

# NEW ZEALAND 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, including the right to manifest religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching, either individually or in community with others, and either in public or in private. The law prohibits discrimination based on religious belief.

Government and community leaders strongly condemned a local indigenous leader's declaration that Muslim dress should be banned from national holiday celebrations.

Jewish and Muslim leaders reported anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic incidents, and the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (HRC) received 49 complaints of discrimination based on religious belief, 30 percent fewer than the previous year. These incidents of discrimination were strongly denounced by the HRC, government officials, and community leaders.

The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officers continued to meet with the government and representatives of all major religious groups throughout the country to discuss religious freedom and the role of religion in society. The Ambassador and Consul General met with Auckland's Interfaith Council to promote religious tolerance and discuss the role of religion in society. The Consul General hosted an interfaith iftar for the Auckland Muslim community and Interfaith Council, bringing together leaders from Auckland's Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, Catholic, Mormon, Protestant, and Muslim communities to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy representatives met with leaders of the Sikh, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian religious groups throughout the country to discuss religious tolerance.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 4.4 million (July 2015 estimate). According to 2013 census data, 12.6 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 11.8 percent of the population is Anglican, 8.1 percent Presbyterian, 7.5 percent other Protestant denominations, 5.5 percent Christian with no affiliation specified, 2.6 percent Methodist, 2.3 percent Hindu, 1.5 percent Buddhist, 1.4 percent Maori religion, 1.2 percent Muslim, and 0.2 percent Jewish. Since 2006 the number of

Muslims and Hindus has increased by 28 and 40 percent, respectively. More than 90 additional religious groups together constitute less than 1 percent of the population. The number of people stating they had no religion increased by 26 percent compared with the 2006 data, from 34 percent of respondents to 42 percent; 4.4 percent of the respondents to the census question on religion stated they objected to the question.

According to 2013 census data, of the indigenous Maori, who make up approximately 15 percent of the population, 11.2 percent are Catholic, 10.8 percent are Anglican, and 8.4 percent belong to syncretic Maori Christian groups such as Ratana and Ringatu. Forty-six percent stated no religious affiliation while 6.5 percent did not respond regarding religion.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The law states that religious expression is “subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.” According to the law, religious practices may not breach the peace.

The government does not require the licensing or registration of religious groups; however, if a religious group desires to collect money for any charitable purpose, including the advancement of its religion, and obtain tax benefits, it must register with Department of Internal Affairs as a charitable trust. The registration must provide the rules of the organization showing it is a nonprofit organization and a list of qualified officers. There is no fee for this registration.

The law provides teaching within public primary schools “shall be entirely of a secular character.” It permits, however, religious instruction and observances in state primary schools within certain parameters. A school may close for up to one hour a week up to a total of 20 hours a year for religious instruction or religious observance, to be conducted in a manner approved by the school’s Board of Trustees in consultation with the principal or head teacher. Attendance at religious instruction or observances is not compulsory. According to the Ministry of Education, public secondary schools may also permit religious instruction at the discretion of individual school boards. Religious instruction, if provided, usually takes place after normal school hours.

Citizens may file complaints of unlawful discrimination, including on the basis of religious belief, to the government-funded Human Rights Commission (HRC). The HRC's mandate includes assuring equal treatment of all religious groups under the law; protecting the right to safety for religious individuals and communities; promoting freedom of religious expression, the right to recognition and reasonable accommodation for religious groups; and the promotion of understanding in education. In the event a complaint is not resolved satisfactorily with the assistance of HRC mediation, the complainant may proceed to the Human Rights Review Tribunal. The tribunal has the authority to issue restraining orders, award monetary damages, or declare a breach of the Human Rights Act, which is reported to parliament. Conduct prohibited by the Human Rights Act may be prosecuted under other laws. In addition to the HRC dispute resolution mechanism, a complainant may initiate proceedings in the court system.

The law does not prevent the registration of political parties based on religion. The country has two registered Christian-associated political parties.

### **Government Practices**

The government did not specifically promote any religion; however, a Christian prayer was recited at the opening of every parliamentary session.

Businesses may be fined if they attempt to operate on the official holidays of Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas, and Australia-New Zealand Army Corps Day. There were 39 complaints about businesses operating during official holidays during the year, but the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment said that because none of the businesses had received a warning nor been previously prosecuted under the law, they would not be prosecuted.

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

The HRC received 49 complaints of unlawful discrimination on the grounds of religious belief or lack of religious belief during 2014-2015 compared to 70 complaints during 2013-2014.

In January government and community leaders strongly condemned a local Maori leader's declaration that Muslim dress should be banned from national holiday celebrations. The leader stated the burqa should be banned from Waitangi Day (the national holiday) celebrations because it "symbolizes Islam's direct threat to

our sovereignty and our culture.” Both the Maori and Muslim communities spoke out against the leader. Members of Parliament reproved the call to ban the burqa. In response to this incident Race Relations Commissioner Dame Susan Devoy stated, “It is unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of religious belief under the Human Rights Act. It’s up to everyday New Zealanders to stand up for one another when we are discriminated against.”

During an interfaith gathering in Christchurch, Bishop John Gray derided the country’s Jewish and Muslim communities, making provocative references to the Holocaust and al-Qaida. In February Anglican archbishops apologized for the incident, saying the bishop’s comments did not represent the views of the Anglican Church, and noting he had been stripped of his position as vicar-general of the Maori Anglican Church. Members of the Jewish and Muslim community accepted the apology of the Anglican Church.

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

Embassy officers regularly met with government officials to exchange thoughts on promoting religious freedom and actions to encourage tolerance.

The Ambassador and Consul General met with Auckland’s Interfaith Council to promote religious tolerance and discuss the role of religion in society. The Consul General hosted an interfaith iftar for the Auckland Muslim community and interfaith council, bringing together leaders from Auckland’s Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, Catholic, Mormon, Protestant, and Muslim communities to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

Embassy representatives met with leaders of Sikh, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian religious groups throughout the country to discuss religious tolerance.