



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Tonga

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

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 288 square miles and its population is approximately 112,400. According to the last official census, in 1996, membership by percentage of population of major denominations was: Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 41 percent; Roman Catholic, 16 percent; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 14 percent; and Free Church of Tonga, 12 percent. More recently, many faiths have said the figures were no longer accurate. The Mormon Church claimed its members comprised at least 32 percent of the population, while the Baha'is stated they accounted for nearly 5 percent. The Free Wesleyan Church stated its community numbered an estimated 30,000. None of these newer estimates could be independently confirmed. Members of the Tokaikolo (a local offshoot of the Methodist Church), Seventh-day Adventist, Assemblies of God, and Anglican churches were present in much smaller numbers. There were also Muslim and Hindu communities, each comprising negligible numbers. There were no reports of acknowledged atheists.

Western missionaries, particularly Mormons and other Christian denominations and organizations, were active in the country and reported being welcomed and respected in local society.

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.

There is no state religion. Registration of religious groups is recommended by the Government for tax purposes, but it 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.

Missionaries operated without special restrictions. There were a number of schools operated by Mormons, the Wesleyan Free Church, and Roman Catholics. The Baha'i Faith, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and the Anglican Church also reported supporting their own schools.

Good Friday, Easter Monday, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day are official holy days.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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 businesses, regardless of the business owners' religion.

The Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) maintained policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines stated that in view of "the character of the listening public," those who preach on Radio Tonga must confine their preaching "within the limits of the mainstream Christian tradition." This policy applied to all faiths. Religious leaders from all faiths were permitted to host programs, but the TBC policy did not, for example, permit the Baha'is to discuss the tenets of their religion or mention its founder, Baha'u'llah, by name. Similarly, the TBC did not allow Mormons to discuss their founder, Joseph Smith, or the Book of Mormon by name. Mormons used Radio Tonga for the announcement of church activities. Other faiths also utilized Radio Tonga. Members of the Baha'i

Faith used a privately owned radio station for program activities and the announcement of functions. The TBC insisted its guidelines were nondiscriminatory, but it was considering revising them to avoid the appearance of discrimination.

A government-owned newspaper occasionally carried news articles about Baha'i activities or events, as well as about those of other faiths.

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 Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. The Tonga National Council of Churches (TNCC) is a nongovernment organization of seven member churches and engages various Christian denominations in ecumenical dialogue. The most active members are the Free Wesleyan, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches. The Mormons do not participate. The TNCC has no formal relationship with the Government, and there were no reports of any government interference with the TNCC's mission.

Religious leaders contacted did not report any overt or latent discriminatory treatment. All religious organizations contacted said religion plays an important part in local society, and there were no reports of religious differences resulting in societal or political hostilities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in the country; the U.S. ambassador in Suva, Fiji, was accredited to the Government of Tonga. The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Officials from the U.S. embassy in Fiji met with religious officials and nongovernmental organizations during visits to the country.

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