



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Nauru

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

There was no significant change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government placed some restrictions on the practice of religious and missionary work by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses. Most adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were foreign workers previously employed by the government-owned Nauru Phosphate Corporation (NPC) and were stranded in the country awaiting repatriation. The Jehovah's Witnesses say that most of their few followers are native Nauruans.

There were no indications of general societal discrimination against particular religious denominations; however, there has been resistance by some elements of the Nauru Protestant Church (the country's dominant religious group) to denominations perceived as foreign, in particular to 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately eight square miles, and its population is an estimated ten thousand, including the unemployed foreign workers. Christianity was the primary religion. According to the 2002 census, approximately two-thirds of Christians are Protestant, and the remainder was Roman Catholic. Some of the ethnic Chinese on the island, approximately 8 percent of the population, may be Confucian, Buddhist or Taoist.

Foreign missionaries introduced Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were a few active Christian missionary organizations, including representatives of the Anglican, Methodist, and Catholic faiths.

Approximately two-thirds of the foreign workers formerly employed in the phosphate industry practiced different faiths from those of native-born citizens, although the majority was thought to be Christian. Both the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have won converts among such workers, some of whom held religious services in their company-supplied housing. The Jehovah's Witnesses said they also had followers among the native population. Both faiths had only small numbers of adherents on the Island, and there was no missionary work in recent years.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, 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 that "makes provision which is reasonably required ... in the interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health." The Government has 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 in the NPC housing facilities, and otherwise practicing their religion. Only two long-standing Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church are officially registered to operate. 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 Church 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

The Government prevented Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormon officials from visiting in their official capacities and on occasion prevented them from visiting at all. Although adherents could practice their religious beliefs privately, they were discouraged from any form of missionary work 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.

Since 2000, visiting ministers or missionaries from the Jehovah's Witnesses have not been permitted to enter the country. Mormon officials were similarly refused entry. The president of the Suva Fiji Mission, who is responsible for ministering to the Nauru community, said the Government discouraged him from applying for a visa. A Mormon missionary in Kiribati formally applied for a visa to enter the country to minister to the community but received no response.

There was a multid denominational religious facility for foreign phosphate workers in the NPC housing area; however, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses were not permitted to use this facility for religious services or meetings.

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 Attitudes

No evidence existed of general societal discrimination against specific religious denominations. Mormons 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 some social strains, and there has been resistance by some elements of the Nauru Protestant Church to religions perceived as foreign, in particular to 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. Embassy officials have discussed the importance of religious freedom with ministers in the reformist Scotty government since its return to office in 2004.

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