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Swaziland

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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 and civil society, including leaders of various church groups, as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 6,700 square miles and a population of one million. Christianity is the dominant religion. Zionism, a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship, is the predominant religion in rural areas. An influential Roman Catholic and Anglican presence includes many churches, schools, and other infrastructure. The population is 40 percent Zionist, 20 percent Roman Catholic, two percent Muslim, and 38 percent other religious affiliations, including Anglican, Bahai, Methodist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), and Jewish. Muslims and Bahais generally live in urban areas. Most immigrants from South Asia practice Islam.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. However, minority religious groups enjoyed fewer protections under traditional law and custom, which included traditional courts and the authority of approximately 360 chiefs. When a religious group's practices conflict with tradition and culture as defined by a chief, chiefs have directed community pressure against the group. Before religious groups may erect religious buildings, they must consult with the chiefs and obtain their approval.

The constitution states that individuals have a right to "freedom of thought, conscience, or religion." The constitution protects the right to religious practice by providing for "[the] freedom [to] worship either alone or in community with others."

Portions of the capital are zoned especially to allow places of worship. Government permission was required for the construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and permission was required from chiefs in rural areas. Religious groups that wished to construct new buildings could purchase a plot of land and apply for the required building permits.

The monarchy (and by extension the government) supported many Christian activities. It was common practice for the king, the queen mother, and other members of the royal family to attend evangelical programs, including Good Friday and Easter weekend services. At such services the host church organization often extended the king an invitation to preach.

There is no legislation describing the organizational requirements of a religious group; however, the Protection of Names and Badges Act requires new religious groups or churches to register with the government upon organizing. To be considered "organized," the group generally must submit its application through one of the country's three umbrella religious bodies: the League of Churches, Conference of Swaziland Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches. The government preferred newly formed churches to be referred and recommended by one of these bodies before the Ministry of Home Affairs considered its registration; however, the government allowed religious groups that do not belong to any of the three bodies to register. After one of these bodies has recommended an organization, the Registrar General's Office in the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs will register the organization. For indigenous religious groups, authorities considered proof of a religious leader, congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant organized status. Organized religious groups were exempt from taxation, although the government did not consider them tax-deductible charities.

Christian programming is available on both of the parastatal broadcast outlets, Swazi Broadcasting and Information Service (SBIS) and Swazi Television; however, government-owned television and radio stations do not grant non-Christian religious groups airtime for broadcasting, a common source of complaints from minority religious groups. These groups claimed that SBIS did not respond to their request letters, that the Ministry of Home Affairs or SBIS told them they must receive permission from the Conference of Churches, and that the Conference of Churches and relevant government officials ignored their requests for meetings.

The Council of Swaziland Churches, which includes the Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches and which split from the Conference of Churches in 1976, was unable to get radio airtime due to opposition by the Conference of Churches and the League of Churches. The three Christian umbrella organizations often had a contentious relationship due to differences over matters such as whether churches should take a stand on political problems or the inclusion of traditional beliefs in church doctrine.

Religious instruction was mandatory in primary school and an elective subject in secondary schools; although schools taught religion predominantly from a Christian perspective, the Ministry of Education included a multireligion component in the religious curriculum. The only organized religious youth clubs reportedly permitted to operate in schools were Christian. Voluntary school clubs conducted daily prayer services in many public schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, and Christmas. Although Easter Sunday is not officially considered a national holiday, persons who work on that day receive holiday pay.

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Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Society often viewed non-Christian religious groups with suspicion, especially in rural areas. Teachers often did not permit children wishing to attend Friday prayers at a mosque to leave school early.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Halls are present in other areas, adherents remained unable to build a church in Lomasha due to opposition by the region's chief.

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.

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