

TONGA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants freedom to practice, worship, and assemble for religious services. The law does not require registration of religious groups. A religious group, however, must register to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers and tax exemptions. The constitution requires “the Sabbath,” which the government takes to mean as Sunday, be “kept holy,” and no business may be conducted on that day except that permitted by law.

Legal disputes over properties continued between the Tokaikolo Church and former members who started the Mo’ui Fo’ou Fellowship in November 2016.

During periodic visits, officials from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji discussed the need to protect religious freedom and tolerance with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor, the Tonga National Council of Churches, and other institutions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 106,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to 2011 census data, the most recent available, membership in major religious groups includes the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 36 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 18 percent; Roman Catholic Church, 15 percent; Free Church of Tonga, 12 percent; and Church of Tonga, 7 percent. (The latter two are local affiliates of the Methodist Church). Other Christian groups account for approximately 10 percent and include the Tokaikolo Church, Constitutional Church of Tonga, Seventh-day Adventists, Gospel Church, Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, other Pentecostal denominations, Anglicans, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Bahais, Muslims, Hindus, observers of Chinese traditional festivals, and Buddhists together constitute approximately 2 percent of the population. The remaining 1 percent declined to state a religious affiliation. According to reports from the Tonga National Council of Churches, the fastest growing religious groups are the Pentecostal and Gospel churches.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religious practice, freedom of worship, and freedom of assembly for religious services, provided these freedoms are not used “to commit evil and licentious acts” or “do what is contrary to the law and peace of the land.” The constitution prohibits commercial transactions on the Sabbath, except according to law that provides some exceptions for the tourism industry. The government views Sunday as the Sabbath.

The law does not require registration of religious groups. Any group of individuals may gather together, worship, and practice their faith without informing the government or seeking its permission. A religious group, however, must register to be eligible for specific benefits such as recognition of clergy as marriage officers, tax exemptions on nonbusiness income, and importation of goods for religious purposes, fundraising, and protection of a denomination’s name. Registration for religious groups requires an application to the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor, accompanied by certified copies of the group’s rules and constitution, a declaration detailing any other trust in which the applicant holds assets, a witness’ signature, and a 115 Tonga pa’anga (\$54) application fee. It is a legal requirement that if a group elects to register with the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor it must also register with the Ministry of Revenue and Customs as a nonprofit organization. There are no additional requirements to register with Ministry of Revenue and Customs once a group is registered as a separate legal entity with Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor.

Religious groups may operate schools, and a number do so. In public schools, the government allows religious groups to offer an hour-long program of religious education with students once per week but does not require schools to do so. In public schools where religious education is provided, students are required to attend the program led by the representative of their respective denomination. Students whose faith did not send a representative are required to take a study period in the library during the hour devoted to religious education.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government permitted all registered religious groups to import goods intended for religious purposes duty-free.

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC), a 24-hour service, maintained policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines stated that in view of “the character of the listening public,” those who preach on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga must confine their preaching “within the limits of the mainstream Christian tradition.” There were no reports, however, of the TBC denying any group’s request to broadcast on public channels. The government permitted all Christian groups to participate in broadcasting one free hour of services on the radio each Sunday. All churches were able to broadcast notices of their activities on six FM radio stations and three television stations, namely Television Tonga, Digi TV, and the Christian station Doulos Television Radio. Muslims have not registered with the government and are thus ineligible. The Bahai community previously had television programming that the community discontinued.

Foreign missionaries were active in the country and operated freely.

The government continued to enforce a ban instituted in July 2016 that prohibits bakeries from operating on Sunday to comply with the constitution’s recognition of Sunday as the Sabbath. By special permit, the government continued to allow hotels and resorts to operate on Sunday for tourists.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal disputes over properties, including land where church buildings stand, continued between the Tokaikolo Church and former members who started the independent Mo’ui Fo’ou Fellowship in November 2016.

The first Anglican bishop from the country was ordained in September.

The Scripture Union and Sisu koe Fetu’u Ngingila continued to provide Bible study and other activities for students of different faiths throughout the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government in Tonga. During meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Innovation, and Labor, and the Tonga National Council of Churches, U.S. embassy officials discussed the importance of religious freedom as a universal human right

and efforts by the country's Muslim community to register as a charitable trust. Embassy officials highlighted the need to protect interfaith tolerance.