

PALAU 2015 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Palau is a constitutional republic. Voters elect the president, vice president, and members of the legislature (the Olbiil Era Kelulau) for four-year terms. In 2012 voters elected Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr. president in generally free and fair elections. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The most significant human rights problems in the country were government corruption, and discrimination against and abuse of foreign workers.

Other human rights problems were domestic violence and trafficking in persons.

The government took steps to prosecute officials who committed abuses.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, and there were no reports government officials employed them.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions did not meet international standards. In 2013 the Supreme Court ruled that conditions in the jail were cruel and inhuman. As a result of this ruling, authorities modified all six cells that previously lacked windows to comply with a court order.

Physical Conditions: Authorities hold female prisoners in a separate area but permit them to mingle with male inmates during daylight hours.

There were no deaths in prison. Sanitation and medical care were inadequate for some prisoners.

Administration: Authorities investigated allegations of mistreatment.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted visits by independent human rights observers.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Ministry of Justice maintained effective control over the national police and marine police, and the government has effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving security forces during the year.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires warrants for arrests, and officials observed the law. The Office of the Attorney General prepares warrants and a judge signs them. The law provides for a prompt judicial determination of the legality of detention, a requirement authorities observed. Authorities informed detainees promptly of charges against them and provided prompt access to family members and lawyers. If a detainee could not afford a lawyer, the public defender or a court-appointed lawyer was available. There was a functioning system of bail.

An arrested person has the right to remain silent and to speak to and receive visits from counsel, a family member, or his employer. Authorities must release or charge those arrested within 24 hours, and authorities must inform detainees of these rights.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Trials are public and judges conduct them. Crimes with a penalty of 12 years' imprisonment or more warrant a trial by jury. Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence, the right to be informed promptly and in detail of charges, to a fair and public trial without undue delay, to consult with an attorney of choice (or have one provided at public expense), and to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense. Defendants can question witnesses, present evidence on their own behalf, and access government-held evidence in their cases. They cannot be compelled to testify or confess guilt, and they have the right to appeal. The law extends these rights to all defendants.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is an independent and impartial judiciary for lawsuits involving allegations of human rights violations by individuals or organizations.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of speech and press.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. Internet access was available throughout the country. Although home service could be expensive, the price for service at internet cafes allowed most citizens access. Approximately 31 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2013.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provides for the freedoms of assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights. The government cooperated with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has no established system for providing protection to refugees. The government provided some protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened on

account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Stateless Persons

Authorities considered approximately 20 children were stateless due to abandonment or by choice.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government through free and fair periodic elections, which they exercised based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2012 voters elected Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr. president and Antonio Bells vice president in generally free and fair elections. Although there were no political parties in the country, a bloc in the Senate that included and supported Remengesau and called itself “the minority” gained majority status. Only seven of the 16-members of the House of Delegates won re-election.

Participation of Women and Minorities: There are no legal impediments to women’s participation in government and politics. Women accounted for more than 15 percent of senators and approximately 14 percent of state legislators. Two governors, two Supreme Court justices, and half of the country’s judges were women. In addition, a woman was minister of community and cultural affairs, the fifth woman to hold a cabinet level position.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

Government corruption was a problem, and the government took some steps to address it. The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were isolated reports of government corruption during the year.

Corruption: In 2014 a government official resigned after charges of corruption were brought against him. A court sentenced the official to six months in prison for misconduct in public office and accepting bribes.

Financial Disclosure: The government requires elected and some appointed public officials and public office candidates to file annual financial disclosure statements and applicable campaign statements with the Ethics Commission. There are administrative and criminal sanctions for noncompliance.

Public Access to Information: The law provides for the right of citizens and noncitizens, including foreign media, to examine government documents and observe official deliberations of any government agency. Except at the national level, government workers were hesitant to release information. In general the national government responded promptly to requests and imposed fees only for copying information. The law holds government officials personally liable for noncompliance, with a minimum penalty of \$500 (the U.S. dollar is the official currency) for a first offense.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The President's Office has an Office of the Ombudsman to which any citizen may complain. In 2014 the office moved from the capital to Koror to be more accessible to the public.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, and social status, and the government generally enforced these prohibitions.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape, including spousal rape, is a crime punishable by a maximum of 25 years' imprisonment. There were two reported cases of rape. During the year authorities sentenced three men for the 2008 rape and murder of a 70-year-old woman. There are no laws on domestic violence, but authorities prosecute cases that resemble domestic violence as assault and battery. Alcohol and drug abuse contributed to violence and crime against women and children. According to women's groups, reported cases of women and children as victims of crimes represented a relatively small percentage of actual abuse cases. Assault is a

criminal offense, punishable by a maximum of six months in jail or a maximum fine of \$100, and police responded to reports of such cases. Women reportedly were reluctant to press charges against their spouses. There were no shelters for victims of rape and domestic violence. The government conducted public education efforts to combat abuse against women and children.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment is illegal, and there were no reported cases during the year.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children; manage their reproductive health; and have the information and means to do so free from discrimination, coercion, or violence.

Discrimination: The law provides for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. The inheritance of property and of traditional rank is matrilineal, with women occupying positions of importance within the traditional system. There were no reported instances of unequal pay for equal work or gender-related job discrimination (see section 7.d.).

Children

Birth Registration: The only legal mechanism to obtain citizenship is by blood, meaning one of the parents must be Palauan. Authorities register a child born to foreign national parents as a citizen of the parents' countries. Birth registration occurs immediately, and there were no reports of failure to register.

Child Abuse: Government and society generally respected children's rights, although there were isolated reports of child neglect.

The Office of Victims of Crimes, under the Ministry of Health's Office on Social Health, deals with victims of crimes. The Office of Victims of Crimes reported that most violence or abuse against children happened in the home and generally involved family members. The Office of Victims of Crimes worked closely with police officers and the Office of the Attorney General to aggressively investigate and prosecute cases of violence against children.

Early and Forced Marriage: Citizens may legally marry after age 16, but they must obtain their parents' permission until age 18. Although no statistics were available on the occurrence of marriages by persons younger than 18 years, a

nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that underage marriage was not a problem.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The age of consensual sex is 16 years, and the penalty for statutory rape is a maximum of five years' imprisonment. The law does not specifically address child pornography.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Anti-Semitism

There were reportedly less than 20 members of the Jewish community in the country. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The constitution prohibits discrimination against persons with physical or mental disabilities. The Disabled Persons' Antidiscrimination Act and the Programs and Services for Handicapped Children Act cover persons with mental disabilities and persons with physical disabilities, and the government enforced the provisions of these acts. The government provides a monthly stipend of \$70 to \$100 for persons with disabilities. The law includes a provision for limited access to government buildings for persons with disabilities, and the government generally enforced this provision. There is no legislation providing access to transportation or communication for persons with disabilities. Most public schools had separate programs to address the education needs of students with disabilities that included mainstreaming them with other students.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The law prohibits noncitizens from purchasing land, and there are no provisions for naturalization.

Some foreign nationals experienced discrimination in employment, pay, housing, education, and access to social services, although the law prohibits such discrimination (see section 7.d.). Some citizens viewed foreign workers negatively. Foreign residents were subject to discrimination and were targets of petty and sometimes violent crimes, as well as other harmful acts against persons and property. Foreign residents made credible complaints that authorities did not pursue or prosecute crimes committed against noncitizens with the same vigor as crimes against citizens.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

There were no laws addressing sexual orientation and gender identity. One law criminalizing sodomy, regardless of the gender of the partners, remains in effect, although the only prosecution under this statute involved an adult male sexually abusing a young girl during the year. There were no reports of violence or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of all persons to assemble peacefully and to associate with others for any lawful purpose, including the right to join and organize labor unions; however, there are no laws regulating trade union organization. The law neither provides for nor prohibits the right to strike, and the government has not addressed this issue. There are no laws concerning collective bargaining or antiunion discrimination.

There were no active labor unions or other employee organizations. The majority of businesses were small-scale, family-run enterprises employing relatives and friends.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor; however, there were reports that such practices occurred. The Attorney General's Office, Bureau of

Public Safety, and Bureau of Labor and Human Resources enforced the law. Penalties for forced labor offenses range from 10 to 50 years' imprisonment and a maximum fine of \$500,000, which were sufficient to deter violations.

There were reports employers forced some foreign workers, particularly domestic helpers and unskilled laborers, to accept jobs different from those for which they signed contracts. There were also reports of fraudulent recruitment onto fishing boats. Employers sometimes verbally threatened or withheld passports and return tickets of foreign workers desiring to leave unfavorable work situations.

See also the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

There is no minimum age for employment. The law states that the government shall protect children from exploitation. By regulation no foreigner younger than 21 years may enter the country for employment purposes, and the government generally enforced this regulation. The Bureau of Labor and Human Resources is responsible for enforcing laws and regulations relating to child labor.

There were no reports of children working in the wage economy, but some assisted their families with fishing, agriculture, and small-scale family enterprises.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The constitution prohibits discrimination with respect to employment or occupation regarding race, sex, language, or social status or clan affiliation. The law protects women from job discrimination and provides for equal pay for equal work. The Bureau of Aging and Gender, under the Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs, promotes gender workplace equality. The law prohibits employment discrimination against persons with disabilities. The government effectively enforced these laws. The law does not prohibit discrimination with respect to employment or occupation regarding sexual orientation and/or gender identity, HIV-positive status, or other communicable diseases.

The Office of the Attorney General and the Bureau of Labor and Human Resources handle cases of workplace discrimination against foreign workers.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Effective October 1, the law, which applies equally to citizens and foreign workers, increased the minimum wage to \$3.25 per hour. The national minimum wage provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family. The law does not include informal-sector work, such as domestic work; some categories of agricultural work; NGO workers; and temporary or probationary work of students and youths younger than 20 years.

There is no legislation concerning maximum hours of work. The Bureau of Labor and Human Resources has established some regulations regarding conditions of employment for nonresident workers. The bureau may inspect the conditions of the workplace and employer-provided housing on the specific complaint of the employees, but enforcement was sporadic, and working conditions varied.

Although there are occupational and safety standards, no law protects workers who file complaints about hazardous conditions. Noncitizens may self-censor complaints due to fear they could lose their employment if they removed themselves from situations that endangered health or safety.

The Division of Labor, which had three labor inspectors, enforced minimum wage laws, regulations regarding working conditions of foreign employees, and safety standards and laws. According to the law, employers are subject to a \$500 civil penalty for noncompliance with minimum wage requirements, in addition to the amount of unpaid wages, taxes, and social security contributions. Penalties for other violations related to acceptable conditions of work range from \$500 per violation to \$2,000 and a maximum imprisonment of six months, which were not sufficient to deter violations. In January the attorney general began reviewing cases to allow foreign workers the possibility of changing employers and remaining in the country. There were no reports of violations of occupational health or safety standards during the year.

In addition to their wages, foreign workers usually received basic accommodations and food gratis or at nominal cost. The minimum wage law stipulates that these costs are deductible from wages paid. Wages for domestic helpers employed in private households generally were lower than the minimum wage. The country continued to attract foreign workers from the Philippines, China, Bangladesh, the Republic of Korea, and Japan. During the year there were an estimated 7,000 foreign nationals with work permits in the country; approximately 60 percent were from the Philippines, 10 percent from China, and 10 percent from Bangladesh.

Reports of mistreatment of foreign workers by their employers continued during the year. The foreign workers most likely to be abused were those who worked under contracts as domestic helpers, farmers, waitresses, beauticians, hostesses in karaoke bars and massage parlors, construction workers, and other semiskilled workers, the majority of whom were from the Philippines and China. The most commonly reported abuses included misrepresentation of contract terms and conditions of employment, withholding of pay or benefits, and substandard food and housing. There were also complaints of physical abuse. In a number of instances, local authorities took corrective action when alerted by social service and religious organizations.