

NAURU 2018 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. Smaller churches continued to find the 750-member requirement for registration difficult to meet, although religious groups stated they could conduct most normal functions without registration.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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 in November.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10,000 (July 2018 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 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints each constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Two percent of the population reported 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 1,000 persons fleeing their home countries lived in Nauru through much of the year, although many reportedly left the country temporarily for medical reasons toward the end of the year. Most of those coming to Nauru were from Muslim majority countries, and 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. 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 with students 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 required such recognition only if a denomination’s clergy wished to officiate at marriages. There were no reports the government discriminated in the registration process, although leaders of churches with smaller congregations continued to express concerns that the 750-member requirement implemented in 2014 was difficult to meet. The registration application for the Baptist Church, which did not have 750 members, remained pending at the end of the year.

In his New Year’s message, President Baron Waqa stated the country continued to live harmoniously with refugees and asylum seekers. He ended his message saying he trusted the people to have celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government, as the U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in Nauru. In November embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and registration requirements during several meetings with senior government officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, other national government officials, and civil society.