

FIJI 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of religion and state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against any religious group a criminal offense. Religious groups must register with the government. In August, Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama ordered state broadcaster Fiji Broadcasting Corporation to refrain from airing an interview with the leader of the *Lotu-Vanua* (First Nation Spiritual Revival Movement), stating that it would confuse religious groups in the country and the general public. The Pacific Council of Churches criticized the Prime Minister, stating his “interference was authoritarian” and that the series of televised interviews between the Lotu-Vanua leader and religious leaders illustrated freedom of expression. Hindu religious leaders and the Fiji Human Rights and Antidiscrimination Commission condemned comments made on social media by Lynda Tabuya, an opposition Member of Parliament (MP) for the Social Democratic Liberal Party, in which she stated the Hindu Diwali festival should not be celebrated on Sunday because it would disturb Christians. The holiday was celebrated over the November 14-15 weekend in the country. She later deleted the post and publicly apologized.

The Methodist Church of Fiji issued a statement distancing itself from comments made by the Church’s communications manager that the use of fireworks on Sunday (as part of the Diwali celebration) would disturb other religious gatherings. In November, a Catholic church in Suva was vandalized, the first such act of vandalism against a Catholic church in the country. In May, a Protestant church was set on fire in Votualevu, Nadi.

U.S embassy officers and local staff met with religious leaders to promote religious tolerance and to encourage and maintain an active interfaith dialogue. In May, the Ambassador hosted an iftar to promote religious tolerance. In June, the Ambassador convened an interfaith dialogue with religious leaders in the western region and discussed the importance of respect for religious freedom as a universal human right. The embassy used social media posts and videos to highlight U.S. support of religious diversity in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 936,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2007 census (the most recent with a breakdown by religion), 64.5 percent of the population is Christian, 27.9 percent Hindu, and 6.3 percent Muslim. Protestants make up 45 percent of the population, of which 34.6 percent is Methodist, 5.7 percent Assembly of God, 3.9 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 0.8 percent Anglican. Roman Catholics make up 9.1 percent of the population, and other Christian groups 10.4 percent. There are small communities of Baha'is, Sikhs, and Jews.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most indigenous Fijians, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. The majority of the country's traditional chiefs belong to the Methodist Church, which remains influential among indigenous persons, particularly in rural areas, where 44 percent of the population lives, according to the 2017 census. Most Indian Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while an estimated 20 percent 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

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The government may limit these rights by law to protect the freedoms of others, or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, or nuisance. The constitution mandates separation of religion and state. 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 individuals may not assert religious belief as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions. Sacrilege is outlawed and is defined as committing any crime within a place of worship after breaking and entering or before exiting with force or intentionally committing any act of disrespect in a place of worship. Penalties may include up to 14 years' imprisonment.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees, who may then hold land or property for the groups. To register, religious bodies must

submit applications to the registrar of titles office. Applications must include the names and identification of the trustees signed by the head of the religious body to be registered, a copy of the constitution of the proposed religious body, title documents for the land used by the religious body, and a registration fee of 2.30 Fiji dollars (\$1). Registered religious bodies may receive an exemption from taxes after approval from the national tax agency, on the condition they operate in a nonprofit and noncompetitive capacity. By law, religious bodies that hold land or property must register their houses of worship, including their land, and show proof of title. There is no mention in the law of religious organizations that do not hold land.

Permits are required for any public meeting on public property organized by religious groups with the exception of regular religious services in houses of worship.

There is no required religious instruction under the law. Private or religious groups sometimes own or manage school properties, but the Ministry of Education administers and regulates the curriculum. 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 law permits noncompulsory religious instruction in all schools, enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations but receiving government support to offer religious instruction. Schools may incorporate religious elements, such as class prayer, as long as they do not force teachers to participate and students may be excused if their parents request it. The government provides funding and education assistance to public schools, including schools owned and operated by religious organizations, on a per-pupil basis. Some schools maintain their religious and/or ethnic origin but must remain open to all students. According to the law, the government ensures free tuition for primary and secondary schools.

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

Government Practices

In August, Prime Minister Bainimarama ordered state broadcaster Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) to refrain from airing an interview with the leader of the Lotu-Vanua. According to media reports, the Prime Minister said the broadcast would confuse religious groups in the country and the general public, since Lotu-Vanua was not an organized religion and the public might believe

group leader Timoci Nacola's stated beliefs, such as that Jesus Christ was born in Fiji. The FBC did not broadcast the interview, but the company's chief executive said that was due to the controversial material and not the Prime Minister's comments, according to media reports. While the Pacific Council of Churches criticized the Prime Minister, stating his "interference was authoritarian" and stifled freedom of expression, other Christians, including some Methodists, supported Bainimarama's actions and criticized the interviews overall, specifically Nacola's comments against the Bible and Christian practices, such as tithing. Earlier, two other television companies, *Fiji Village* and *Mai TV*, aired similar interviews with Nacola and representatives of two Christian groups, the Christian Methodist Fellowship Church and the New Methodist Church.

On November 10, Hindu religious leaders and the Fiji Human Rights and Antidiscrimination Commission condemned comments made on social media by Lynda Tabuya, an MP from the opposition Social Democratic Liberal Party, in which she said that Diwali "should not be celebrated on a Sunday because it was a quiet day of rest for Christians." Tabuya later deleted the Facebook comments, which were widely criticized, and issued a public apology.

Prime Minister Bainimarama, other cabinet ministers, and members of parliament continued to emphasize religious tolerance during public addresses. According to media reports of his address to the nation on October 30 for the Prophet Muhammed's birthday, the Prime Minister said, "No person has a God-given superiority over another." In November, Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum emphasized that religious freedom is guaranteed in the constitution, which also allows all faiths the space to practice their religion.

A decision on an appeal against the 2018 acquittal of three staff members of the *Fiji Times* on sedition charges remained pending at year's end. The three, which included the editor in chief, were charged for the 2016 publication of a letter to the *Fiji Times*' indigenous-language newspaper *Nai Lalakai* that the government characterized as antagonistic toward the country's Muslim community.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 10, Catholic Archbishop of Suva Peter Loy-Chong issued public messages commemorating Diwali, which was celebrated in the country over the November 14-15 weekend. Also in November, the Methodist Church of Fiji issued a statement distancing itself from comments made by the Church's communications manager on social media, similar to those by MP Tabuya, that

“the use of fireworks on Sunday [as part of the Diwali celebration] would disturb other religious gatherings.”

On November 11, police arrested a man for the desecration of a religious statue at the Roman Catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral in Suva. According to Archbishop Loy-Chong, “A mentally challenged man threw a piece of block at the statue of Mary located in the grotto in front of the church.” He called for Catholics to be compassionate to the person. In public comments, some Indo-Fijians approved of the vandalism. The man’s case remained pending at year’s end. This was the first such act of vandalism against a Catholic church in the country.

On May 24, according to media reports, an unidentified person set fire to the Bible Truth Fellowship Church in Votualevu, Nadi. Members of the church put out the fire, but the building was damaged. At year’s end, a police investigation into the incident was underway.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officers met with local religious leaders, including the head of the Methodist Church in the country, to promote religious tolerance and to encourage them to maintain an active interfaith dialogue.

On May 20, the Ambassador hosted an iftar to promote religious tolerance. In addition to senior members of the Muslim community, guests included the Minister for Industry and Trade, the Attorney General (both Muslims), and foreign diplomats. In his remarks, the Ambassador highlighted the diversity of religious groups in countries such as Fiji and the United States.

On June 25, the Ambassador convened an interfaith dialogue with religious leaders from the country’s western division and discussed the importance of respect for religious freedom as a universal human right. Religious leaders in attendance included members of the Christian, Hindu, Arya Samaj, International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha’i, Sikh, and Muslim communities.

On November 6, the Ambassador spoke on social media and also during remarks at a Diwali commemoration about the importance of faith and protecting religious freedom.

The embassy used social media, including posts that highlighted diverse religious traditions in the country, to promote religious pluralism and tolerance.