



## Fiji

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The country's laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Prior to its abrogation in April 2009, the Constitution expressly provided for freedom 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 period covered by this report as a result of a nation-wide "Christian crusade," directed by the Police Commissioner, which all police officers and their families were required to attend, regardless of religion.

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 a total 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 is 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 adheres to Confucianism. The very small European community is predominantly Christian.

Hindu and Muslim communities maintain 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 provided for freedom of religion. Current laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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; however, this right is limited for police officers. There is no state religion. Religious groups are not required to register. The Government did not restrict foreign clergy, domestic or foreign missionary activity, or other activities of religious organizations.

The Government recognizes major holy days of the predominant religions as national holidays, including Easter, Christmas, Diwali, and the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, the role of religion continued to be a political issue. Younger Methodist leaders have in recent years moderated the expression of strong ethnic Fijian nationalist sympathies endorsed by the previous church leadership.

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 are required to attend the rallies, regardless of religion. In February 2009, local media covered a tirade by the commissioner directed against senior Indo-Fijian police officers during which he accused them of being liars and backstabbers. The commissioner told officers to support the Christian rallies or leave the police force. The incident was caught on camera and followed anonymous complaints to journalists from within the police force about Hindu and Muslim police officers and their families being compelled to attend Christian rallies. There were reports of Hindu and Muslim police officers joining the commissioner's church for fear of being denied promotions or losing their jobs. The Police Force asserted the Christian crusades were highly successful, resulting in a 50 percent decrease in crime, and would continue.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There was some concern the religious crusade instituted by the Police Commissioner 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. According to police statistics, reported incidents of sacrilege decreased from 39 in 2006 to 22 in 2007. Of the 21 reports of robbery and/or desecration of places of worship in 2007, 12 involved Christian churches, seven involved Hindu temples, and two involved mosques. Police surmised that many incidents had more to do with theft than with religious intolerance.

Several Hindu temples were attacked during the reporting period. In August 2008, a private temple in Ba was reportedly destroyed by arsonists. Following a string of temple desecrations in October, Prime Minister Frank

Bainimarama ordered a special investigation. Bainimarama stated that ending racism against Indo-Fijians was a priority for his administration.

There were isolated problems for religious groups viewed as outside the mainstream seeking to establish congregations in some 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 issues with the Government 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.