

BOTSWANA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, with certain exceptions, and protection against governmental discrimination on the basis of creed. The government deported a U.S. pastor from the Faithful World Baptist Church on September 20 for visa improprieties and for his participation in a radio interview during which he called for LGBTI persons “to be stoned to death,” statements the government determined to be “hate speech.” The government denied long-term residence permits for missionaries of some religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy engaged with the government at high levels regarding residency permits for missionaries and religious freedom generally.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 Population and Housing Census reporting on the population 12 years and over, 79 percent of citizens are members of Christian groups, 15 percent espouse no religion, 4 percent are adherents of the Badimo traditional indigenous religious group, and all other religious groups comprise less than 1 percent of the population.

Anglicans, Methodists, and members of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa make up the majority of Christians. There are also Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, members of the Dutch Reformed Church, Mennonites, and members of other Christian denominations. According to the 2011 census, there are approximately 11,000 Muslims, many of whom are of South Asian origin. There are small numbers of Hindus and Bahais, as well as a small Jewish community. Immigrants and foreign workers are more likely to be members of non-Christian religious groups than are native-born citizens.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Under its broader protections of freedom of conscience, the constitution provides for freedom of thought and religion, the right to change religion or belief, and the right to manifest and propagate religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution permits the government to restrict these rights in the interest of protecting the rights of other persons, national defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health when the restrictions are deemed “reasonably justifiable in a democratic society.” The government has never exercised this provision. The constitution’s provision of rights also prohibits discrimination based on creed.

The constitution permits every religious group to establish places for religious instruction at the group’s expense. The constitution prohibits requiring religious instruction, as well as requiring participation in religious ceremonies in a religion other than one’s own. The constitution also prohibits compelling an individual to take an oath that is contrary to that individual’s religious beliefs. The penal code criminalizes “hate speech” towards any person or group based on “race, tribe, place of origin, color or creed” with a maximum fine of 500 pula (BWP) (\$47).

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with the government. To register, a group must submit its constitution to the registrar of societies section of the Ministry of Nationality, Immigration and Gender Affairs. A group must register to conduct business, sign contracts, or open an account at a local bank. Any person who manages, assists in the management of, or holds an official position in an unregistered group is subject to a fine of up to BWP 1,000 (\$94) and up to seven years in prison. Any member of an unregistered group is subject to penalties including fines up to BWP 500 (\$47) and up to three years in prison.

Senior government officials indicated the country changed its policy to eliminate long-term residence permits for all religious workers; the policy change was not announced publicly until November.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

As of the end of the year, an amendment passed in March 2015 raising the minimum membership threshold for registration for new religious groups from 10

to 250 members had not been implemented as it was pending presidential assent. Previously registered groups were not affected by the amendment.

Optional religious education remained part of the curriculum in public schools; this curriculum continued to emphasize Christianity but also addressed other religious groups in the country. Government regulation of private schools did not distinguish among Christian, Muslim, or secular schools.

Some registered Christian organizations reported some of their missionaries had difficulty obtaining residence permits for missionary work. For example, the government denied multiple applications for residence permits to Mormon missionaries, continuing a pattern that started in October 2013. The Ministry of Nationality, Immigration and Gender Affairs attributed this difficulty to unspecified “security issues.” President Ian Khama expressed concern about unregulated and unscrupulous churches coming into the country to take advantage of local citizens. There were anecdotal reports of pastors, including some from other African countries, demanding tithes and donations for routine services or special prayers.

The government deported a U.S. pastor from the Faithful World Baptist Church on September 20 for visa improprieties and for what the government determined to be “hate speech” during the pastor’s participation on a live radio interview earlier that morning. In the radio interview, the pastor called for LGBTI persons “to be stoned to death.” President Khama ordered the pastor’s immediate deportation stating, “We do not want hate speech in this country.”

Although it was common for government meetings to begin with a Christian prayer, members of non-Christian groups occasionally led prayers as well.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and senior Department of State officials engaged the president, vice president, and relevant ministries at the highest level, urging greater transparency on resident permit regulations for missionaries and advocating on behalf of religious freedom generally.

After the U.S. pastor's September deportation, the embassy hosted a media roundtable underscoring U.S. support for freedom of speech and religion, as well as the human rights of LGBTI persons.