

SOLOMON ISLANDS 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for religious freedom, including the freedom to change religions, proselytize, and establish religious schools. Laws “reasonably required” to achieve certain listed public goals may restrict these rights. As of year’s end, the Constitutional Review Committee had not finalized a draft of an approved 2017 parliamentary motion to declare the country a Christian nation. In September Malaita Province Premier Daniel Suidani urged support of recognition of Taiwan rather than China because of shared Christian and democratic values.

In April police arrested five men for damaging a United Methodist church building in Makina Village, East Guadalcanal. Police stated the attackers suspected the church of influencing congregants to vote against their preferred candidate in national elections. There were no reported injuries to the congregants. The courts ordered the five perpetrators to pay repair costs for the damage they caused. The five largest religious groups that make up the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) organized joint religious activities and encouraged religious representation at national events.

The U.S. government, through the embassy in Papua New Guinea and the consular agency in Solomon Islands, discussed religious tolerance with the government during the year. Embassy officials raised the issue of a parliamentary motion seeking to change the preamble of the constitution in an effort to ensure that the changes did not discriminate against non-Christian religious organizations or activities. Embassy officials also discussed the potential for church-run schools to open enrollment to all students regardless of church affiliation. Embassy officials discussed with religious minorities whether groups believed they could freely exercise their religious beliefs and if they had concerns about the proposed change to the constitution. Embassy representatives also met with religious leaders of larger groups and leaders of SICA.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 673,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the government census and independent anthropological research, approximately 90 percent of the population is affiliated with one of the following Christian churches: Anglican Church of Melanesia, 32 percent; Roman Catholic,

20 percent; South Seas Evangelical, 17 percent; Seventh-day Adventist, 12 percent; and United Methodist, 10 percent. An estimated 5 percent of the population, consisting primarily of the Kwaio ethnic community on the island of Malaita, adheres to indigenous, animistic religions. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Muslims, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and members of indigenous churches that have broken away from major Christian denominations, such as the Christian Fellowship Church, which separated from the United Methodist Church in 1960.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of thought and of religion. This includes the freedom for individuals to change religion or belief and to worship, teach, practice, and observe one's religion in public or in private, either alone or with others. It also provides for the freedom to establish noncompulsory religious instruction. These provisions may be restricted by laws "reasonably required" to protect the rights of others, for defense, or for public safety, order, morality, or health.

All religious groups must register with the government. Religious groups are required to apply in writing to the Registrar of Companies for a certificate of registration. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations may register as charitable organizations. To register, a group must submit the required paperwork to the Registrar of Companies; the application fee of 1,250 Solomon Islands dollars (SBD) (\$150) is waived for religious groups. Documentation required for the application process includes a description of the group, a list of board members, and a constitution that states how the group is governed and how members are chosen. The registrar issues a certificate when satisfied that the requirements have been met and that the nature, extent, objectives, and circumstances of the applicant are noncommercial.

The public school curriculum includes an hour of weekly religious instruction, the content of which is agreed upon by the member churches of SICA, an ecumenical nongovernmental organization comprising the county's five largest churches. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Government-subsidized church schools are required to align their nonreligious curricula with governmental criteria. Non-Christian religious instruction is provided in the

schools upon request. Ministers or other representatives of the religion provide these classes. Anyone found to be preventing religious instruction faces imprisonment of up to one year or a fine of up to SBD 500 (\$62).

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

As of year's end, the Constitutional Review Committee had not finalized draft constitutional changes intended to implement a 2017 parliamentary motion to explore the possibility of amending the preamble of the constitution to declare the country a Christian nation. Committee representatives said the changes would recognize Christianity as the main religion of the country without limiting religious freedom. In December a member of the Church of Jesus Christ in Honiara said the government should focus on economic development in Solomon Islands instead of religion, commenting that religious groups in the country did not pose a threat to civil liberties.

In September, amid a political standoff and public tension over the government's decision to cut diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of China, Malaita Province Premier (Governor) Daniel Suidani encouraged Solomon Islanders to maintain their Christian and democratic values by supporting relations with Taiwan instead of China. Christians were present in large numbers at the airport to welcome and express sadness to Taiwanese officials arriving in the country to close down their embassy.

Three new groups, two subsidiaries of the Anglican Church of Melanesia and one local church affiliated with the Christian Fellowship Church, were registered during the year. There were no reports of religious groups being denied registration.

The government continued to interact with religious groups through the Ministry of Home Affairs. The ministry characterized its role as maintaining a balance between constitutionally protected rights of religious freedom, free speech, and free expression, and maintaining public order. The ministry also again granted a small amount of funding to churches to carry out social programs, such as a Christian care center for victims of domestic violence administered by the Anglican Church of Melanesia. The maximum amount of these grants was SBD 15,000 (\$1,900). Some churches also received funding from local members of

parliament through their constituent development funds. According to informal guidelines on how constituent development funds should be allocated, no more than SBD 250,000 (\$31,000) per year per district could be given to religious groups. Groups needed to apply directly to members of parliament to receive these funds.

Religious groups operated several schools and health services. The government subsidized most of the schools and health centers administered by the Catholic Church, Anglican Church of Melanesia, United Methodist Church, South Seas Evangelical Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church. Subsidies were allocated proportionally based on the number of students at the schools and the size of the health centers. There were no reports of discrimination among groups in receiving these subsidies.

Government oaths of office customarily continued to be taken on the Bible, but this was not a compulsory practice.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In April police arrested five men following an attack on a United Methodist church in Makina Village, East Guadalcanal, in which they threw rocks at the church while persons prayed inside. The attackers did not injure the individuals inside but did cause damage to the building. Police stated the attackers suspected the church influenced persons to vote against their preferred candidate in the national general election. The men were charged with unlawful damage and later released after paying for the cost of repairing the church building.

The five largest religious groups that make up SICA continued to play a leading role in civic life, organizing joint religious activities and encouraging religious representation at national events. In June SICA organized a prison visit event for church members to share gifts, food, and church teachings with prisoners at Rove prison in Honiara. Other, smaller Pentecostal churches were part of the Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association (SIFGA), an umbrella organization. In June SICA and SIFGA cohosted the visit of a U.S. evangelist.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy and consular representatives from the embassy in Papua New Guinea and the consular agency in Solomon Islands discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including a recommendation that the proposed change to the

preamble of the constitution not discriminate against non-Christian religious organizations or activities, and that church-run schools open enrollment to all students regardless of church affiliation.

Embassy and consular representatives discussed with religious minorities their perceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in the country and any concerns about the proposed change to the constitution. Embassy representatives met with leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ and the Catholic archbishop to emphasize the importance of religious freedom regardless of religious affiliation. In May embassy officials discussed with SICA the challenges of church-provided health and education services, including cooperation by churches with civil society and government.