



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Vanuatu

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 the 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; however, some churches and individuals objected to the missionary activities of nontraditional denominations and continued to suggest that they be curtailed.

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 is an island nation, covering 4,707 square miles, and its population is approximately 208,900. The great majority belonged to Christian churches, although many combined their Christian faith with cultural practices in place prior to the arrival of Christianity. Church membership primarily was Presbyterian (approximately 32 percent), Roman Catholic (13 percent), Anglican (13 percent), and Seventh-day Adventist (11 percent). Another 14 percent were members of the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, and other Christian denominations. The John Frum Movement, a political party that also is an indigenous religious movement, was centered on the island of Tanna and included about 5 percent of the population. The Bahai Faith, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) also were active. There were believed to be members of other religions within the foreign community; they were free to practice their religions, but they were not known to proselytize or hold public religious ceremonies.

Missionaries representing several western churches brought Christianity to the country in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some foreign missionaries continued this work; however, the clergy of the established churches are now primarily indigenous. Missionaries represented the Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches. The Summer Institute of Linguistics, which translates the New Testament into indigenous languages, also was present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to traditional values and Christian principles; however, the constitution also provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government did not tolerate the abuse of religious freedom, 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 Home Affairs and the Vanuatu Christian Council. Customarily, government oaths of office are taken on the Bible. The Government provides some financial help for the construction of churches for Vanuatu Christian Council members, 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 non-Christian religious organizations. Government schools also schedule time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of council churches, using materials designed by those churches. Students whose parents do not wish them to attend the classes are excused. Non-Christian groups are not permitted to teach their religions in public schools.

Aside from the activities of the Ministry of Home Affairs, use of government resources to support religious activities is not condoned (although there is no law prohibiting such support). If a formal request is given to the Government and permission is granted, governmental resources may be used.

The Government does not attempt to control missionary activity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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; however, some churches and individuals objected to the missionary activities of nontraditional denominations and continued to suggest that they be curtailed.

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 gesture of defiance by those who join the new church, and as a threat to community solidarity. However, subsequent friction 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

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

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