

TUVALU 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom to change religion or belief and the freedom to show and spread religious belief through worship, teaching, observance, or practice. The law designates the Ekalesia A Kelisiano Tuvalu (the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu or EKT) as the state church and allows it to conduct “special services on major events.” In January the government announced the establishment of a national action plan on human rights that included the affirmation of freedom of expression, opinion, thought, and religion. Traditional island councils reportedly continued to discourage public meetings of several minority religious groups, and religious bans by traditional leaders remained in place.

On some outer islands, traditional leaders reportedly worked actively against nontraditional religious groups.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government in Tuvalu, and the U.S. Embassy in Suva, Fiji, promoted religious tolerance in meetings with the Attorney General’s Office and local religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11,000 (July 2017 estimate). Approximately 97 percent of the population belongs to the Ekalesia A Kelisiano Tuvalu (Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu or EKT), which has historical ties to the Congregational Church and other churches in Samoa, 1.4 percent to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and 1 percent to the Bahai Faith. There are small numbers of Catholics, Muslims, Baptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Brethren Church.

The nine island groups have traditional chiefs, all of whom are members of the EKT. Most members of other religious groups are found in Funafuti, the capital, and some Bahais live on Nanumea Island.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The EKT is by law the state church, and the law affords its followers “the privilege of performing special services on major national events.” The constitution otherwise provides for separation of religion and state. The constitution provides for “freedom of thought, religion, and belief,” which may be limited by law for reasons such as avoiding divisiveness; protecting the rights of others; defense; and public order, safety, morality, and health. The preamble of the constitution states the country is “an independent State based on Christian principles, the Rule of Law, and Tuvaluan custom and tradition.”

By law, any new religious group with adult members representing not less than 2 percent of the country’s total population (at the most recent census) must register with the government; failure to register could result in prosecution. The Ministry of Home Affairs requires religious groups seeking registration to submit a request signed by the head and supported by five other members of the organization. Information on and proof of the number of adherents, the name of the religious organization, and approval from the traditional elder councils, known as *falekaupule*, are also required in the request. Under the law, all religious groups, regardless of size, must register with and obtain approval from the *falekaupule* of any island on which they conduct services. The law prohibits joint or public worship by religious groups not approved by these councils. The law also allows the *falekaupule* to withhold permission from certain religious groups to meet publicly, should they be judged locally to “directly threaten the values and culture of the island community.” The law provides for unapproved groups to be fined up to 500 Australian dollars (\$390) if they engage in public meetings in violation of the law.

The law guarantees the right of individuals to worship freely within their own residences.

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

Government Practices

In January the government announced the establishment of a national action plan on safeguarding and protecting human rights, which focused on systematically addressing the needs of marginalized populations in the country’s development priorities. The document affirms human rights, including freedom of expression, opinion, thought, and religion.

Missionaries continued to practice without government restrictions on some islands, such as Funafuti, but on other islands, the *falekaupule* issued formal and informal bans on proselytizing and public worship by representatives of religious groups that were perceived to challenge traditional cultural norms.

In October the authorities permitted the Jehovah's Witnesses to hold their annual church meeting in Vaitupu. The government also facilitated the use of its shipping vessel to ferry church members to the meeting.

Government ceremonies at the national level, such as the opening of the parliamentary year, and at the island-council level continued to include Christian prayers and clergy.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On the main island of Funafuti, religious minorities continued to report they were able to function freely without restrictions from local or government authorities. On smaller islands, including Niu, Nukufetau, Nanumanga, Niutao, and Vaitupu, the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religious groups were reportedly perceived by residents as being outside of traditional norms. In some cases, local traditional leaders discouraged groups from proselytizing or holding meetings, stating nontraditional and minority religious groups might disrupt traditional societal structures. Many religious groups continued to operate privately without formal approval, especially in the outer islands, without penalty.

Leaders from religious minority groups acknowledged the government's efforts to promote greater religious tolerance, but they said the government had failed to spread the message sufficiently on the outer islands.

Local minority religious leaders said the EKT continued to exert considerable influence in the social, cultural, and political life of the country. For example, the Church continued to limit activities on Sunday and encouraged a modest dress code in local villages. Unlike in previous years, Jehovah's Witnesses said they did not receive reports of students being forced to attend EKT prayer sessions or functions.

Since the EKT and traditional culture are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

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. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Fiji visited the country and expressed concern to the Attorney General's Office about the status and effects on minority religious groups of the restrictions on proselytizing and holding public meetings imposed by village elders on the outer islands.

Embassy officials met with leaders of several religious minority groups to discuss conditions for religious groups in the country. The embassy utilized social media to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, such as posts highlighting diverse religious traditions.