

SEYCHELLES 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds as well as laws establishing any religion. It provides for freedom of religion, including the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religion. Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, some non-Catholic students in public schools providing Catholic instruction did not have access to alternative activities during those classes. The government regularly consulted with the Seychelles Interfaith Council (SIFCO), an interfaith group composed of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, and other religious groups present in the country, on issues directly affecting religious groups, such as a possible amendment to the Registration Act that would impose new criteria for registering heads of religious groups and establish mechanisms to detect financial fraud and terrorism financing through religious groups. SIFCO met with newly-elected President Wavel Ramkalawan and called for greater consultation of religious organizations in the lawmaking process. The new President called on religious leaders to help rehabilitate moral values and morality in the country. SIFCO organized at least three religious services prior to and after the elections for the candidates and the general public. SIFCO also organized a conference on the Truth, Reconciliation, and National Unity Commission (TRNUC), an independent, nonpartisan government body investigating alleged human rights abuses related the 1977 government takeover and subsequent presidency of France-Albert Rene, to communicate various religious groups' perspectives on forgiveness and to reinforce the commission's national unity objective.

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

The U.S. Embassy in Mauritius monitored religious freedom in Seychelles and engaged with SIFCO to promote freedom of religious expression.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 96,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2010 census conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, approximately 76 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups include Anglicans (6 percent), Hindus (2.4 percent), and Muslims (1.6 percent). Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Brahma Kumaris, and

Christian groups, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, Nazarites, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds and forbids any laws establishing any religion or imposing any religious observance. The constitution permits limitations on freedom of religion only "as prescribed by a law and necessary in a democratic society" in the interest of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health as well as to protect the rights and freedoms of other persons. It provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right of individuals to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate their religion in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community with others, in public or private. These rights may be subject to limitations stated in the constitution. The constitution stipulates individuals shall not be required to take a religious oath counter to their religious beliefs or profess any religion as a prerequisite for public office.

The law requires registration for all religious groups as either corporations or associations. To apply through the Registrar of Associations, a group must submit its name, location, rules, and list of assets; the name, occupation, and addresses of officers and at least seven members; and the resolution appointing its officers. A minimum of seven members is required to register an association. To receive tax benefits – notably tax exemptions on the importation of goods – and corporate social responsibility assistance for projects that advance the country's socioeconomic goals and meet certain other criteria, religious groups must also register with the Finance Ministry. The government recognizes the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, Islamic groups, and the Baha'i local spiritual assembly through individual acts of incorporation.

Although no penalties are prescribed for unregistered groups, only those registered as corporate bodies or associations have legal status and the right, for example, to petition the government for broadcast time for religious programming or permission to provide spiritual counsel in prisons.

The constitution prohibits compulsory religious education or participation in religious ceremonies in state schools but permits religious groups to provide religious instruction. Religious instruction is provided by the Catholic and

Anglican Churches and is offered during school hours. There are no faith-based schools.

The law prohibits religious groups from obtaining radio or television licenses. The state-funded Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation provides broadcast time to religious groups on national radio and for an early morning television program. Access to radio programming is granted based on the size of each group's membership. Religious groups may publish newspapers.

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

Government Practices

The government continued drafting a proposed amendment to the Registration Act, the law that regulates religious groups and associations. The amendment would impose new criteria for registering heads of religious groups and establish mechanisms to detect financial fraud and terrorism financing through religious groups. SIFCO continued to express concern about the number of religious groups that registered as nongovernmental organizations. SIFCO said that the relatively easy registration process could attract fraudulent religious groups to the country. Discussion of the draft amendment continued at year's end.

Following the election of opposition leader and ordained Anglican priest Wavel Ramkalawan as President in October, the Office of the President assumed the portfolio for religious affairs, which was formerly located in the Office of the Vice President. The newly-elected Vice President, Ahmed Afif, became the country's first Muslim Vice President.

The Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation continued to broadcast religious programming for holidays such as Christmas, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Due to COVID-19 restrictions that prohibited large gatherings, the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation also broadcast 90-minute Catholic and Anglican services on the radio as well as prayers during the month of Ramadan. The state-run broadcaster continued to review and approve all other religious programming to ensure hate speech was not broadcast. Other religious programming consisted of 15-minute prerecorded prayers by Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Seventh-day Adventist, Catholic, and Anglican groups every two weeks. Private radio and television stations did not feature religious programs.

In the run-up to the joint presidential and legislative election in October, SIFCO issued a press statement calling on Seychellois to peacefully exercise their right to vote and appealed to the political parties to create a peaceful and nonviolent campaign, promote responsible use of social media, accept election results, and employ integrity and responsibility.

SIFCO commented publicly on national issues and actions taken by the National Assembly and the President. Three weeks after his inauguration, President Ramkalawan met with SIFCO. SIFCO called for the government to consult religious leaders in the lawmaking process. President Ramkalawan said that he would address the request with the National Assembly and the Attorney General's Office. He also urged SIFCO to reconsider its request for the government to provide land at Ile Perseverance for SIFCO to build an interfaith house of worship, since each religion had different rites. Instead, Ramkalawan said he would assess the individual requests of each denomination.

During his inauguration speech following the presidential and legislative election in October, the new President called on religious leaders to help rehabilitate moral values and morality in the country. SIFCO organized religious services prior to and after the elections for candidates and the general public. Prior to the election, SIFCO issued a press release calling on citizens to vote freely and peacefully and for political candidates to act responsibly and accept election results. During an October 10 nondenominational service that was open to all candidates and the general public, SIFCO members called on all citizens who had the right to vote to do so.

In February, SIFCO held a half-day conference on the moral and spiritual dimensions of the ongoing investigation and reconciliation process that was run by the TRNUC, an independent nonpartisan government body investigating alleged human rights abuses related to the 1977 takeover and presidency of France-Albert Rene. In addition to praising the TRNUC's work and urging support for the process, the conference provided a forum for delegates to suggest ways in which the TRNUC could better communicate its work to the public. The TRNUC chairperson provided an overview of the TRNUC's work, and former Vice President Vincent Meriton and former leader of the opposition Wavel Ramkalawan addressed the participants. Following the conference, SIFCO gathered scripture from different religious groups and shared it with conference participants and, at the TRNUC's request, the general public.

Former President Danny Faure thanked Bishop Denis Wiehe, who retired in September, for being instrumental in improving relations with other religious denominations through his role as the chair of SIFCO. Bishop Wiehe had been Roman Catholic Bishop of Port Victoria since 2002.

Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, non-Catholic students in some public schools providing Catholic instruction were not offered alternative activities during those classes, according to parents.

Various religious groups stated they continued to engage and participate actively with prison authorities to carry out spiritual and religious activities in prisons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Officers from the U.S. Embassy in Port Louis, Mauritius, frequently traveled to Seychelles before the outbreak of COVID-19 and coordinated with local staff on engaging SIFCO to discuss the importance of freedom of religious expression, the registration process, and possible amendment of the Registration Act.

The U.S. Embassy in Mauritius posted several articles online that discussed religious freedom, including a *ShareAmerica* article on religious freedom.