

VANUATU 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion or traditional belief. The preamble to the constitution refers to “traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles,” but there is no state religion. On penalty of a fine, the law requires religious groups to register; however, the government did not enforce this requirement. In July, the Minister of Finance and Economic Management recommended that the interdenominational Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) organize prayer sessions for all government ministries. Prime Minister Bob Loughman told the VCC chairman the government would appoint a chaplain to work with the VCC to facilitate the prayer sessions, but as of year’s end, the government had not implemented this. According to sources, the government planned to give new Bibles to all members of parliament but did not do so by year’s end. Churches were eligible to apply for a one-time stimulus package that was part of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the VCC, religious minorities were respected, and any tension between groups was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues. Members of minority faith groups, however, stated members of dominant religious denominations ridiculed their beliefs. In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision making predominated on significant social changes, such as the establishment of a new religious group. Throughout the year, the VCC continued dialogue with the West Papua Council of Churches to establish a region-wide Melanesian council of churches.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Papua New Guinea discussed with government officials the importance of interfaith dialogue and of including religious minorities in national events and programs. Embassy representatives discussed religious freedom issues with leaders of the VCC and religious minority groups, and with civil society organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 298,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2009 census, the most recent, approximately 82 percent of the population is Christian. An estimated 28 percent of the population is

Presbyterian; 15 percent, Anglican; 12 percent, Roman Catholic; and 12 percent, Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups, cumulatively comprising 15 percent of the population, include the Church of Christ, Neil Thomas Ministries, the Apostolic Church, and the Assemblies of God. Smaller Christian groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), which estimates its membership at nearly 9,000, and Jehovah's Witnesses, which estimates its membership at 750. According to the census, approximately 13 percent of the population belongs to an estimated 88 other religious groups, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Muslims, and several newly formed groups. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group centered on the island of Tanna, constitutes approximately 3 percent of the population, according to census data.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for individual freedom of "religious or traditional beliefs," including the freedoms of conscience and worship, subject "to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defense, safety, public order, welfare, and health." Any individual who believes these rights have been violated may apply "independently of any other possible legal remedy... to the Supreme Court to enforce that right." The Supreme Court may issue orders it considers appropriate to enforce these rights if it finds they have been violated and to pay compensation. The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to "traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles," but there is no state religion.

The law requires every religious body to apply to the government for a certificate of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$9), and obtain final approval of the Minister for Internal Affairs to operate. Registration allows the religious group to maintain a bank account. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$470); however, the law is not enforced.

According to law, children may not be refused admission to government and nongovernment schools or be treated unfavorably because of their religion.

The Department of Education prohibits religious discrimination. Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by VCC representatives using their own materials. The government provides grants to

church-operated schools and pays the salaries of teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. There is no uniform standard amount of time dedicated to religious instruction across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that students in grades seven through 12 receive one hour of religious instruction per week. Parents may request that students be excused from religious education classes in both private and public schools.

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

Government Practices

In July, the *Daily Post* reported that Minister of Finance and Economic Management Johnny Koanapo requested the VCC organize prayer sessions for all government ministries. Prime Minister Loughman told VCC Chairman Pastor Allan Nafuki the government would appoint a chaplain to work with the VCC to facilitate the prayer sessions. Sources said the government planned to give new Bibles to all members of parliament. As of year's end, however, neither action had been taken.

The government continued to interact with religious groups through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the VCC, the latter composed of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of Christ, and the Apostolic Church, with Seventh-day Adventists and the Assemblies of God having observer status. Government officials said they respected religious minorities but that these groups each had different expectations and protocols. The officials said the government preferred to work with a coordinated body like the VCC, which represented the majority of churches.

The Ministry of Health continued to cooperate with six churches, including Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, the Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, and the Church of Jesus Christ, to provide health, educational, economic, and disaster response assistance to needy local communities. In October, the government, community organizations, and partner churches provided free training on basic health awareness to combat noncommunicable diseases such as tuberculosis in their communities.

The VCC received a 10 million vatu (\$94,100) annual grant from the government. The VCC said that as in years past it would use the funds for the administration of the VCC and to support the intertwined social, political awareness, and religious

activities of the churches in the country, including evangelism and public outreach activities of member churches.

Churches were eligible to apply for a one-time stimulus package that was part of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At year's end, the funds had not been disbursed.

Government oaths of office customarily were taken on the Bible.

Ceremonial prayers at national events were organized through the VCC. Religious minorities criticized the government for not including non-Christian faith groups in celebrations of national events.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the main leader of the VCC, religious minorities were respected, and if there was tension between groups, it was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues. Members of minority faith groups, however, stated members of dominant religious denominations ridiculed their beliefs.

In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision making predominated. In general, if a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action required agreement by the chief and the rest of the community.

In April, the VCC called for all churches to stand together in prayer when the islands were impacted by Cyclone Harold. The Santo Bush Mission and Talua Theological Training Institute in Santo suffered significant damage.

Throughout the year, the VCC continued dialogue with the West Papua Council of Churches regarding establishment of a Melanesian council of churches, which would include Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. According to VCC representatives, however, there were no in-person meetings due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea is accredited to the government. Representatives from the Embassy in Papua New Guinea discussed religious

tolerance and the importance of interfaith dialogue with senior government officials, as well as the role of faith-based organizations in disaster response operations, such as during a pandemic, and the inclusion of minority faiths in national events and programs.

Embassy representatives discussed with religious minorities, including Catholics, Baha'is, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses, their perceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Embassy representatives exchanged ideas with Christian leaders of various denominations, civil society organizations, and government agencies on the importance of interfaith dialogue regardless of religious affiliation. In October, embassy officials discussed with the VCC the central role played by church groups in response to social challenges, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and public health emergencies.