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Fiji

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

Prior to its abrogation in April 2009, the constitution expressly provided for freedom of religion. Current laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, there was a decline in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period as a result of a ban on the annual conference of the Methodist Church and meetings of its 52 divisions, as well as the criminal prosecution of 27 members of the Church Standing Committee who resolved to go ahead with the 2009 conference despite the announced ban. The harassment of Methodists appeared to stem from the military's disapproval of links between some church leaders and political parties critical of the military.

There were isolated 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 archipelago of more than 300 islands with an area of 7,050 square miles and a population of 827,000. Most of the population is concentrated on the main island of Viti Levu. Estimates of religious affiliation were as follows: 52 percent of the population is Christian, 30 percent Hindu, and 7 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church, which claims approximately 218,000 members. Other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church also have significant followings. The Methodist Church is supported by the majority of the country's chiefs and remains influential in the ethnic Fijian community, particularly in rural areas. There are also a small number of active nondenominational Christian groups.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. Most indigenous Fijians, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. Most Indo-Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the population, practice Hinduism, while 20 percent follow Islam. In addition an estimated 6 percent of Indo-Fijians are Christian. Other ethnic communities include Chinese, Europeans, Rotumans, and other Pacific Islanders. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian, and 4 percent adhere to Confucianism. The very small European community is predominantly Christian.

Hindu and Muslim communities maintained a number of active religious and cultural organizations.

Numerous Christian missionary organizations are nationally and regionally active in social welfare, health, and education. Many major Christian denominations, most notably the Methodist Church, have missionaries in the country. The missionaries operate numerous religious schools, including colleges, not subsidized by the government.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Prior to its abrogation in April 2009, the constitution expressly provided for freedom of religion. Current laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, both in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. There is no state religion. Religious groups are required to register with the government under the Religious Bodies Registration Act. The government did not restrict foreign clergy, domestic or foreign missionary activity; however, the government restricted the operations of the Methodist Church, banning meetings of its executive standing committee, annual conference, and divisional and quarterly meetings.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter, Christmas, Diwali, and the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, the role of religion continued to be a sensitive political issue.

In 2008 and 2009, under the direct leadership of the police commissioner, the Fiji Police Force partnered with Souls to Jesus (commonly known as the New Methodists), a Christian group led by the police commissioner's younger brother, to host evangelistic events at all police divisions and major police stations in the country in an effort to foster community policing and reduce crime. All officers and their families were effectively required to attend the rallies, regardless of religion. There were reports that Hindu and Muslim police officers joined the commissioner's church for fear of being denied promotions or losing their jobs. In December 2009 the Cabinet of Ministers issued a directive calling for the public crusades to cease. While the crusades have ceased, the Souls to Jesus congregations continued to use official police premises to hold their weekly services for police families, and all police stations and offices held weekly Christian services for one hour, during working hours.

In May 2009 the government began harassing Methodist pastors opposed to the government. From May 14 to 15, authorities detained Manasa Lasaro, a former president of the Methodist Church, for writing a proposal for peaceful protests against the government. On May 29 the military issued an unsigned statement declaring that the Methodist Church would not be allowed to hold its 2009 annual conference, scheduled for August 2009. Despite the ban, the church's executive standing committee met on July 17 and resolved to have the conference as planned. On July 19 a delegation of senior church ministers met with the paramount chief of Rewa Province, Ro Teimumu Kepa, who was to host the conference. Kepa served as minister of education in the ousted Qarase government. On July 20 Kepa was arrested along with nine senior church ministers, for breaching the Public Emergency Regulations.

All those arrested were held at military headquarters in Suva until July 23, when Kepa and four of the nine detained Methodist officials were charged with various offences relating to breach of public order and released on bail. Subsequently, 25 additional church officials also were charged with offenses related to their roles in organizing the

conference. All those charged were subjected to strict bail conditions, which prevented them from communicating with each other, traveling, or taking part in church meetings and other church events. The government also banned the standing committee from meeting. In October 2009 police and military officers stopped an induction service for senior Methodist Church officials from taking place. The government stated that the ministers could not be inducted while court proceedings were pending against them.

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On January 12, 2010, the government announced a ban on the Methodist Church's annual conference until 2014. After the abrogation of the constitution in April 2009, the government announced that general elections would be held in 2014. The government accused church ministers of being on the payroll of the ousted Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua government (SDL) and spying on the military in the period prior to the 2006 coup. Military Commander Bainimarama criticized the church's links to the SDL. In February the government announced the ban on the quarterly meetings of the church's 52 divisions.

Forced Religious Conversion

There was some concern that the use of police facilities for Christian services during work hours resulted in coercion within the police force to convert to Christianity.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Three cases of insult to a religion and three cases of disturbing religious assemblies were reported. Police surmised that many incidents had more to do with theft than with religious intolerance; 23 cases of sacrilege were reported.

There were isolated problems for religious groups viewed as outside the mainstream seeking to establish congregations in villages and outer islands. In a few cases, local traditional leaders prevented groups from proselytizing or holding meetings.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government and non-governmental organizations dedicated to interfaith and civic dialogue as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy disseminated materials related to political and religious freedom across a wide spectrum of society.

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