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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Solomon Islands

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SOLOMON ISLANDS

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among religions in society contribute to the free practice of religion.

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. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Department of Home and Cultural Affairs has a nominal policymaking role concerning religion. It characterizes this role, on the one hand, as keeping a balance between constitutionally protected rights of religious freedom, free speech, and expression; and, on the other hand, maintenance of public order. All religious institutions are required to register with the Government; however, there is no evidence that registration has been denied to any group.

Religious Demography

Most citizens are members of Christian churches. The Anglican, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Methodist, and Seventh-Day Adventist denominations are represented. Traditional indigenous religious believers, consisting primarily of the Kwaio community on the island of Malaita, account for approximately 5 percent. Other groups, such as the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and indigenous churches that have broken off from traditional Christian churches, account for another 2 percent. There are believed to be members of additional world religions within the foreign community who are free to practice their religion, but they are not known to proselytize or hold public religious ceremonies. According to the most recent census figures there are only six Muslims in the country.

In general the Government does not subsidize religion. Several schools and health services in the country were built by and continue to be operated by religious

organizations. There are schools sponsored by Roman Catholics, the Church of Melanesia, the United Church (Methodist), the South Sea Evangelical Church, and Seventh-Day Adventists. Upon independence the Government recognized that it had neither the funds nor the personnel to take over these institutions and agreed to subsidize their operations. The Government also pays the salaries of most teachers and health staff in the national education system.

The public school curriculum includes 30 minutes daily of religious instruction, the content of which is agreed upon by the Christian churches; students whose parents do not wish them to attend the class are excused. However, the Government does not subsidize church schools that do not align their curriculums with governmental criteria. There is mutual understanding between the Government and the churches but no formal memorandum of understanding. Although theoretically non-Christian religions can be taught in the schools, there is no such instruction at present.

Christianity was brought to the country in the 19th and early 20th centuries by missionaries representing several Western churches: Anglican; Roman Catholic; South Seas Evangelical; Seventh-Day Adventist; and the London Missionary Society (which became the United Church). Some foreign missionaries continue to work in the country. However, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church, whose clergy is about 50 percent indigenous, the clergy of the other traditional churches is indigenous. Traditional church missionaries are represented by religions such as the Seventh-Day Adventists, the United Church (Methodist), the South Sea Evangelical Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

There are no government-sponsored ecumenical activities. Customarily, government oaths of office are taken on the Bible; however, religious oaths are forbidden by the Constitution and cannot be required.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Although a government minister threatened in late 1999 to deny the Baha'i Faith future program access to the national radio, the matter was settled amicably, and the Baha'i continue to broadcast.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

In general there are amicable relations between the religious communities. Joint religious activities, such as religious representation at national events, are organized through the Solomon Islands Christian Association, which is composed of the five traditional churches of the country. Occasionally individual citizens object to the activities of nontraditional denominations and suggest that they be curtailed. However, society in general is tolerant of different religious beliefs and activities.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights. During the period covered by this report, the Ambassador and the Embassy's consular officer talked with a representative of the Solomon Islands Christian Council, the director of a human rights nongovernmental organization, and American citizen missionaries regarding the status of religious freedom.

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