

# NAURU 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws provide for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, and for freedom to change one's religion or beliefs. Although the law requires registration for religious groups to conduct a full range of activities, religious groups stated they could conduct most normal functions without registration. Although The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) was, as in previous years, unable to register during the year, the Church stated it made progress towards registration and was optimistic it would obtain some form of official recognition in 2021.

During the year there was a decline in the number of refugees in the country, many of them non-Christian. Although a government official expressed concern in 2019 that local communities "fear that refugees could overrun the tiny island nation," there were no reports of these concerns during the year.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. Officials from the U.S. embassy in Suva discussed religious pluralism, tolerance, and registration requirements during visits with government officials, civil society, and religious leaders in February.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10,000 (midyear 2020 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 members of the Church of Jesus Christ each constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Two percent of the population reports no religious affiliation. Ethnic Chinese residents, estimated to constitute 5 percent of the population, are Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, or nonreligious.

In addition, according to several nongovernmental organizations and the Australian government, approximately 211 persons fleeing their home countries lived in the country at the beginning of the year, a decline from approximately 1,000 in 2019

due to resettlement. Sources stated the number was even fewer because many who were moved from the country to Australia for temporary medical treatment were still legally considered to be in the country, even if they physically were not. Most of those coming to the country were from Muslim-majority countries, although many were Christian.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for the freedom of conscience, expression, assembly, and association, and for freedom to change one's religion or beliefs. These rights may be restricted by any law that 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 new 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, Nauru Congregational Church, Assemblies of God, Nauru Independent Church, and Seventh-day Adventist 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 during school hours, but it 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 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 continued to require such recognition only if a denomination's clergy wished to officiate at marriages.

Religious groups stated they could conduct most normal functions without registration. There were no reports the government discriminated in the registration process. Although the Church of Jesus Christ was, as in previous years, unable to register during the year, the Church stated it made progress towards registration and was optimistic it could obtain some form of official recognition in 2021.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

During the year there was a decline in the number of refugees in the country, many of whom were non-Christian. Although a government official expressed concern in 2019 that local communities “fear that refugees could overrun the tiny island nation,” there were no reports of these concerns during the year.

Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize intolerance toward refugees as being based solely on religious identity.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government; the U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in Nauru. In February, embassy officials discussed religious pluralism, tolerance, and registration requirements during meetings with senior government officials, civil society, and religious leaders.

The embassy and the ambassador utilized their social media platforms to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, including highlighting comments by the U.S. President and posts during major Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim celebrations in support of religious tolerance and practices.