

# TUVALU 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for the freedom to change religion or belief and the freedom to show and spread religious belief through worship, teaching, observance, or practice. The law designates the Congregational Christian Church as the state church and allows it to conduct “special services on major events.” Traditional island councils reportedly discouraged public meetings of several minority religious groups, and religious bans by traditional leaders remained in place.

On some islands, traditional leaders reportedly worked actively against nontraditional religious groups. The Jehovah’s Witness community on Vaitupu stated it experienced discrimination and that a church member was forced to move off the island after refusing to participate in activities supporting the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu.

Although the U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in the country, the U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. The U.S. Embassy in Suva promoted religious freedom and tolerance on social media and in meetings with the acting attorney general and local religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11,000 (July 2016 estimate). Approximately 97 percent of the population belongs to the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu (Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu or EKT), which has historical ties to the Congregational Church and other churches in Samoa, 1.4 percent to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and 1 percent to the Bahai Faith. There are small populations of Catholics, Muslims, Baptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Local religious leaders report that the Brethren Church, a charismatic Protestant group founded by former members of the EKT, is rapidly gaining members.

The nine island groups have traditional chiefs, all of whom are members of the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu. Most members of other religious groups are found in Funafuti, the capital, and some Bahais live on Nanumea Island.

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

## Legal Framework

The EKT is by law the state church, and the law affords its followers “the privilege of performing special services on major national events.” The constitution otherwise provides for separation of religion and state. The constitution provides for “freedom of thought, religion, and belief” which may be limited by law for reasons such as avoiding divisiveness; protecting the rights of others; defense; and public order, safety, morality, and health. The preamble of the constitution states the country is “an independent State based on Christian principles, the Rule of Law, and Tuvaluan custom and tradition.”

By law any new religious group with adult members representing not less than 2 percent of the country’s total population (at the most recent census) must register with the government; failure to register could result in prosecution. The Ministry of Home Affairs requires religious groups seeking registration to submit a request signed by the head and supported by five other members of the organization. Information on and proof of the number of adherents, the name of the religious organization, and approval from the traditional elder councils, known as *falekaupule*, are also required in the request. Under the law all religious groups, regardless of size, must register with and obtain approval from the *falekaupule* of any island on which they conduct services. The law prohibits joint or public worship by religious groups not approved by these councils. The law also allows the *falekaupule* to withhold permission from certain religious groups to meet publicly, should they be judged locally to “directly threaten the values and culture of the island community.” The law provides for unapproved groups to be fined up to 500 Australian dollars (\$361) if they engage in public meetings in violation of the law.

The law guarantees the right of individuals to worship freely within their own residences.

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

## Government Practices

Missionaries continued to practice without government restrictions on some islands, such as Funafuti, but on other islands, the *falekaupule* issued formal and

informal bans on proselytizing and public worship by representatives of religious groups that were perceived to challenge traditional cultural norms.

With the stated goal of promoting religious tolerance, the acting attorney general, people's attorney, and the director of operations for the police hosted a one-time call-in radio program to discuss the relationship between the law on religion and traditional culture. Staff from the People's Lawyer Office said public response to the radio show was positive, but village elders on the outer islands continued to misunderstand their role under the law. The Government Media Corporation also granted regular radio time to Tuvalu's sole imam to discuss religious tolerance and Islam.

Government ceremonies at the national level, such as the opening of the parliamentary year, and at the island-council level continued to include Christian prayers and clergy.

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

Local religious leaders reported that on May 7, a Jehovah's Witness family was evicted from the Vaitupu atoll by their neighbors after the father refused to participate in building an EKT church. The family relocated to Funafuti, the capital of Tuvalu. Government representatives stated they were not aware of any reports of such abuses.

On the main island of Funafuti, religious minorities reported they were able to function freely without restrictions from local or government authorities. On smaller islands, including Niu, Nukufetau, Nanumanga, Niutao, and Vaitupu Island, the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religious groups were reportedly perceived by residents as being outside of traditional norms. In some cases, local traditional leaders discouraged groups from proselytizing or holding meetings, stating nontraditional and minority religious groups might disrupt traditional societal structures. Many religious groups continued to operate privately without formal approval, especially in the outer islands, without penalty.

Leaders from religious minority groups also stated that teachers often forced students on the islands to attend EKT prayer services and social functions. These leaders acknowledged the government's efforts to promote greater religious tolerance, but said the government had failed to spread the message sufficiently on the outer islands.

The EKT continued to exert considerable influence in the social, cultural, and political life of the country. For example, the Church limited activities on Sunday and encouraged a modest dress code in local villages.

Because the EKT and traditional culture are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

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

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Fiji visited the country and expressed concern to the acting attorney general about the status and effects on religious groups of the legal restrictions on public meetings imposed by village elders on the outer islands. Embassy officials met with members of government and leaders of several religious minority groups to discuss conditions in the country. The embassy used social media to promote religious freedom and tolerance.