

# **SOLOMON ISLANDS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for religious freedom, including the freedom to change religions, proselytize, and establish religious schools. These rights may be restricted by laws “reasonably required” to achieve certain listed public goals.

Unlike the previous year, there were no media reports of violence between faith communities. The Solomon Islands Christian Association continued to play a key role in society.

The U.S. government, through the embassy in Papua New Guinea and its consular agency office in country, discussed religious freedom with the government during the year, including on the process for registering religious groups with the government and whether groups felt they could express their religious beliefs freely. Representatives from the embassy also met with religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 635,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the government census and independent anthropological research, approximately 90 percent of the population is affiliated with one of the following Christian churches: Anglican Church of Melanesia, 32 percent; Roman Catholic, 20 percent; South Seas Evangelical, 17 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 12 percent; and United Methodist, 10 percent. An estimated 5 percent of the population, consisting primarily of the Kwaio ethnic community on the island of Malaita, adheres to indigenous, animistic religions. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Muslims, Bahais, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and members of indigenous churches that have broken away from major Christian denominations.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for the freedom to practice, change, and proselytize for the individual and community. It also provides for the freedom to establish noncompulsory religious instruction. These provisions may be restricted by laws “reasonably required” to protect the rights of others or for defense or public safety, order, morality, or health.

All religious groups must register with the government. Religious groups are required to apply in writing to the Registrar of Companies for a certificate of registration. To register, the group must create an online account on the appropriate government website and the application fee of 1,250 Solomon Islands dollars (SBD) (\$157) is waived. Part of the application process requires a description of the group, a list of board members, and a constitution. The registrar issues a certificate when satisfied that the nature, extent, objectives, and circumstances of the applicant are noncommercial.

The public school curriculum includes an hour of daily religious instruction, the content of which is agreed by the member churches of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA), an ecumenical nongovernmental organization comprising the county’s five largest churches. Parents are able to have their children excused from religious education. Government-subsidized church schools are required to align their nonreligious curricula with governmental criteria. Non-Christian religious instruction is provided in the schools upon request.

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

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of religious groups being denied registration; one new group was registered during the year.

The government interacted with religious groups through the Ministry of Home Affairs. The ministry characterized its role as maintaining a balance between constitutionally protected rights of religious freedom, free speech, and free expression and maintaining public order. The ministry also granted a small amount of funding to churches to carry out social programs. During the year, five churches requested and were granted government funding for such programs. The maximum amount for these grants was SBD 15,000 (\$1,890). Some churches also received funding from local members of parliament through their constituent development funds.

Religious groups operated several schools and health services. The government subsidized most of the schools administered by the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church of Melanesia, the United Church, the South Seas Evangelical Church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Subsidies were allocated proportionally based on the number of students at the schools and the size of the health centers. There were no reports of discrimination among groups in receiving these subsidies.

Government oaths of office customarily are taken on the Bible, but this was not a compulsory practice.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Unlike the previous year, there were no media reports of violence between faith communities.

Local Anglican Church leaders who reportedly burned down a Seventh-day Adventist church in 2015 were allowed to stay on Anuta and the media reported the two religious groups reconciled.

The five largest religious groups that make up SICA continued to play a leading role in civic life, organizing joint religious activities and encouraging religious representation at national events.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. government representatives from the Embassy in Papua New Guinea, and its consular agency office in country discussed religious freedom with the government, including on the process for registering religious groups with the government and whether groups felt they could express their religion beliefs freely. Embassy staff met with representatives of the Bahai community, Church of Melanesia, South Seas Evangelical Church, Anglican Church, and the Catholic Archbishop of Guadalcanal to discuss and highlight the importance of religious freedom.