

SAMOA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to choose, practice, and change one's religion. 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.

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 198,000 (July 2015 estimate). The major religious groups are Congregational Christian, 32 percent; Roman Catholic, 19 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 15 percent; Methodist, 14 percent; Assemblies of God, 8 percent; and Seventh-day Adventist, 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, the Elim Church, Bahais, and Anglicans. A comparison of the 2006 and 2011 censuses shows a slight decline in the membership of major denominations and an increase in nontraditional and evangelical groups. Although there is no official estimate, 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

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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.

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.

Government Practices

As noted in the analysis prepared for a 2012 special commission review of the Village *Fono* Act 1990, village elders and the community at large often resisted attempts to introduce another denomination or religion into the community. Observers stated 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. However, new religious groups sometimes faced resistance when attempting to establish themselves in some villages.

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

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

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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with government officials at the national level and maintained contacts with representatives of various religious groups.

Outreach with religious groups during the year included sponsoring the participation of the Katinas musical group in a nondenominational religious music festival that promoted inclusiveness and tolerance for all religions. The embassy funded the production of a domestic violence brochure, “Preach Against Violence” containing religious scripture promoting tolerance and reaching village communities Pacific-wide.