

SAMOA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion. There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom.

Village leaders continued to pressure village members to participate in the same Christian religious group as the majority of villagers.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and maintained contacts with representatives of various religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 197,000 (July 2014 estimate). The major religious groups are Congregational Christian 32 percent, Roman Catholic 19 percent, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) 15 percent, Methodist 14 percent, Assemblies of God 8 percent, and Seventh-day Adventist 4 percent. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, the Congregational Church of Jesus, the Church of the Nazarene, nondenominational Protestants, Baptists, the Worship Centre, the Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, the Elim Church, Bahais, and Anglicans. A comparison of the 2006 and 2011 censuses shows a slight decline in the membership of major denominations and an increase in nontraditional and evangelical groups. Although there is no official estimate, there are reportedly small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews, primarily in Apia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion. This right may be subject to "reasonable restrictions" by law in the interests of national security or public order, health, or morals, or protecting the rights of others. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private as well as government actors.

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The preamble to the constitution describes the country as “an independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions” and public ceremonies typically begin with a Christian prayer. There is, however, no official state religion.

The government does not require religious groups to register.

The constitution provides that no one can be forced to take religious instruction in a religion other than his or her own, and gives each religious group the right to establish its own schools.

Government Practices

In May a parliamentary committee endorsed the recommendations of a 2010 Commission of Inquiry and subsequent 2012 report by the Samoa Law Reform Commission (SLRF) and decided not to amend or limit the constitutional article on religious freedom. The committee also endorsed the commissions’ recommendations to amend the law to deal with concerns that too much power resides in the village *fono* (council) over religious matters and the establishment of new churches. It is not clear when or if such amendments will be made.

The government enforced an education policy making Christian instruction compulsory in public primary schools and optional in public secondary schools. There was little if any public concern or opposition to this policy.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Prominent societal leaders repeatedly emphasized in public that the country was Christian. Public discussion of religious issues sometimes included negative references to non-Christian religions.

One of the elements of *Fa’a Samoa* (the Samoan way) has been the traditional, tightly knit village community. As noted in the papers for the SLRF review of the village *fono* law, village elders and the community at large often were not receptive toward those who attempted to introduce another denomination or religion into the community. Observers stated in many villages throughout the country, leaders forbade individuals to belong to churches outside of the village or to exercise their right not to worship. Villagers in violation of such rules faced fines and/or banishment from the village.

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Traditionally, villages tended to have one primary Christian church. Village chiefs often chose the religious denomination of their extended families. Many larger villages had multiple churches serving different denominations and coexisting peacefully. However, new religious groups sometimes faced resistance when attempting to establish themselves in some villages.

As reported by media and in letters to the editor, there was a high level of religious observance and strong societal pressure at village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities, and to support church leaders and projects financially. In some denominations, financial contributions often totaled more than 30 percent of family income. This issue gained media attention from time to time, as members of society occasionally spoke out about pressure on families to give large amounts of their income to churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and maintained contacts with representatives of various religious groups.