

NAURU 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws provide for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, and freedom to change one's religion or beliefs. Smaller churches found the 750-member requirement for registration difficult to meet, although religious groups stated they could conduct most normal functions without registration.

Protestant and Catholic clergy communicated a message of tolerance toward refugees from an Australian government regional processing facility after the refugees were granted residency visas by the government.

Although the U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in the country, the U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. The Ambassador traveled to Nauru to discuss the country's efforts to promote religious tolerance with the secretary of multicultural affairs and deputy secretary for justice and border control. Officials from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji discussed religious freedom with officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Education, and local church leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9,600 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 national census, approximately 95 percent of the population is Christian. The Nauru Congregational Church (which includes the Nauru Protestant Church) is the largest Christian group constituting 36 percent of the population, followed by the Roman Catholic Church at 33 percent, the Nauru Independent Assembly of God at 13 percent, and the Nauru Independent Church at 10 percent. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) each constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Two percent of the population reported no religious affiliation. Ethnic Chinese residents, estimated to constitute 5 percent of the population, are Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, or nonreligious. As of November 30, the Australian government houses approximately 383 asylum seekers in the country, many of whom are Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom of conscience, expression, assembly, and association. These rights may be restricted by any law which is “reasonably required” in the interests of defense or public safety, order, morality, or health.

Under the law, religious groups must register with the government to operate in an official capacity, which includes proselytizing, building houses of worship, holding religious services, and officiating at marriages. A 2014 cabinet memorandum sets out requirements for registration of religious groups, including having at least 750 enrolled members, land and a building in the country, and leadership by a Nauruan member of the clergy, who must reside in the country. The Catholic Church, the Nauru Congregational Church, the Assemblies of God, and the Nauru Independent Church are officially registered.

Religious groups may operate private schools and a number do so. In public schools the government allows religious groups to have a weekly religious education program with students during school hours, but does not require schools to offer such education. In schools where religious education is provided, students are required to attend the program led by the representative of their respective religious group. Students whose faith is not represented are required to undertake a period of independent study during the class time devoted to religious education.

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

Government Practices

Although the law requires registration for religious groups to conduct a full range of activities, local religious leaders stated the government required such recognition only if a denomination’s clergy wished to officiate at marriages. Representatives of the Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists reported that although they had not registered, they had not experienced problems with the government granting visas to their missionaries. There were no reports the government discriminated in the registration process, although leaders of churches with smaller congregations expressed concerns that the 750-person requirement implemented in 2014 was difficult to meet. Representatives of a Baptist church, which does not

have 750 members, applied for registration and their application was pending at the end of the year.

As of August authorities had granted 10-year residency visas to 894 former asylum seekers, many of whom were Muslim.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Protestant and Catholic clergy continued to communicate a message of tolerance toward refugees through sermons conducted during visits to the refugee centers. Muslim women wore headscarves in public. Some refugees belonging to religious minorities established small businesses, while some found employment in the local economy.

Missionaries representing several Christian groups were active and stated they operated freely.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government; the U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in the country. The Ambassador traveled to Nauru to discuss the country's efforts to promote religious tolerance with the secretary of multicultural affairs and deputy secretary for justice and border control. Other officials from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji also discussed the importance of religious freedom as a core value and universal human right with officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Education, and local church leaders.