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## Vanuatu

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 4,568 square miles and a population of 222,000. Approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. Of the country's population, an estimated 31.4 percent is Presbyterian, 13.1 percent Roman Catholic, 13.4 percent Anglican, and 10.8 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups that together constitute 13.8 percent include the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, and other Protestant denominations. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group with its own political party, is centered on the island of Tanna and includes approximately 5.6 percent of the population. Other religious groups, including the Baha'i Faith, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), make up 9.6 percent of the population. There are believed to be members of other religious groups within the foreign community; they are free to practice their religions but are not known to proselytize or hold public religious ceremonies.

#### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to "traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles." The constitution also provides for freedom of religion.

Religious organizations are required to register with the government; however, this law was not enforced.

The government interacts with churches through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Vanuatu Christian Council.

Government oaths of office customarily are taken on the Bible.

The government does not provide any funds for construction of churches.

The government provides grants to church-operated schools and pays teachers' salaries at church-operated schools that have been in existence since the country's independence in 1980. These benefits are not available to the few non-Christian religious schools in the country.

Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of council churches, using materials produced by those churches. There is no uniform standard time for religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that year seven through 12 students are allocated one hour a week dedicated to religious instruction. The Education Act allows parents to have their children excused from religion classes. In practice, since the school is responsible for children during the school day, students are required to be in class at all times. Hence, most students attend a class linked to their denomination. Classes emphasize the history and tenets of Christianity and respect for authority.

Aside from the activities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, use of government resources to support religious activities is typically not condoned (although there is no law prohibiting such support).

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

#### 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.

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.

In rural areas traditional Melanesian communal decision-making predominates. If a member of a community proposes to introduce a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new church, the chief and the rest of the community must agree. If a new church is established without approval, the community views the action as a threat to community solidarity and a gesture of defiance by those who join the new church. However, religious tension generally has been resolved through appeals from traditional leaders to uphold individual rights.

Religious representation at national events is organized through the Vanuatu Christian Council. Ecumenical activities of the council are limited to the interaction of its members.

#### 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 Papua New Guinea is also accredited to the government of the country. Representatives of the U.S. embassy in Papua New Guinea periodically discuss religious freedom issues with the government and nongovernmental organizations as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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