

# **BOTSWANA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, with certain exceptions, and protection against governmental discrimination based on creed. The government welcomed the planned visit of the Dalai Lama to a conference in August, despite significant pressure from the Chinese government to deny his visa. The Dalai Lama eventually canceled his trip, citing health concerns. The government continued to deny long-term residence permits for missionaries of some religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), but did permit short-term visits.

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. Embassy officials met with Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon, and other religious representatives to discuss religious freedom, interreligious relations, and community engagement. The Ambassador hosted a breakfast discussion with women religious leaders in observance of the UN International Day for Tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (July 2017 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, Mennonites, and members of the Dutch Reformed Church and 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, Bahais, Buddhists and Sikhs, 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) (\$51).

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 1,000 BWP (\$100) and up to seven years in prison. Any member of an unregistered group is subject to penalties including fines up to 500 BWP (\$51) and up to three years in prison.

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

### **Government Practices**

An amendment passed in March 2015 raising the minimum membership threshold for registration for new religious groups from 10 to 150 members received presidential assent and became law in August 2016. The amendment did not affect previously registered groups.

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.

As a matter of policy, the government no longer granted residence permits for religious workers. While the government did permit 90-day visits for Mormon missionaries, it inconsistently granted or denied missionaries' applications for extensions of a further 90 days, as the law allows. The government reportedly remained concerned about unregulated churches (sometimes called "fire churches") coming into the country to take advantage of local citizens by demanding tithes and donations for routine services or special prayers. There were reports some pastors from countries normally allowed visa-free travel were required to apply for visas to enter the country, while the government deported others without explanation. For example, the government reportedly put Shepherd Bushiri, the Malawian founder of the Enlightened Christian Gathering, on a visa-required list in April.

The Dalai Lama was scheduled to attend a conference at Gaborone's Botho University on August 17-19. President Ian Khama criticized China's attempts to prevent the Dalai Lama's visit, saying Botswana "is not a colony of China." The Dalai Lama's office released a statement praising President Khama and the government for "their unwavering principled stand to welcome him to their country, despite overwhelming pressure not to do so." The Dalai Lama eventually canceled his visit, citing health concerns.

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 and Engagement**

The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials continued to engage the government on the issue of visas for Mormon missionaries. Embassy officials engaged with Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon, and other religious representatives to discuss religious freedom, interreligious relations, and community engagement.

The Ambassador hosted an iftar dinner for members of the local Muslim community where he and a local imam highlighted the importance of tolerance and peace between and among different religious groups. In observance of the UN International Day for Tolerance, the Ambassador hosted a breakfast roundtable with women religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and other human rights issues.