



Vanuatu

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

October 26, 2009

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 235,000. Approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. An estimated 32 percent is Presbyterian, 13 percent Roman Catholic, 13 percent Anglican, and 11 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Groups that together constitute 14 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 percent of the population. The Baha'i Faith, Muslims, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) are also active. There are believed to be members of other religious groups within the foreign community; they are free to practice their religions, but they are not known to proselytize or hold public religious ceremonies.

Missionaries representing several Western churches brought Christianity to the country in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some foreign missionaries continue this work; however, approximately 90 percent of the clergy of the established churches are now indigenous. As of 2008, SIL International had translated the New Testament into three of the country's indigenous languages.

Section II. Status of 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. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Religious organizations are required to register with the Government; however, this law is 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 instructions across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that Year 7 through 12 students are allocated one hour a week dedicated to religious instruction. The Education Act allows parents to have their children excused from religious 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 does not attempt to control missionary activity.

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, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 Vanuatu. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Papua New Guinea periodically discuss religious freedom issues with the Government and nongovernmental organizations in Vanuatu as part of an overall policy to promote human rights.