

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The government consistently interpreted the constitution's provisions for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion to mean that any religion may be practiced or propagated as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others. In March a court dismissed on a technicality a legal challenge to efforts by the speaker of parliament to replace traditional symbols in parliament with Christian symbols. Faith leaders continued to criticize the speaker's plans. Discussions continued under the nationwide consultation, approved by parliament in 2013, on the question of religious freedom and whether to ban non-Christian religions.

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

The U.S. Ambassador met with the minister for religion, youth, and community development on several occasions and discussed religious freedom. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and met regularly with local religious leaders as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations. Embassy officials also met with members of the Muslim community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.6 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2000 census (the most recent available), 98 percent of citizens identified themselves as Christian. Of this number, approximately 27 percent are Roman Catholic; 20 percent, Evangelical Lutheran; 12 percent, United Church; 10 percent, Seventh-day Adventist; 9 percent, Pentecostal; 5 percent, Evangelical Alliance; 3 percent, Anglican; and 3 percent, Baptist. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Salvation Army, together constitute 9 percent. Bahais make up less than 1 percent of the population, and the remaining 2 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with some indigenous beliefs and practices. The Muslim community numbers about 5,000.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The constitution provides the individual the right to the “freedom of conscience, thought and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs” except where that practice infringes on another person’s rights or where it violates a public interest in “defence, public safety, public order, public welfare, public health, the protection of children and persons under disability, or the development of under-privileged or less advanced groups or areas.” This has consistently been interpreted to mean that any religion may be practiced or propagated as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others, including traditional beliefs and customs. The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the constitution, which refers to “our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours.” There is, however, no state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government in order to hold a bank account. There have been no reports of groups being denied registration.

Immigrants and noncitizens are free to practice their religions, and foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities.

Government Practices

Controversy continued over the December 2013 attempt by the speaker of parliament to replace a totem pole in parliament’s main hall and masks over the main entrance with a Christian unity pole and biblical text, respectively. The Catholic Bishops Conference condemned the removal attempt and issued warnings about the rise of religious fundamentalism as a risk to the country’s traditional identity. The director of the National Museum, and former Prime Minister and founding father Sir Michael Somare also condemned the action, and won a court-ordered stay on the removal, which the court dismissed in March due to improper legal document notifications.

Controversy continued over the question of religious freedom and whether to ban non-Christian religions. In July 2013, parliament tasked the minister for religion, youth and community development and the Constitutional Review Commission to set up a bipartisan team to consult the public to determine whether or not the government should allow freedom of religion. The argument was that the national pledge and the constitution specifically state the country shall be a Christian country. Several church conferences and religious associations spoke out against

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

the ban on religious freedom, declaring that it was against Christian principles. There were no significant developments during the year; however, the issue had not been resolved by year's end.

While respecting church autonomy, the Department of Community Development pursued its policy objectives by cooperating with many religious groups that, in addition to proselytizing, provided education and health services.

In general the government did not subsidize the practice of religion. Churches ran half of schools and health services, and the government provided support for these institutions. Upon independence, the government recognized it had neither the funds nor the personnel to take over these institutions and agreed to subsidize their operation on a per-pupil or per-patient basis. In addition, the government continued to pay the salary and provide benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff (generally members of the civil service) who worked at these church-administered institutions, as it did for teachers and health staff of national institutions. The education and health infrastructures continued to rely heavily on church-run institutions.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in the public schools. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and students attended the class operated by the church of their parents' choice. Children whose parents did not wish them to attend the classes were excused. Members of non-Christian groups used family and group gatherings before and after school for religious lessons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Nontraditional Christian and non-Christian religious groups have become increasingly active in recent years. Muslim and Confucian organizations largely served the expatriate population, although there is a growing indigenous Muslim population. Pentecostal and charismatic Christian groups have found converts within congregations of the more established churches.

The proliferation of new missionary movements, especially charismatic Christian groups, and the growth in the Muslim community, led some established churches and public figures to question whether such developments were desirable. .

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The possible resettlement of Muslim refugees from the Australian-funded Manus Island Regional Detention Center was accompanied by nascent anti-Muslim sentiment among some religious and community leaders.

The Council of Churches made the only known effort at interfaith dialogue. The council members included the Anglican, Gutnius Lutheran, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and United Churches and the Salvation Army. In addition, 16 church-affiliated organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participated in its activities. The ecumenical work of the Council of Churches was confined primarily to cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects. The Council of Churches does not include Seventh-day Adventists or Pentecostals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador met with the minister for religion, youth, and community development on a number of occasions and discussed religious freedom. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and met regularly with local religious leaders, as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations. Embassy officials also met with some members of the Muslim community to discuss religious freedom.