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Tuvalu

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. Some traditional island councils interfered with the free practice of religion on some islands. In September the government passed a new law further requiring all religious organizations practicing in the country to register with and obtain approval from island councils.

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, particularly on the northern island of Nanumanga.

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 nine island groups with a total area of 10 square miles and a population of 11,000. The Church of Tuvalu, which has historic ties to the Congregational Church and other churches in Samoa, has the largest number of followers. Government estimates of religious affiliation as a percentage of the population include the Church of Tuvalu, 91 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 3 percent; Bahai Faith, 3 percent; Jehovah's Witnesses, 2 percent; and Roman Catholic, 1 percent. There are also smaller numbers of Muslims, Baptists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The Tuvalu Brethren Church, a new charismatic Protestant group, claims to have as many as 300 adherents.

The nine island groups have traditional chiefs, all of whom are members of the Church of Tuvalu. Most followers of other religious groups or denominations are found in Funafuti, the capital, with the exception of a relatively large number of followers of the Bahai Faith on Nanumea Island.

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.

Although the Church of Tuvalu is by law the state church, this status has few ramifications other than to afford it "the privilege of performing special services on major national events." The constitution provides for separation of church and state. The preamble of the constitution states the country is "an independent State based on Christian principles, the Rule of Law, and Tuvaluan custom and tradition." Government ceremonies at the national level, such as the opening of parliament and at the island-council level, often included Christian prayers and clergy.

By law any new religious group with more than 50 members must register; failure to register could result in prosecution. Furthermore, following the enactment of a new law effective January 1, 2011, all religious organizations practicing in the country also are required to register with and obtain approval from the respective island councils.

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

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.

Missionaries practiced without restriction on some islands, but on other islands traditional island elder councils have issued formal and informal bans on proselytizing by representatives of religious groups that are not already established there.

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 isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The Brethren Church and other groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, were perceived as outside the mainstream on some outer islands, particularly on Nanumanga Island. In some cases local traditional leaders discouraged groups from proselytizing or holding meetings, claiming that "new" religious groups may disrupt traditional societal structures.

Social discrimination, including acts and threats of violence, occurred against Brethren Church members on Nanumanga. Such treatment prompted some members of the group to move to Funafuti.

The Church of Tuvalu exerts considerable influence in the social and political life of the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Although the U.S. government does not maintain a resident embassy in the country, the U.S. ambassador to Fiji also is accredited to the government. Representatives of the U.S. embassy in Fiji visited the country and discussed human rights with the government. Embassy officials also discussed with nongovernmental organizations and the Tuvalu People's Lawyer the status of legal cases surrounding the Brethren Church.

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