

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely. Media reported that during the year, authorities released the remaining refugees, primarily Muslims, from detention facilities in Port Moresby, but the immigration status of many remained unresolved, and they were living in motels in the city. Media reported the refugees had been kept in extremely poor conditions, with many suffering from mental and physical illnesses as a result. The National Executive Council, the country's cabinet, approved a constitutional amendment defining the country as Christian, but parliament had not debated or ratified the proposed amendment as of year's end. Political opponents and civil society groups objected to the proposed amendment, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation. Some national ministries continued to instruct civil servants to participate in weekly prayer devotionals, but government officials said individuals could opt out without repercussions. In January, teacher training began for the Citizenship and Christian Values Education syllabus that made Christian life studies a compulsory subject in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide, although students legally had the option to opt out. In August, Prime Minister James Marape announced his government would pass a law requiring that 10 percent of the country's export earnings fund the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches (PNGCC) but did not specify a timeframe for passage. Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituencies to carry out religious activities. Nearly all of these institutions were Christian.

Media reported on several attacks against clergy and missionaries in the Highlands Region in March. In separate incidents, several missionaries, a pastor and two children, and a Seventh-day Adventist deacon and two of his fellow congregants were killed in tribal violence. Also in March, an unknown number of gunmen attacked 15 Seventh-day Adventist missionaries who were promoting a May religious event in Mt. Hagen, Western Highlands Province, killing at least one. The PNGCC continued to organize dialogues among its members and fostered cooperation on social welfare projects.

U.S. embassy officials discussed with government officials, including those from the Department for Community Development and Religion (DfCDR), the importance of equitable distribution of governmental support for religious groups.

Embassy officials engaged with government officials and civil society representatives to ensure any moves to declare the country a Christian nation did not conflict with the freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution. The Ambassador and other officials discussed religious tolerance and religious groups' roles as health and educational service providers in regular meetings with the PNGCC and local religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 98 percent of citizens identified as Christian. Approximately 26 percent of the population is Roman Catholic; 18 percent Evangelical Lutheran; 13 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 10 percent Pentecostal; 10 percent United Church (an offspring of the London Missionary Society, Australian Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand); 6 percent Evangelical Alliance; 3 percent Anglican; and 3 percent Baptist. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Kwato Church, and the Salvation Army, together constitute 9 percent. There are approximately 60,500 members of the Baha'i Faith, constituting less than 1 percent of the population, and 2 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Newer, self-identified fundamentalist Christian religious groups are increasing. The Jewish community in Port Moresby (locally referred to as the Messianic group) totals approximately 800 members, of which almost 40 percent are local converts. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with indigenous beliefs and practices. The Muslim community numbers approximately 5,500 and includes an estimated 2,220 local converts. Most Muslim expatriate workers live in Port Moresby, and Muslim converts live in Port Moresby or villages in the highlands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides the individual the right to "freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs," except where that practice infringes on another person's rights or where it violates public laws, safety, and the welfare of marginalized groups. The preamble of the constitution refers to "our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours." There is no official state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government in order to hold a bank account, own properties in the religious group's name, have limited individual liability, and apply to the Internal Revenue Commission for exemption on income tax and to the Department of Treasury for exemption of import duty. To register, groups must provide documentation including a list of board or executive committee members and a constitution.

According to the law, religious instruction in public schools is noncompulsory, but Christian education is offered in most public schools. Students of non-Christian religious groups may opt out with approval of the school principal. Religious organizations are free to establish private schools, but students deciding to opt out of religious instruction might be asked to transfer to public schools.

Foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. Religious workers receive a three-year special exemption visa from the government. Applications for the visa require a sponsor letter from a religious group in the country, an approved work permit from the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, and a 100-kina (\$28) fee.

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

Government Practices

Media reported that during the year, authorities released the remaining refugees, primarily Muslims, from detention facilities in Port Moresby, but the immigration status of many remained unresolved, and they were living in motels in the city. Media also reported many suffered from mental and physical illnesses due to living in poor conditions in detention facilities before their release. Some of the detainees had been in detention for seven years, and at year's end, all were awaiting status determinations. Since religion, national origin, and refugee status are often closely linked, it was difficult to characterize their treatment as being based solely on religious identity. Media reported it was unclear how many former asylum seekers had been resettled in third countries or had accepted voluntary repatriation to their home countries.

In January, a court dismissed the defamation suit brought by the Alotau Police Department in 2019 against Catholic Bishop of Alotau-Sideia Rolando Santos. Santos posted on Facebook that police officers burned down 19 houses in Alotau after a night of drinking. The court indicated Santos' post did not meet the standards for proving cyber libel.

In August, the National Executive Council, the country's national cabinet, approved a constitutional amendment declaring the country a Christian nation, but parliament had not debated or ratified the proposed amendment as of year's end. During the year, the Constitutional and Law Reform Commission (CLRC) continued consultations with government agencies and churches at the national level on the proposed amendment, but according to CLRC and DfCDR officials, funding and capacity shortfalls delayed the countrywide local-level consultations. The DfCDR stated consultations were on hold due to lack of funding and capacity. Political opponents and civil society groups objected to the proposed amendment, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation. In June, the Papua New Guinea National Research Institute published a report stating that amending only the preamble of the constitution would be insufficient to declare Papua New Guinea a Christian country. The institute's report stated that section 45 of the constitution, which addresses religious freedom, would have to be amended to declare Christianity the state religion supported by a state-owned church.

Parliament sessions and most government meetings continued to begin and end with Christian prayers, but according to parliament officials, persons of different faiths were able to opt out with no repercussion. The speaker of the house selected a member of parliament to start the sessions with a Christian prayer. According to senior government officials, some national government agencies continued to tell public servants they had to attend weekly morning devotions for 10 to 20 minutes; the specific day of the devotion varied by region and agency. Individuals choosing to opt out could do so without negative consequence, according to the same government officials. Pastors from different Christian denominations led the morning devotional sessions.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools. Such instruction remained legally noncompulsory, although almost all students attended. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and there was no standard curriculum. According to law, children whose parents did not wish them to attend the classes could opt out with approval of the school principal.

In December 2019, the Department of Education finalized the Citizenship and Christian Values Education syllabus, making Christian life studies a compulsory subject in elementary and secondary public, private, and church-run schools

nationwide. Officials began training teachers in January to implement the curriculum and syllabus.

The government continued to fund churches to deliver health and education services through the Church-State Partnership Program with additional funding from international partners. PNGCC churches continued to operate approximately 60 percent of schools and health services in the country, and the government provided financial support for these institutions. The government subsidized their operation using a formula based on the number of schools and health centers run by each church. In addition, the government continued to pay the salaries of and provide benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff (generally members of the civil service) who worked at these church-administered institutions, as it did for teachers and health staff of national institutions. The facilities provided services to the general population irrespective of religious beliefs, and operations were not religious in nature.

In October, the Christian Health Services stated that funding shortfalls from the government negatively impacted staffing, which limited the services it provided to the communities it served. Media reported that on July 3, Archbishop of Madang Anton Bal said the government had failed to pay healthcare personnel from the Catholic Church and Christian Health Services for several months.

In August, Prime Minister Marape announced his government would pass a law requiring that 10 percent of the country's export earnings go to fund the PNGCC but did not set a timeframe for passage.

Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituencies to carry out religious activities. Nearly all of these institutions were Christian.

The Church Partnership database, announced in 2018 by the DfCDR with the stated goal of providing more support to churches, continued to be nonoperational at year's end because technical issues made it inaccessible to the public, according to a statement from a DfCDR official.

The PNGCC continued to work with provincial governments to establish provincial church councils. The PNGCC included the Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, United, and Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Salvation Army, as well as other churches and organizations as associate members.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Media reported on two separate March incidents in Enga, one in which several missionaries were killed and another in which a pastor and two children were killed. The reports did not identify the pastor's religious affiliation. Media reported that in another incident in March in Enga, a Seventh-day Adventist deacon and two of his fellow congregants were killed in tribal violence. In response, authorities sent additional police to the area.

Media reported that in Eastern Highlands in March, an unknown number of gunmen attacked 15 Seventh-day Adventist missionaries, killing at least one. The missionaries were promoting a May religious event in Mt. Hagen, Western Highlands Province.

The PNGCC continued dialogue among its members, and 16 church-affiliated organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participated in its activities. The council concentrated primarily on promoting cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects.

Through the Church-State Partnership Program, religious leaders discussed working together to address social issues that affected congregation members such as education, health, gender equality, fragmentation of family values, and sorcery-related violence. Some participants proposed limiting cooperation in the Church-State Partnership Program to only PNGCC churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officers discussed with government officials, including those from the DfCDR, the importance of equitable distribution of government support for religious groups. In August, embassy officers attended national prayer events and Repentance Day ceremonies, engaging key government officials and civil society leaders on the importance of religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and the relationship between church and state. In August, a senior embassy official discussed with the Deputy Prime Minister the importance of preventing and responding to persecution, repression, and discrimination based on religious beliefs.

Embassy representatives attended church-organized activities and participated in discussions on the role of churches in development and the importance of

including a broad spectrum of religious groups. Embassy officials asked attendees, including government officials and civil society representatives, to ensure any moves to declare the country a Christian nation did not conflict with the freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution.

In regular meetings with the PNGCC and local religious leaders, the Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious tolerance and religious groups' role as health and educational service providers.