

KIRIBATI 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Religious groups with memberships equal to or greater than 2 percent of the population are required to register with the government.

Two islands in the southern part of Kiribati continued to uphold a “one-church-only” policy out of stated deference to the first Protestant missionaries that visited the islands in the 1800s.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government, and officials from the U.S. embassy in Fiji discussed religious freedom with the Kiribati’s government and religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 107,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 census, approximately 56 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 34 percent is Kiribati Protestant (a Congregationalist denomination), and 5 percent belongs to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the Bahai Faith (2 percent), the Seventh-day Adventist Church (2 percent), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Assembly of God, and Muslims. The Mormon Church states it has a higher number of adherents, with membership exceeding 15 percent. Persons with no religious affiliation account for less than 1 percent of the population. Members of the Catholic Church are concentrated in the northern islands, while Protestants constitute the majority in the southern islands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience (including religion), expression, assembly, and association. These rights may be limited by law “which is reasonably required” in the interests of public defense, safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights of others.

By law any religious group with adult members representing no less than 2 percent of the total population (according to the most recent census) must register with the government. The religious organization submits a request to the Ministry of Women, Youth, and Social Affairs, signed by the head of the group and supported by five other members of the organization. Also required in the request is information and proof of the number of adherents, and the religious denomination and name under which it wishes to be registered. Although the law requires a religious organization representing 2 percent of the population to register, there are no legal consequences for not registering.

There is no mandated religious education in public schools. Public schools in the country allow a variety of religious groups, including Catholics, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Mormons to provide religious education in schools. Students who opt out of religious education must participate in a supervised study period.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Most governmental meetings and events began and ended with an ordained minister or other church official delivering a Christian prayer.

The government continued to administer a small grants program for church projects from registered religious organizations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The population of two islands – Arorae and Tamana – remained largely Protestant, at 99 percent and 94 percent respectively, according to the 2010 census, although a small number of Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Mormon, and Bahai adherents were also present. The residents of these islands continued their “one-church-only” tradition, which they stated was in deference to Protestant missionaries who came to the islands in the 1800s, according to government reports. On these islands, residents of other religions worshiped in their own homes. Religious groups outside the Kiribati Protestant Church were discouraged by villagers from proselytizing or holding meetings. The Ministry of Women, Youth, and Social Affairs reported receiving no complaints from other groups regarding the tradition.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji was accredited to the government. Representatives of the Embassy in Fiji also visited the country and discussed religious tolerance and religious practices on the outer islands with government representatives and Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders. In October the Ambassador visited the country and met with representatives from the Muslim community to discuss issues facing religious minority groups.