

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely. The Constitutional Review Commission shelved a parliamentary proposal to prohibit the worship of non-Christian faiths on the grounds that the proposed ban would be a violation of religious freedom. The Supreme Court ruled that the speaker of parliament must re-install indigenous cultural artifacts to the parliament house that he had planned to replace with Christian symbols. Most official government meetings began and ended with Christian prayer.

There continued to be reports that established churches criticized the role of new Christian and missionary groups. Possible resettlement of Muslim refugees was accompanied by some anti-Muslim sentiment among the population. Two Muslim refugees were attacked on Manus Island in August and one was attacked in October.

The U.S. Ambassador met with the minister for religion, youth, and community development and with leaders of a variety of faiths on several occasions and discussed religious freedom and the equity of funding received by various religious groups from the national government for educational and health services. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and met regularly with local religious leaders as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.8 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2000 census (the most recent available), 98 percent of citizens identified themselves as Christian. Approximately 27 percent of the population is Roman Catholic; 20 percent, Evangelical Lutheran; 12 percent, United Church (an offspring of the London Missionary Society, Australian Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand); 10 percent, Seventh-day Adventist; 9 percent, Pentecostal; 5 percent, Evangelical Alliance; 3 percent, Anglican; and 3 percent, Baptist. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Salvation Army, together constitute 9 percent. Bahais make up less than 1 percent of the population, and 2 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Many

citizens integrate Christian faith with indigenous beliefs and practices. The Muslim community numbers approximately 5,000 and includes local converts and expatriate workers primarily centered in Port Moresby.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides the individual the right to “freedom of conscience, thought and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs” except where that practice infringes on another person’s rights or where it violates a public interest in “defence, public safety, public order, public welfare, public health, the protection of children and persons under disability, or the development of under-privileged or less advanced groups or areas.” The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the constitution, which refers to “our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours.” There is, however, no state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government in order to hold a bank account, own properties in the religious group’s name, have limited individual liability, and apply to the Internal Revenue Commission for exemption on income tax and to the Department of Treasury for exemption of import duty. In order to register, groups must provide documentation including a list of board or executive committee members and a constitution. There were no reports of groups being denied registration.

Foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. Religious workers receive a three-year special exemption visa from the government. Applications for the visa require a sponsor letter from a religious group in the country, an approved work permit from the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, and 100 Kina (\$32) fee, which is less than for other visa categories. The government routinely approved religious worker applications.

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

Government Practices

In June the Constitutional Review Commission shelved a parliamentary proposal to “prohibit the worship of non-Christian faiths” on the grounds that the proposed ban would be a violation of religious freedom. The proposal never moved forward

to parliament as a bill and a nationwide consultation did not take place as previously planned.

In June the Supreme Court ordered the speaker of parliament to re-install indigenous cultural artifacts that he had ordered removed from the parliament house in 2013. The speaker had removed or in many cases destroyed these artifacts, saying they were demonic and “ungodly images and idols.” His plan to replace them with Christian symbols was never implemented. The plaintiffs in the case were former Prime Minister and current Member of Parliament Sir Michael Somare and the director of the National Museum. Many Christian groups supported of the court’s decision, saying that the speaker’s actions were divisive. When delivering the ruling, Justice David Canning said that the removal of the artifacts infringed on the constitutionally-guaranteed right of individuals to practice any religion of their choice. He said that the speaker’s actions were an attempt to impose his religious beliefs on others.

The King James Bible that was purchased in the United States in 2015 continued to be on display in parliament. The purchase was criticized because the trip was government funded. Parliament sessions and most official government meetings began and ended with Christian prayers.

Churches continued to operate approximately half of schools and health services in the country, and the government provided financial support for these institutions. The government subsidized their operation on a per-pupil or per-patient basis. In addition, the government continued to pay the salary and provide benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff (generally members of the civil service) who worked at these church-administered institutions, as it did for teachers and health staff of national institutions. Services were provided to the general population irrespective of their religious beliefs and operations were not religious in nature. The education and health sectors continued to rely heavily on church-run institutions.

Many faith-based organizations complained about government funding cuts to education and health services they provided, but the minister for national planning stated that the cuts were implemented equitably and not directed against religiously based organizations.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools. This instruction was not compulsory legally but was attended by almost all students. Representatives of Christian churches

taught the lessons, and students attended the class operated by the church of their parents' choice. Children whose parents did not wish them to attend the classes were excused. Members of non-Christian groups used family and group gatherings before and after school for religious lessons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The resettlement of Muslim refugees from the Australian-funded Manus Island Regional Detention Center was accompanied by anti-Muslim sentiment among some religious and community leaders. As restrictions on movement were eased, there were increased tensions between refugees and local inhabitants. In August residents of Manus Island attacked and beat two Muslim refugees, and in October an assailant hit a Muslim refugee in the head with a rock. Many Muslim refugees told the press that they feared resettling in Papua New Guinea, partly because they are a religious minority.

The Council of Churches continued its efforts at interfaith dialogue among its members. The council members included the Anglican, Gutnius Lutheran, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and United Churches, and the Salvation Army, but not Seventh-day Adventists or Pentecostals. In addition, 16 church-affiliated organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participated in its activities. The council concentrated primarily on cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects. There were reports that established churches, either through the Council of Churches or on their own, continued to criticize new missionary movements and new Christian groups, for what established churches perceived as the increasingly important role they play in society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador met with the minister for religion, youth, and community development on a number of occasions and discussed religious freedom in the country and the equity of funding received by various religious groups from the national government for educational and health services. Other embassy officials also discussed religious freedom with the government. The Ambassador and embassy officers discussed these issues in regular meetings with local religious leaders, as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations. Embassy officials also met with members of the Muslim community to discuss their ability to practice freely and to review the growth of Islam in the country.