



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Swaziland

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The country's first constitution in more than thirty years, which went into effect on February 8, 2006, provides for freedom of religion. The Government generally respected freedom of religion in practice, although authorities on occasion disrupted or cancelled prayer meetings that they believed to have political implications. The original draft of the constitution declared Christianity the country's official religion, but during final debates the provision was dropped.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 6,700 square miles and a population of 1.1 million. Christianity was the dominant religion. Zionism, a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship, was the predominant religion in rural areas. A large Roman Catholic presence, including churches, schools, and other infrastructure, continued to flourish. The population was approximately 35 percent Protestant, 30 percent Zionist, 25 percent Catholic, and 1 percent Muslim. The remaining 9 percent of the population was divided among the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church, the Baha'i Faith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Judaism, and other religious groups. Followers of Islam and the Baha'i Faith generally were located in urban areas. There were few atheists.

Missionaries inspired much of the country's early development and continued to play a role in rural development. A majority of missionaries were western Christians, including Baptists, Mormons, evangelical groups, and other Christian faiths. The Baha'i Faith was one of the most active non-Christian groups in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Article 23 of the constitution states that individuals have a right to "freedom of thought, conscience, or religion." The original draft of the constitution declared Christianity the country's official religion, but during the final debate that provision was dropped. The country had not had a constitution since 1973. Religious and other civil society groups have frequently denounced the drafting process for allowing input only from individuals and not from groups. The constitution protects the right to practice by guaranteeing "[the] freedom [to] worship either alone or in community with others."

Apart from the constitution, there is no law, statute, or regulation that protects the right of religious freedom or provides effective remedies for the violation of that right.

Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Easter Monday, and Ascension Day are all national holidays. The monarchy (and by extension the Government) supports many Christian activities. The royal family occasionally attended various evangelical programs, including Good Friday and Ascension worship services at the national stadium in the Ezulwini Valley, hosted by participating churches of the local evangelical movement. King Mswati III used the Easter Weekend service to call for the construction of a national church and pledged \$57,400 (E350,000) of his own money towards its construction.

There is no legislation in the country describing the organizational requirements of a religious group; however, new religious groups or churches are expected to register with the Government upon organizing. To be considered organized, a religious group must demonstrate possession of either substantial cash reserves or financial support from foreign religious groups with established ties to western or eastern religions. For indigenous religious groups, authorities consider demonstration of a proper building, a pastor or religious leader, and a congregation as sufficient to grant organized status. These organized religious groups are exempt from paying taxes, although they are not considered tax-deductible charities.

Portions of the capital city are zoned specifically for places of worship of all denominations. Government permission is required for the construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and permission is required from chiefs in rural areas. Those religious groups that wish to construct new buildings may purchase a plot of land and apply for the required building permits. The Government has not restricted any religion with financial means from building a place of worship; however, non-Christian groups sometimes experience minor delays in obtaining permits from the Government to build residences for clergy.

The Government allows religious instruction, primarily Christian, in public schools. Voluntary school clubs conducted daily prayer services in many public schools.

The Government neither restricts nor formally promotes interfaith dialogue, and it does not provide formal mechanisms for religions to reconcile differences. Religious groups have access to the courts as private entities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Followers of all religious faiths generally were free to worship without government interference or restriction, although there were exceptions.

Authorities on occasion disrupted or cancelled prayer meetings that were considered to have political implications. In 2004 police and security forces disrupted a prayer vigil held by local residents commemorating the four year anniversary of the Macetjeni/KaMkhweli evictions. Residents of KaMkhweli and Macetjeni were evicted in 2000 for refusing to transfer their allegiance from their traditional chiefs to Prince Maguga, a brother of the king.

Local, traditional leaders sometimes discriminated against members of Jehovah's Witnesses, although such actions were often reversed by higher judicial institutions. On May 7, 2005, traditional leaders fined the family of a member of Jehovah's Witnesses one cow because the woman refused to wear mourning clothes after her husband's death.

The three primary school children of Jehovah's Witnesses who were expelled in 2004 for refusing to pray during school assemblies were reinstated by court order on September 2, 2005. The court order has allowed members of Jehovah's Witnesses to refrain from praying during school assemblies, but no formal government policy exists. On November 11, 2005, the Court of Appeal ordered a chief to return five cows seized in 2003 from a member of Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to allow his daughters to wear the virginity tassels as ordered by the king.

On June 23, 2005, the Court of Appeal ruled that the University of Swaziland's failure to accommodate a student's religious obligation was an infringement of his freedom of religion. In May 2004 the first year university law student, a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, failed his course because he refused to take his final exam because it was offered on a Saturday, and Seventh-day Adventists refrain from secular work, including academic activities, from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, the day they observe as the Sabbath.

The government-owned television and radio stations did not permit non-Christian religious groups to broadcast messages. Christian programming was available on both of the parastatal broadcast outlets, Swazi Broadcasting and Information Service and Swazi Television. The local satellite television service, DSTV (cable service is not available), carried at least one religious channel. Church groups owned several newsletters and magazines.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. For example, five different denominations peacefully maintain adjoining properties in Mbabane. There was no public conflict among religious groups during the period covered by this report.

Christian churches were well organized and were divided into three groups: the Council of Churches, the League of Churches, and the Conference of Churches. Each group was open to members of all denominations. However, Zionists and all African traditional churches belonged to the League of Churches; most evangelical churches associated with the Conference of Churches; and Anglican, Catholic, United Christian, Mennonite, Episcopal, and Methodist churches generally belonged to the Council of Churches. These groups primarily produced common statements on political matters, facilitated the sharing of radio production facilities, or became involved with common rural development and missionary strategies. Although the groups sometimes strongly disagreed with one another, they have found common ground on topics of concern, such as support for a constitutional amendment to allow for freedom of religion.

Several very conservative clergymen urged the Government to declare the country uniquely Christian.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy maintains contact and good relations with the various religious organizations.

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