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Tonga

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 reporting period.

There were no 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 with an area of 288 square miles and a population of 102,000. According to census data from 2006, membership by percentage of population of major religious groups was: Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 37.3 percent; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 16.8 percent; Free Church of Tonga, 15.6 percent; and Roman Catholic Church, 11.3 percent. All other Christian denominations, namely the Tokaikolo Church (a local offshoot of the Methodist Church), Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and Anglicans, account for 14 percent. Groups that constitute 4 percent of the population include the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism; the remaining 1 percent declined to state their religious affiliation, if any.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for 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.

There is no state religion. Registration of religious groups is recommended by the government for tax purposes but is not required. All religious groups are permitted duty-free entry of goods intended for religious purposes, but no religious group is subsidized or granted tax-exempt status.

The constitution states that Sunday, the Sabbath day, is to be "kept holy" and that no business can be conducted, "except according to law." Although an exception is made for hotels and resorts that are part of the tourism industry, the Sabbath day business prohibition is enforced strictly for all other businesses, regardless of a business owner's religion.

A number of religious groups including Mormons, Free Wesleyan Church, Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists, and Baha'i operated schools in the country.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas Day.

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 reporting period.

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) maintains policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines state that in view of "the character of the listening public," those who preach on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga must confine their preaching "within the limits of the mainstream Christian tradition." All religious groups are permitted to host programs on Radio Tonga and TV Tonga, but discussions of the basic tenets of non-Christian religions are not permitted. Notices of activities of all churches were broadcast on both Radio Tonga and TV Tonga as well as on privately owned radio and television stations.

In June a visiting group of 'goodwill ministers' from the U.S.-based Church of Scientology conducted public outreach programs in villages on the main islands of Tongatapu and Vava'u without any hindrances.

Foreign missionaries are active in the country and operate freely.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom with the government and non-governmental organizations as part of overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. government did not maintain a resident embassy in the country; the U.S. ambassador in Suva, Fiji, is accredited to the government.

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