

SAMOA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion. In December Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi brought a constitutional amendment to parliament which would establish Christianity as the official state religion. Parliament had not discussed the amendment by year's end. Speaking about the amendment in May, the prime minister reportedly said there was a fine line between freedom of religion and extremists who use that freedom to justify their violent behavior, referencing the Middle East. There were continued reports that village leaders resisted attempts by new religious groups to establish themselves in village communities, forbade individuals to belong to churches outside their village, and did not permit individuals to abstain from participating in worship services.

In May the general secretary of the National Council of Churches (NCC) advocated for the government to ban Islam. There was reportedly strong societal pressure at village and local levels to participate in church services and other activities, and in some cases to give large proportions of household income to support church leaders and projects.

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 199,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 national census, Congregational Christians constitute 32 percent of the population; Roman Catholics, 19 percent; members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 15 percent; Methodists, 14 percent; members of the Assemblies of God, 8 percent; and Seventh-day Adventists, 4 percent. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Congregational Church of Jesus, Church of the Nazarene, nondenominational Protestants, Baptists, Worship Centre, Peace Chapel, Samoa Evangelism, Elim Church, Bahais, and Anglicans. There are 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 citizens as well as government officials. The preamble to the constitution describes the country as "an independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and traditions."

The government does not require religious groups to register, but groups have the option to register as a charitable trust with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labor. Registration is free, with a simple application. Becoming a charitable trust entitles groups to receive tax exemptions and legal status. Unregistered religious groups may not formally buy property or pay employees. Religious groups may be established on community land or on land owned by their leader.

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.

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

Government Practices

In December the prime minister submitted to parliament an amendment that would add in the constitution's body that the country is a Christian nation. Parliament took no action as of the end of the year. The proposal for the amendment followed the prime minister's statement in May that the government would amend the constitution to make Christianity the official religion of the country. Referencing the Middle East and terror attacks, he reportedly said there was a fine line between freedom of religion and extremists and that "No country would want their constitution to include those who believe in religion that allows murderous acts." According to media reports, he did not name any particular religion. Reportedly, the amendment would not affect the part of the constitution which guarantees freedom of religion.

Chairman of the NCC Reverend Kasiano Leaupepe said the amendment on Christianity as the national religion was not needed because the preamble already

said the country was based on Christian principles. (The NCC is comprised of 10 Christian religious groups in the country, encompassing more than 85 percent of the population.). (Laulu Mohammed Daniel Stanley, the head of the Muslim League of Samoa, also opposed the amendment.

Reportedly, *matai* councils, the traditional governing body of villages, often resisted attempts to introduce new religious groups into their communities on the grounds of “maintaining harmony within the village,” a duty which is prescribed in legislation. Observers continued to report that 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.

Traditionally, villages have tended to have one primary Christian church. Village chiefs often have chosen the religious denomination of their extended families. Many larger villages have had multiple churches serving different denominations and coexisting peacefully.

The government enforced an education policy making Christian instruction compulsory in public primary schools and optional in public secondary schools. There was no opt-out provision.

Public ceremonies typically began with a Christian prayer.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

In May the general secretary of the NCC advocated that the government ban Islam, saying it posed a threat to the country. The NCC is comprised of 10 Christian religious groups in the country, encompassing more than 85 percent of the population.

As reported by media and in letters to the editor, there was a high level of religious observance and continued 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 periodic media

attention as members of society occasionally spoke out about pressure on families to give large amounts of their income to churches. There was an increase throughout the year in public expression in print and social media citing church commitments, and in particular financial commitments, as one of the major sources of hardship for Samoans in the country and abroad. Reportedly, in several cases people were fined by their villages after speaking to the press against what they said were excessive financial demands by churches. Some individuals expressed concern that church leaders abused their privileged status among the congregation and village.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with government officials, including conversations with political leaders regarding the impact of potentially banning certain religious groups. The embassy discussed similar issues with representatives of various religious groups.