

FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states no law may be passed to establish a state religion or impair the free exercise of religion. The government provides assistance to all religiously affiliated schools for nonreligious purposes. All such schools are either Catholic or Protestant.

In its annual report, released in March, Freedom House stated that the “small Ahmadi Muslim community has reported some instances of discrimination and vandalism and intolerance for non-Christian religions in several states....” The Interdenominational Council in Pohnpei continued to address social problems and to promote official cooperation among most Christian groups.

U.S. embassy officers and a visiting U.S. official discussed religious freedom and tolerance with national and state governments. The embassy had discussions with religious leaders to promote religious inclusion and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 102,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to government statistics, approximately 99 percent of the population identifies as Christian. Several Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church are present in all four states. According to government statistics, 55 percent of long-term residents are Catholic and 42 percent are Protestant. The United Church of Christ is the main Protestant denomination. Other Christian groups include Baptists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, the Apostolic Church, the Salvation Army, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Church of Jesus Christ counted its membership as approximately 6,000 members in 2019. The Jehovah’s Witnesses state they have approximately 10,000 followers throughout the country. Other religious groups exist in small numbers, including approximately 45 Ahmadi Muslims, with a variable expatriate population of Baha’is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and other Muslims. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center report, the most recent published on folk religions in the country, 2.7 percent of the population followed folk religions. Informally, many in the country combine Christian beliefs with traditional indigenous beliefs

in spirits, magic, and communing with the dead. Funerals are typically several days long and usually include some traditional aspects.

In Kosrae State, 90 percent of the population is Protestant, with the United Church of Christ the most prominent. In Pohnpei State, the population is divided evenly between Protestants and Catholics, although more Protestants live on the western side and more Catholics live on the eastern side. In Chuuk State, an estimated 60 percent is Catholic and 40 percent Protestant. In Yap State, an estimated 80 percent of the population is Catholic and the remainder Protestant. Religious affiliation often follows clan lines.

The majority of foreign workers are Filipinos, who number more than 1,000 and are mostly Catholic. The Fijian community comprises fewer than 100 individuals and is predominately Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution forbids the establishment of a state religion or of governmental restrictions on freedom of religion. The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion. Sections 1 and 2 of the constitution state, “No law may deny or impair freedom of expression, peaceable assembly, association, or petition,” and “No law may be passed respecting an establishment of religion or impairing the free exercise of religion,” respectively. The constitution also says that the traditions of the country are protected by statute and that if a statute protecting a tradition is challenged as violating rights provided in the constitution, protection of the tradition “shall be considered a compelling social purpose warranting ... governmental action.”

Religious entities are required to register as nonprofit organizations to be exempt from taxation.

While there is no religious education in public schools, private schools teach religion in addition to the curriculum established by the Department of Education. The government may fund nonreligious activities in religiously affiliated schools.

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

Government Practices

Government leaders did not take any position on the public statements of some Christian leaders calling for the exclusion of non-Christians and/or the prohibition of the open practice of non-Christian religions.

The government continued to provide grants to private, church-affiliated schools, and continued to state it made no distinction between public and private schools in its grant programs. All such schools were Catholic or Protestant. There are no non-Christian religious schools.

National and state government events routinely opened and closed with a prayer, invocation, or benediction from a Protestant or Catholic clergy member, and often one from each group. There were no voiced objections to government leaders' Christian prayers before official events and/or to references to the Bible during meetings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Ahmadi Muslim community reported that it had established a community center in Pohnpei State without encountering the discrimination experienced previously in Kosrae State. The community moved from Kosrae to Pohnpei in 2017.

In March, Freedom House released its annual report, which stated, "A small Ahmadi Muslim community has reported some instances of discrimination and vandalism" and that "intolerance for non-Christian religions in several states is [of] ... growing concern."

The Interdenominational Council in Pohnpei stated it encouraged unity among religious groups by addressing local social problems and promoting cooperation among religious communities. Council officials noted that the council met annually with other religious groups in the country to promote unity and cooperation. During the year, such cooperation included measures to assure social distancing at church services.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some U.S. missionaries, church workers, and religious teachers from the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh-day Adventists departed the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Prior to strict border closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, embassy representatives and a visiting U.S. official met with senior cabinet, state government officials, and leaders of religious communities in each state. The U.S. official stressed the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. He noted that religion plays a critical role in the lives of people in the country and is intertwined with politics, life, culture, and government. Embassy officials stressed the primacy of the constitution and its provisions regarding religious freedom over local laws or practices that potentially privilege one religious group over others.

Prior to travel restrictions due to the pandemic, embassy officials met in Yap and Chuuk States with representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist School and Church, the International Christian School and Church of God, and the Catholic School and church to discuss religious tolerance.