



Nauru

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

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. Representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), also previously barred, received permission to visit Nauru.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice; however, some elements of the Nauru Protestant and Roman Catholic communities occasionally voiced discomfort with religious groups perceived as foreign, in particular the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (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 March 2008.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 8 square miles and a population of 9,300. Christianity is the primary religion. According to the 2002 census, approximately two-thirds of Christians are Protestant, and the remainder is Catholic. The ethnic Chinese on the island, estimated to constitute approximately 5 percent of the population, may be Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, or nonreligious. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons stated they had small numbers of followers in the country.

Foreign missionaries introduced Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There are a few active Christian missionaries, including representatives of Anglicanism, Methodism, Catholicism, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, until recently, other laws and policies 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 had in the past cited this provision as a basis for preventing foreign churches from proselytizing native-born citizens, but did not do so during the reporting period.

There is no state religion.

The Government informed officials of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormon leaders 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. 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. Only the Catholic Church and two long-standing Protestant denominations, the Nauru Congregational Church and the Kiribati Protestant Church, are officially registered to operate. A small, breakaway Protestant congregation, catering principally to expatriate workers, is not registered. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives were allowed into the country and held religious services without interference by the Government. While they have not submitted a request for registration, they intend to do so in the near future. The Mormon 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.

The Government observes Christmas and Easter as official 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 2007, representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses were issued visas to visit the country and meet with local coreligionists. Several visits took place, one lasting a month. In February 2008 two church representatives arrived on Nauru and were given three-month visas, which are now in the process of being extended to one year. Representatives of the Mormons received approval for a visit, which took place in June 2008.

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 societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who visited the country stated 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 travel restrictions on religious leaders, with the Government.

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.

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