



Papua New Guinea

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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 the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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 is an island nation with an area of 280,773 square miles and a population of 6.7 million. According to the 2000 census, 96 percent of citizens identify themselves as members of a Christian church. Churches with the most members are Roman Catholic, 30 percent; Evangelical Lutheran, 20 percent; United Church, 11.5 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 10 percent; Pentecostal, 8.6 percent; Evangelical Alliance, 5.2 percent; Anglican, 3.2 percent; Baptist, 2.5 percent; and the Salvation Army, 0.2 percent. Other Christian groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Jehovah's Witnesses, constitute 8 percent. There are approximately 15,000 Baha'is and 2,000 Muslims. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with some indigenous beliefs and practices.

Western missionaries introduced Christianity to the country in the 19th century. Colonial governments initially assigned different missions to different geographic regions. Since territory in the country is aligned strongly with language group and ethnicity, this colonial policy led to the identification of certain churches with certain ethnic groups. However, churches of all denominations are now found throughout the country. The Muslim community has a mosque in the capital of Port Moresby with the capacity for 1,500 worshipers. There are seven Islamic centers. There are concentrations of Muslims in Port Moresby, Baimuru, Chimbu, Daru, Marshall Lagoon, the Musa Valley, and on the islands of New Britain and New Ireland.

Nontraditional Christian and non-Christian religious groups are active throughout the country. According to the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches, both Muslim and Confucian missionaries have become active. Pentecostal and charismatic Christian groups have found converts within the congregations of the more established churches.

Missionaries of many traditions operate freely. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) partnered with the Department of Education and local communities in linguistic research, literacy, Bible translation, Scripture use, and training. The Department of Education relies on SIL to produce translations of the Bible for government-sponsored religious instruction in schools. As of June 2008, SIL had translated the New Testament into 166 of the country's indigenous languages.

Section II. Status of 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 Constitution's provisions for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion consistently have been interpreted to mean that any religion may be practiced or propagated as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others. The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the Constitution, which refers to "our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours"; however, there is no state religion.

The Department of Family and Church Affairs has a nominal policymaking role that largely has been confined to reiterating the Government's respect for church autonomy. During the period covered by this report, government officials, including the Governor-General and other senior politicians, attended rallies held by local and visiting Christian evangelists.

In general the Government does not subsidize the practice of religion. Churches continue to run most schools and many health services, and the Government provides support for these institutions. Upon independence, the Government recognized that it had neither the funds nor the personnel to take over these institutions and agreed to subsidize their operation on a per pupil or per patient basis. The Government also pays the salaries of national teachers and health staff. The education and health infrastructures continue to rely heavily on church-run institutions. Some schools and clinics closed periodically because they did not receive promised government support; these problems were due in part to endemic financial management problems in the Government.

The Government observes Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas Day as official holidays.

Immigrants and noncitizens are free to practice their religions, and foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. The Roman Catholic Church was the only traditional church that still relied to a large extent on foreign clergy.

It is the policy of the Department of Education to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in the public schools. Representatives of Christian churches teach the lessons, and the students attend the class that is operated by the church of their parents' choice. Children whose parents do not wish them to attend the classes are excused. Members of non-Christian religious groups are not numerous, and they use family and group gatherings before and after school for religious lessons. Nontraditional Christian groups such as Seventh-day Adventists and Mormons also teach religious lessons in schools.

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 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.

As new missionary movements proliferated, representatives and individuals of some established churches questioned publicly, in denominational meetings and newspaper articles, whether such activity was desirable. However, the courts and government practice have upheld the constitutional right to freedom of speech, thought, and belief, and no legislation to curb those rights has been adopted.

In the past there were incidents of discrimination against recently arrived Muslim immigrants, but there were no reports of such incidents during the period covered by this report.

The Council of Churches made the only known effort at interfaith dialogue. The council members included the Anglican, Gutnius Lutheran, Union Baptist, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, United Church, and the Salvation Army. In addition 15 parachurch organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participated in its activities. The ecumenical work of the Council of Churches is confined primarily to cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects. The Council of Churches does not include Seventh-day Adventists or Pentecostals.

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 Ambassador and embassy officials met regularly with local religious leaders and with U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations and agencies.