

SWAZILAND 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. Although the law requires new religious groups to register, unregistered groups were able to operate freely. Some traditional chiefs did not allow the operation of, or closed currently operating, businesses in their jurisdictions by individuals who appeared to be Muslim. Muslim communities and the media reported plainclothes police officers attended and monitored Friday prayer sessions in mosques. During a people's parliament held at a royal residence, male Rastafarians who wanted to enter to participate in the discussions were required to uncover their heads, which they said was against their religious beliefs.

Muslim communities and the media reported negative views of Islam in society. The media reported incidents of offensive speech against Islam by members of the Christian clergy. Many non-Muslims declined to patronize Muslim-owned businesses such as eating establishments.

The U.S. Ambassador and other U. S. embassy representatives met with religious groups and engaged with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom concerns.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.5 million (July 2016 estimate). Religious leaders estimate 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent is Muslim (of which most are not ethnically Swazi), and the remainder belongs to other religious groups, including those with native African beliefs. According to anecdotal reports, approximately 40 percent of the population practices Zionism, a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship, (some adherents of which self-identify as evangelical Christians), while another 20 percent is Roman Catholic. There are also Anglicans, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and small Jewish and Bahai communities. Zionism is widely practiced in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. These rights may be limited by laws that are “reasonably required” in the interest of defense, or public safety, order, morality, or health, or protecting the rights of others.

The constitution affords unwritten traditional laws and customs, which are interpreted by traditional courts, equal status with codified laws, and prohibits the parliament and national courts from changing or regulating them.

The law requires religious groups to register with the government. In order to register, Christian groups must apply through one of the country’s three umbrella religious bodies (the League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches) for a recommendation, which is routinely granted, according to church leaders. The application process requires the group to provide its constitution, membership, and the physical location of the organization, along with the umbrella body’s recommendation, to the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, which registers the organization. For indigenous religious groups and non-Christian religious organizations, authorities consider proof of a religious leader, a congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant registration. Registered religious groups are exempt from taxation, but contributions to these groups are not tax deductible.

Religious groups are required to obtain government permission for the construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and must obtain the appropriate chief’s and the chief’s advisory council’s permission for new buildings in rural areas. In some rural communities, designated special committees allocate land to religious groups.

Religious instruction is mandatory in primary school and is incorporated into the daily morning assembly. Religion is an elective subject in secondary school. Although schools teach religion predominantly from a Christian perspective, the Ministry of Education includes a component on other religious groups in the curriculum. The constitution provides religious groups the right to establish and operate private schools and to provide religious instruction for their students without interference from government.

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

Government Practices

Muslim communities and the media reported plainclothes police officers attended and monitored Friday prayer sessions in mosques.

During a people's parliament held at a royal residence, male Rastafarians who wanted to participate in the discussions and make submissions on issues of national interest were required to uncover their heads in order to enter the residence, which they stated was against their religious beliefs.

In August the *Times of Swaziland* reported that a presiding judicial officer ordered a defendant to remove a pin from his jacket symbolizing his affiliation with the Zion Christian Church. After the defendant removed the pin, the officer allowed him to take the witness stand and proceeded with the trial.

Religious leaders said the government protected the right of Muslim workers to close businesses in order to attend Friday afternoon prayer sessions at mosques despite the government mandated business operating hours. Businesses owned by members of the Bahai community were allowed to close shops in observance of Bahai religious holidays. Public schools, however, did not allow Muslim pupils early departure to attend Friday prayers.

According to local religious leaders, unwritten traditional laws and customs allowed approximately 360 chiefs and their councilors to restrict some rights of minority religious groups within their jurisdictions if the chiefs determined the groups' practices conflicted with tradition and culture. Some chiefs continued to state they would not allow the operation of businesses in their jurisdictions by individuals who appeared to be associated with Islam.

According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, only Christian religious youth clubs were permitted to operate in public schools by the schools' administration. Other non-Christian religious clubs were prohibited from meeting in the schools. The voluntary Christian clubs conducted daily prayer services in many public schools. The schools' administration permitted the Christian clubs to raise funds and at times the clubs received funding from the school or from the general public.

Non-Christian groups reported the government provided some preferential benefits to Christians, such as free transportation to religious activities for Zionists and

airtime on state television and radio for Christians, which the government did not make available to them. Government-owned television and radio stations broadcast daily morning and evening Christian programming. The government provided each of the three Christian umbrella religious bodies with free airtime to broadcast daily religious services on the state-run radio station. Non-Christian religious groups stated they did not receive airtime despite their repeated calls for inclusion in state-run television and radio programs.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, aligned itself with Christian faith-based groups and also supported many Christian activities. The king, the queen mother, and other members of the royal family commonly attended Zionist programs, including Good Friday and Easter weekend services, where the host church usually invited the king to preach. Official government programs generally opened with a Christian prayer and several government ministers held Christian prayer vigils, which civil servants were expected to attend, to address social issues such as crime and increases in traffic accidents.

In April the government indicated its intent to regulate the operation of religious groups following a 2014 parliamentary call for a national policy to control the rapidly growing number of religious groups in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders and the media reported instances when members of the larger Christian groups discriminated against non-Christians, particularly in rural areas. Some Christians reportedly declined to patronize Muslim-owned businesses such as eating establishments. According to media reports, during the celebration of Eid al-Adha, members of the Muslim community extended an open invitation to join them and receive free meat as part of the festival, but many Christian leaders called upon their members to avoid the festival and the offered meat.

Muslim communities and the media reported negative views of Islam in society. Some individuals associated Islam with terrorist organizations such as ISIS (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or Boko Haram and therefore any activity conducted by Muslims was viewed with suspicion and disdain. The media reported incidents of offensive speech against Islam by members of the Christian clergy.

Prominent religious leaders from across the country met in May for the second annual meeting of the World Alliance of Religions' Peace Office. The assembly

included leaders representing Judaism, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Christianity, and Islam. Various participants stated the meeting helped them better understand other religious groups through dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador hosted a discussion focused on freedom of religion which brought together members of government and civil society from both religious and nonreligious organizations. The participants, mainly those following Christian or traditional beliefs, addressed the issue of state involvement in religion and implied that there was insufficient separation between religion and state.

Embassy representatives also met with leaders of different faith-based organizations, such as the imam from the Islamic Center and members of an organization known as the Swaziland Concerned Church Leaders, to discuss their concerns with respect to religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy personnel attended a tree-planting session organized by the Islamic Center and engaged in discussions on religious tolerance. The Islamic Center stated it hosted this event to foster a positive relationship with the embassy and encourage more interaction. The discussion focused on the purpose of the center, which is to educate children in the Muslim faith, and on the challenges the center has encountered through its opening and operation.