

# **FIJI 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The 2013 constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of church and state. For the first time in the country's history, the government selected a non-Methodist to become the president in October.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. Ambassador held meetings with various religious groups in efforts to encourage and maintain an active interfaith dialogue. The embassy used social media to highlight the Ambassador's religious outreach and the country's religious diversity.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 909,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2007 census, approximately 64 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, and 6 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church, which, according to the 2007 census, has approximately 290,000 members. Other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church also have significant membership. There are a small number of nondenominational Christian groups and small communities of Bahais and Sikhs.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most indigenous citizens, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. The majority of the country's traditional chiefs belong to the Methodist Church, and it remains influential among indigenous people, particularly in rural areas where 49 percent of the population lives. Most Indian Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while roughly 20 percent of Indian Fijians are Muslim and 6 percent Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The small community of mixed European and Fijian ancestry is predominantly Christian.

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

### **Legal Framework**

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The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. These rights may be limited by law to protect the freedoms of others, or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, or nuisance. Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution provides that religious belief may not be asserted as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution does not ban proselytizing, but places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees who may then hold land or property for the groups. Under the law, religious bodies that hold land or property must register their churches including their land and show proof of title. There is no mention in the law of churches that do not hold land. To register, religious bodies must submit applications to the registrar of titles’ office. Registered religious bodies may be exempted from tax after approval from the national tax agency. Income may be tax exempted subject to conditions. Religious groups including churches are exempt from tax upon approval. Permits are required for any public meeting, including for religious groups.

There is no required religious instruction under the law. The law allows religious groups the right to establish, maintain, and manage places of education, whether or not they receive financial assistance from the state, provided the institution maintains educational standards prescribed by law. The country’s Education Act permits religious instruction in schools enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations to offer some religious instruction. These schools must excuse students from attendance during religious instruction if parents request it.

### **Government Practices**

Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama emphasized religious tolerance during public addresses at home and overseas, stating the country is a multifaith nation with religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution. In October the parliament elected retired Major General Jioji Konrote, a Seventh-day Adventist, as the country’s first non-Methodist president.

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The government provided funding and education assistance to public schools, including schools owned and operated by religious organizations. .

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

The Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist Churches, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) and Seventh-day Adventist Church, as well as Hindu and Muslim groups operated numerous schools, including secondary schools, which were eligible for government subsidies based on the size of the student population.

The Hindu and Muslim communities maintained a number of religious and cultural organizations. Interfaith organizations regularly brought together people from different religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, with the aim of building bridges of respect and understanding between different religious traditions.

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

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials advocated religious freedom and held meetings with various religious groups in efforts to encourage and maintain an active interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar and visited local temples, mosques, and religious schools to demonstrate U.S. support for religious freedom. The embassy used social media to highlight the Ambassador's religious outreach and demonstrate appreciation of and respect for the country's religious diversity.