The Constitution states that religious instruction at public schools is permitted so long as it is voluntary and religions are treated equally. The Department of Education has drafted a policy document entitled "Religion in Education," which reviews the instruction and observance of religions in public schools. The policy document differentiates between religion education and religious instruction. The new policy calls for religion education in schools, including lessons on the religions of the world with particular attention to the religions of South Africa, a focus on worldviews, and an emphasis on values and moral education. Previously, the Department of Education used a syllabus that required public schools to administer one period of religious instruction per week. There are some private religious schools in which religious instruction is required. However, many public schools had dropped religious instruction in practice. The Department of Education considers religious instruction the responsibility of the family and religious institutions. The Minister of Education also advocates removing religious school assemblies and chapel services in public schools because these generally favor one particular religion. The new policy created significant public debate.

Only Christian religious holidays, such as Christmas and Good Friday, are recognized as public holidays; however, members of other religious groups are allowed to commemorate their particular religious holidays without government interference. The National Association of School Governing Bodies has requested the Government to review all public holidays of a religious nature to ensure fairness and equity in religion.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports that students were suspended for wearing dreadlocks. In February 2001, nine pupils were suspended from their high school for wearing dreadlocks. The students claimed that they subscribed to Rastafarianism as a religion, which they claimed requires that adherents grow their hair. The Department of Education allowed the children back into the school and stated that the Department would allow pupils wearing dreadlocks to attend school, if they were members of the Rastafarian religion.

PAGAD is an Islamic-oriented organization that began as a community-based group opposed to crime, gangsterism, and drugs; however, it is known for its violent vigilantism (see Section III). Although members of the group complained that they were the targets of police brutality, in part due to their religious beliefs, there was no indication that police targeted PAGAD members for investigation because of their religious affiliation.

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities generally are amicable. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Concerns about Islamic extremism, fueled by past incidents of violence by the radical organization PAGAD, subsided. There also has been a marked downturn, since 2000, in urban terror activity following a crackdown on urban terrorism and trials of numerous suspects.

There are many official and unofficial bilateral and multilateral ecumenical contacts between the various churches. The

largest of these is the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which represents the Methodist Church, the Church of the Province of South Africa (Anglican), various Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, and the Congregational Church, among others. The major traditional indigenous religions, most of the Afrikaans-language churches, and the Pentecostal and charismatic churches are not members of the SACC and usually have their own coordinating and liaison bodies. The Roman Catholic Church's relationship with other churches is becoming more open, and it works closely with other churches on the socio-political front.

The Muslim community has protested the infrequent availability of bail for Muslim detainees and staged periodic small-scale protests, criticizing the treatment as unfair compared with the judicial treatment of non-Muslims.

Urban terrorism had decreased significantly in the Western Cape by the end of 2001, and remained low during the period covered by this report. The activities of PAGAD have been curtailed severely by a successful law enforcement and prosecutorial effort against leading members of the organization for crimes linked to urban bombings and murder (See Section II). There were several ongoing trials of PAGAD members for charges related to urban terrorism. Isolated incidents of urban terror took place in the country in the period covered by this report. On November 16, 2002, an explosion shook the Bishop Lavis offices of the Serious Violent Crimes Unit in the Western Cape. No one was injured in the blast. Police suspected that the bombing may either have been linked to PAGAD, whose members had court cases in progress at that time, or to members of an extremist right-wing Afrikaner group, the Boeremag. No arrests have been made in the case. In late October and early November 2002, a spate of bombings took place in Gauteng in which one woman was killed, and one incident in KwaZulu-Natal, in which no one was injured. Members of the Boeremag have been charged and the trials are currently underway. The perpetrators of these acts reportedly hold personal religious views, Christian in orientation, but not any associated with any formal religion, that purport whites are racially superior to other races.

In March 2001, three persons were sentenced to between 10 and 13 years in prison for committing a series of bombings, including of a mosque in Rustenburg, in January 1997. They have not appealed nor have they received permission from the Magistrate to appeal their sentences.

There were unconfirmed reports of killings linked to the continued targeting of alleged practitioners of witchcraft during this reporting period. In the Limpopo Province, where traditional beliefs regarding witchcraft remain strong, officials have reported dozens of killings of persons suspected of witchcraft over the past 5 years. The Government has instituted educational programs to prevent such actions. In September 2001, four women and one man were sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of a 74-year-old man whom they accused of witchcraft. Various witchcraft-related attacks and murders took place in KwaZulu-Natal during the period covered by the report. In one incident a family of four was killed near Paulpietersburg, KwaZulu-Natal in October 2002. According to police, the Ngwenya family had been accused of witchcraft, which may have been the motive for the attack.

There also were reports of killings linked to the practice of Satanism. The Government does not keep records on cases of reported witchcraft and Satanism killings. These cases are investigated and prosecuted as homicide by law enforcement officials.

Various religious, educational, and political groups and the Department of Education are divided on the right of learners to exercise religious observance in state schools. The Department is of the view that religious instruction should not be part of the general curriculum, which is currently under review. The Department wants religion education to be part of the curriculum. Others advocate for the promotion of the role of religion in communities and schools to underpin moral regeneration in society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy and Consulates have frequent contact with leaders and members of all religious communities in the country.

The U.S. Government actively engaged with the religious community in the period covered by this report. The U.S. Embassy and Consulates have intensified engagement with the Muslim community, interacting with a broad range of figures from formal religious entities, such as the Islamic Propagation Center, to academics, journalists, and other members of civil society. The Embassy and Consulates held several video conferences that included American Islamic leaders in order to open a dialog between Americans and South Africans on Islam in both countries. In May the U.S.-based Institute for Faith and Politics facilitated the visit of a U.S. congressional delegation to interact with their South African parliamentary counterparts, governmental officials, and South African civil society on comparative experiences in reconciliation.

The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.