

FIJI 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Despite the abrogation of the constitution in April 2009, laws and policies generally protected religious freedom for most groups. The government's respect for religious freedom, which had declined in practice in previous years, improved slightly during the year. The military-led government lifted the four-year restriction on annual meetings of the Methodist Church and demonstrated improved respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In meetings with the government, the embassy advocated abolishing meeting-permit requirements for religious and other organizations. Embassy officers discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to interfaith and civic dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The government's official 2007 census estimated the population to be 837,300. Approximately 64 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, and 6 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church, which claims approximately 290,000 members, more than one-third of the population. Other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church also have significant followings. The majority of the country's chiefs support the Methodist Church, and it remains influential in the ethnic Fijian community, particularly in rural areas. There are also a small number of active nondenominational Christian groups and small but active communities of Bahais and Sikhs.

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, are Hindu, while roughly 20 percent of the Indo-Fijians are Muslim and 6 percent are Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The very small western community is predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Policy Framework

Prior to its abrogation in April 2009, the constitution and other laws and policies protected religious freedom. Since then, laws and policies generally have continued to protect religious freedom for most groups.

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 does not restrict foreign clergy or foreign missionary activity, but does restrict some domestic religious activity.

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

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, the role of religion continued to be a sensitive political issue. The government's respect for religious freedom, which had declined in practice in previous years, improved slightly during the year.

The police ceased their practice of requiring meeting permits for Hindu temples that were not registered with the Hindu religious body, Shree Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji.

The government partially lifted a 2009 ban on the Methodist Church's annual conference. The government had accused church ministers of being on the payroll of the ousted Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua government and spying on the military before the 2006 coup, and called for a change in the church's leadership. The government also lifted the 2009 ban on the quarterly meetings of the church's 52 divisions as well as the requirement for permits for meetings of the Church's Executive Standing Committee. Before lifting meeting-permit requirements in October, the government granted the Methodist Church a one-day meeting permit for its Annual General Conference before ultimately granting it a three-day permit. The church explained this did not allow choir competitions, hurting the church financially. The government also lifted in October the 2011 requirement for all

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church meetings other than regularly scheduled Sunday services to have a permit from the police.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. As defined by local authorities, there was one sacrilege case reported and investigated this year. Thieves vandalized a Hindu temple on November 17 and desecrated the prayer hall and worship ornaments.

There were isolated problems for religious groups viewed as outside the mainstream that sought to establish congregations in villages and on outer islands. Most indigenous Fijians are Methodists or members of the Assemblies of God denomination. New Pentecostal denominations sometimes faced difficulties in proselytizing and establishing congregations in villages and on outer islands.

During the constitutional reform process this year, some political organizations and individuals called for Fiji to declare Christianity the state religion. Several other groups opposed this idea and promoted a secular state in which religion and government were kept distinct. The draft constitution the Constitution Commission released in December--and which may still be amended--provided for freedom of religion and separation of church and state. The government promoted religious freedom as a non-negotiable principle.

Numerous Christian missionary organizations were nationally and regionally active in social welfare, health, and education. Many major Christian denominations had missionaries in the country. The Adventist, Anglican, Catholic, Hindu, Methodist, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Muslim, and other communities operated numerous schools, including colleges, which the government did not subsidize. Hindu and Muslim communities maintained a number of active religious and cultural organizations

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In meetings with government officials at all levels, embassy officers advocated an end to permit requirements for church meetings and fewer restrictions on religious organizations. The embassy also discussed religious freedom with the government and NGOs dedicated to interfaith and civic dialogue as part of the overall bilateral discussion of human rights. Embassy Suva placed opinion pieces and articles on

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religious freedom and tolerance with national and regional media that are widely read in the country.