



South Africa

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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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 a few 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 has an area of 470,693 square miles and a population of 47.9 million. The 2001 religious demography census estimated that 80 percent of the population is Christian. Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and adherents of traditional African beliefs constitute 4 percent of the population. Approximately 15 percent of the population indicated that it belongs to no particular religion or declined to indicate an affiliation.

African Independent Churches (AICs) are the largest group of Christian churches. Once regarded as Ethiopian churches, the majority are now referred to as Zionist or Apostolic churches. There are more than 4,000 AICs, with a membership of more than 10 million, constituting approximately 20 percent of the population. The Zionist Christian Church is the largest AIC, with an estimated membership of more than four million. AICs serve more than half the population in northern KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga areas. There are at least 900 AICs in Soweto.

Other Christian groups include Protestants (Dutch Reformed family of Churches, Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian) and the Roman Catholic Church. Greek Orthodox, the Church of Scientology, and Seventh-day Adventist churches are also active.

African traditionalists make up less than 1 percent of the population. Practitioners include traditional healers, often referred to as witches, although they do not see themselves as such. Many of the African traditionalists combine Christian and indigenous religious practices, and 15 percent of the population claims no affiliation with any formal religious organization. It is believed that many of these persons adhere to indigenous religions.

An estimated two-thirds of South Africa's Indian population, a majority of which resides in KwaZulu-Natal, practice Hinduism. The small Muslim community is mostly made up of Cape Malays of Indonesian descent, and the remainder is largely of Indian extraction.

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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Bill of Rights prohibits the Government from unfairly discriminating directly or indirectly against anyone based on religion, and it states that persons belonging to a religious community may not be denied the right to practice their religion and to form, join, and maintain religious associations with other members of that community. Cases of discrimination against a person on the grounds of religious freedom may be taken to the Constitutional Court.

The Constitution is deliberately religion-neutral. Leading government officials and ruling party members adhere to a variety of faiths.

The Government passed a law in 2000 that prohibits unfair discrimination on the grounds of religion--the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (Equality Act).

Good Friday and Christmas are recognized as national holidays. Members of other religious groups are allowed to celebrate their religious holidays without government interference.

The Government does not require religious groups to be licensed or registered. Religious groups can qualify as Public Benefit Organizations exempt from income tax.

The Government allows, but does not require, religion education in public schools; however, religious instruction, or the advocating of tenets of a particular religious group, is not permitted in public 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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In December 2007 the Revenue Services granted the South African Church of Scientology status as a public benefit organization, which includes tax exempt status. The Church of Scientology applied for the status 26 times over 42 years before it was approved.

In October 2007 the Government promoted religious tolerance in a decision by the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the Durban Girls' High School discriminated against a student's right to the voluntary practice of her Hindu religious beliefs. The high school's Code of Conduct prohibited wearing jewelry and thus "had the potential for indirect discrimination because it allowed certain groups of learners to express their religious and cultural identity freely, while denying that right to others," according to the High Court.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

According to the South African Jewish Board Deputies (SAJBD), the central representative organization and civil rights lobby of the Jewish community, there was a relatively low-level threat to the Jewish community in the country. Recorded anti-Semitic incidents during the reporting period included verbal abuse, hate e-mail, graffiti, and vandalism of cemeteries. There were very few acts of violence recorded, and SAJBD clarified that the incidents did not necessarily reflect religiously motivated acts of violence.

On February 3, 2008, exiled Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset Azmi Bishara officially launched Israeli Apartheid Week 2008. He spoke under the banner, "Silenced in Apartheid Israel – Welcomed in Soweto" alongside prominent members of society, including Eddie Maque, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches.

During the reporting period, the Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) was active on the campus of Witwatersrand University and promoted anti-Israel events, which according to students crossed the line into anti-Semitism.

The PSC also compiled a list of Israeli products sold in the country and of companies that either invest in or support Israel. The list was part of a consumer campaign to encourage ordinary citizens to avoid purchasing these products.

Residents in Queensburgh continued to block plans for the Muslim community to build an Islamic center in the town. In October 2007 the chairman of the Islamic Society organized a meeting to discuss concerns with residents, but the meeting was cancelled after he received threats. In December 2007 the city's head of planning and development was still evaluating complaints against the proposed mosque.

In October 2007 the Advertising Standards Authority, an independent body of the marketing communications industry, sided with the Union of Orthodox Synagogues against the group Jews for Jesus in agreeing that Jews for Jesus' advertising on bus shelters was "offensive" to orthodox Jews. Jews for Jesus leaders accepted the ruling and removed the advertisements.

There are many ecumenical and interdenominational organizations among the various churches. The largest of these is the South African Council of Churches, which represents the Methodist Church, the Church of the Province of South Africa (Anglican), various Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, and the Congregational Church, among others. The major indigenous religions, most of the Afrikaans-language churches, and the Pentecostal and charismatic churches are not members of the SACC and usually have their own coordinating and liaison bodies. The Catholic Church's relationship with other churches continued to become more open, and it worked closely with other churches on the socio-political front.

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.

In March 2008 the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with government officials and representatives of the Jewish community to spread awareness of anti-Semitism.

In April 2008 the U.S. Embassy sponsored one local government leader to participate in a three-week International Visitor Leadership Program in the United States on "Religious Tolerance and Interfaith Dialogue."

The U.S. Consulate General in Cape Town continued its support of the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative (CTII). The CTII brings together Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, and African traditionalists.

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