

BOTSWANA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, with certain exceptions, and protection against governmental discrimination based on creed. In July President Mokgweetsi Masisi said he would begin to permit yearlong visas for missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). The government reportedly remained concerned that unregulated churches entering the country were demanding payments for routine services, and there were also reports that the government required visas for some pastors from countries for which visas were not required.

Representatives of religious organizations stated interfaith relations were robust, and there was a high degree of tolerance for religious diversity.

The U.S. embassy and senior elected U.S. government officials engaged with the government at high levels regarding residency permits for missionaries and religious freedom. Embassy officials met with representatives of faith groups to discuss religious freedom, interreligious relations, and community engagement. The Ambassador hosted an iftar during Ramadan for representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim communities, who highlighted the importance of empathy and peace between and among different religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 Population and Housing Census reporting on the population 12 years of age and over, 79 percent of citizens are members of Christian groups, 15 percent espouse no religion, 4 percent are adherents of the Badimo traditional indigenous religious group, and all other religious groups together constitute less than 1 percent of the population.

Anglicans, Methodists, and members of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa make up the majority of Christians. There are also Lutherans, Roman Catholics, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Mennonites, and members of the Dutch Reformed Church and other Christian denominations. According to the 2011 census, there are approximately 11,000 Muslims, many of whom are of South Asian origin. There are small numbers of Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jews.

Immigrants and foreign workers are more likely to be members of non-Christian religious groups than native-born citizens.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Under its broader protections of freedom of conscience, the constitution provides for freedom of thought and religion, the right to change religion or belief, and the right to manifest and propagate religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution permits the government to restrict these rights in the interest of protecting the rights of other persons, national defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health when the restrictions are deemed “reasonably justifiable in a democratic society.” The government has never exercised this provision. The constitution’s provision of rights also prohibits discrimination based on creed.

The constitution permits every religious group to establish places for religious instruction at the group’s expense. The constitution prohibits requiring religious instruction or participation in religious ceremonies in a religion other than one’s own. The constitution also prohibits compelling an individual to take an oath that is contrary to that individual’s religious beliefs. The penal code criminalizes “hate speech” towards any person or group based on “race, tribe, place of origin, color or creed” and imposes a maximum fine of 500 pula (\$47) per violation.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with the government. To register, a group must submit its constitution to the Registrar of Societies section of the Ministry of Nationality, Immigration, and Gender Affairs. A group must register to conduct business, sign contracts, or open an account at a local bank. In order to register, new religious groups must have a minimum of 150 members. For previously registered religious groups, the membership threshold is 10. Any person who manages, assists in the management of, or holds an official position in an unregistered group is subject to a fine of up to 1,000 pula (\$94) and up to seven years in prison. Any member of an unregistered group is subject to penalties including fines up to 500 pula (\$47) and up to three years in prison. According to a 2018 survey by the Registrar of Societies, there are 2,308 registered religious organizations.

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

Government Practices

Optional religious education remained part of the curriculum in public schools; this curriculum continued to emphasize Christianity but also discussed other religious groups in the country. Government regulation of private schools did not distinguish among Christian, Muslim, or secular schools.

In general religious groups reported little difficulty or delay in the registration process.

In July President Masisi said he would permit yearlong visas for missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ, who previously were permitted only short-term visits. The Church president stated four missionaries were granted one-year stays in September. The government reportedly remained concerned about unregulated churches (sometimes called “fire churches”) coming into the country to take advantage of local citizens by demanding tithes and donations for routine services or special prayers. There were reports by some pastors from countries that normally allowed visa-free travel that the government required them to apply for visas to enter. For example, the government reportedly put Shepherd Bushiri, the Malawian founder of the Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG), on a visa-required list in April 2017. That same year, on December 6, the Registrar of Societies notified the ECG it had canceled its registration effective the same day. ECG subsequently appealed the decision and at year’s end awaited the determination of the Court of Appeal. The church has 14 branches around the country.

Although it was common for government meetings to begin with a Christian prayer, members of non-Christian groups occasionally led prayers as well.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Representatives of religious organizations stated interfaith relations were robust, and there was a high degree of tolerance for religious diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, senior embassy officials, and other U.S. government employees continued to engage the government on the issue of visas for Church of Jesus Christ missionaries. Embassy officials engaged with Muslim, Buddhist, Church of Jesus Christ, and other religious representatives to discuss religious freedom,

interreligious relations, and community engagement. The Ambassador hosted an iftar for representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim communities, who highlighted the importance of empathy and peace between and among different religious groups.