

ESWATINI 2020 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. In April, the University of Eswatini published results of a study of the effects of the 2017 directive requiring public schools to teach only Christianity, and recommended the government review the curriculum. The policy of excluding the teaching of other religions remained in effect. The government reportedly provided favorable treatment to Christian beliefs and organizations in various circumstances, such as access to free radio and television time.

Muslim leaders continued to report negative and/or suspicious views of Islam in society. Faith groups and civil society organizations held interfaith dialogues, and different faith groups sometimes collaborated on community service or development initiatives, which Muslim leaders said helped increase societal respect and tolerance for Islam.

The Ambassador and other U.S. government officials engaged with government officials on issues such as the directive banning the teaching of non-Christian religions in public schools. They engaged with religious leaders on the importance of developing and maintaining interfaith dialogue in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). Religious leaders estimate that 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent is Muslim (of whom many are not ethnic Swati, the dominant ethnic group in the country), and the remainder belongs to other religious groups, including those with indigenous 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, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and very small Jewish and Baha'i 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, public safety, order, morality, health, or protecting the rights of others. The constitution provides religious groups the right to establish and operate private schools and to provide religious instruction for their students without interference from the government.

The law requires religious groups to register with the government. The Ministry of Home Affairs is the government agency responsible for monitoring religious affairs in the country. To register as a religious group, 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 and does not impede registration, according to church leaders. The application process requires a group to provide its constitution, membership, and physical location, along with the umbrella body’s recommendation, to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Trade, which then 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 are not tax deductible.

All prospective builders, including religious groups, must obtain government permission for the construction of new buildings in urban areas, and permission from the appropriate chief and chief’s advisory council for new buildings in rural areas. In some rural communities, chiefs have designated special committees to allocate land to religious groups for a minimal fee.

Christian religious instruction is mandatory in public primary schools and is incorporated into the daily morning assembly. Christian education is also compulsory in public secondary schools. There are no opt-out procedures. Religious education is neither prohibited nor mandated in private schools.

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

Government Practices

A 2017 directive declaring Christianity the only religion in the public school curriculum and banning the teaching of other religions remained in effect. In April, a group of University of Eswatini researchers completed a study on the effects of the 2017 directive and published a journal article recommending that the government review the curriculum to suit the needs of all learners and ensure that constitutional protections against religious discrimination are honored in practice. In September, Deputy Speaker of the House of Assembly Phila Buthelezi, in his role as chair of the Public Accounts Committee, publicly asked whether it was time for the government to reconsider the 2017 directive and stated his intention to introduce a motion for reconsideration in the next session of the Assembly. As of year's end, the government had not reacted to the study nor to Buthelezi's call for reconsideration of the 2017 directive. According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, school administrations continued to permit only Christian religious youth clubs to operate in public schools. Christian clubs sometimes conducted daily prayer services in public schools and were permitted to raise funds on campus. Christian clubs' activities were normally conducted during lunch breaks, weekends, and school holidays.

During the year, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Themba Masuku hosted an interfaith dialogue in which he called for religious leaders to collaborate among themselves and with the DPM's office to help raise awareness of, and fight against, poverty, sexual exploitation, rape, truancy, domestic violence, and other crimes and social ills. Religious leaders reported that the DPM's efforts were both welcome and helpful in encouraging coordination and cooperation on commonly held goals. A Muslim leader highlighted the DPM's efforts to engage with various faith groups and said that religious tolerance appeared to have improved somewhat during the year as a result of more frequent and more inclusive dialogue.

Religious leaders said the government continued to protect the right of Muslim workers to close businesses in order to attend Friday afternoon prayers at mosques despite government-mandated business operating hours. Businesses owned by members of the Baha'i community were allowed to close shops in observance of Baha'i religious holidays. Public schools, however, did not excuse students from attendance on non-Christian religious holidays, Friday Islamic prayers, or Saturday services, such as for Seventh-day Adventists.

Non-Christian groups reported the government continued to provide some preferential benefits to Christians, such as free time on state television and radio. Government-owned television and radio stations broadcast daily morning and evening Christian programming. The government continued to provide each of the three Christian umbrella religious bodies and their affiliates with free airtime to broadcast daily religious services on the state-run radio station. Local newspapers provided free space in their announcement sections to Christian groups but not to non-Christian groups.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, aligned itself with Christian faith-based groups and supported Christian activities such as commemorating Christian holidays. Official government programs often opened with a Christian prayer, and several government ministers held Christian prayer vigils, which civil servants were expected to attend.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Muslim community continued to report negative, but improving, views of Islam in society. According to Muslim leaders, some members of society continued to conflate reports of violence committed by groups such as ISIS or Boko Haram with behavior associated with Muslims or Islam in general. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, with Muslims in the country being primarily of South Asian descent, it was difficult to categorize such perceptions as being solely based on religious identity.

The Baha'i community held quarterly interfaith devotional fellowship dialogues, and different faith groups sometimes collaborated on community service or development initiatives. Muslim leaders and civil society organizations also hosted pioneering interfaith dialogues during the year. Muslim leaders reported that they viewed these interfaith initiatives as key to increasing societal respect and tolerance for Islam, stating they believed the suspicion Muslims faced was due more to ignorance than intolerance. In light of COVID-related lockdowns, the Muslim community held virtual dialogues to promote religious, cultural, and social tolerance.

One civil society organization, the Swaziland Youth Intent Organization (SIYO), hosted an interfaith dialogue that received significant coverage in local newspapers and on national radio. SIYO also developed and held the first of a series of all-day "boot camps," in which 40 participants from different religious groups attended simulated immersion trips to Muslim, Baha'i, and traditional Eswatini religious

communities to experience firsthand their respective religions, cultures, and languages. According to the SIYO project coordinator, these simulated experiences helped to dismantle religious and cultural stereotypes, build social cohesion, and promote peace and tolerance among individuals and organizations representing diverse backgrounds.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials engaged with government officials, the head of the Human Rights Commission Secretariat, and the head of the Millennium Challenge Corporation task force on religious freedom and tolerance issues, including the directive banning the teaching of non-Christian religions in public schools.

Embassy officials also engaged with civil society, the academic community, and religious leaders of different faiths on issues such as the directive banning the teaching of non-Christian religions in public schools and the importance of developing and maintaining interfaith dialogue in the country.