

KIRIBATI 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Religious groups with memberships equal to or greater than 2 percent of the population are required to register with the government.

Two islands in the southern part of Kiribati continued to uphold a “one church only” policy out of stated deference to the first Protestant missionaries that visited the islands in the 1800s.

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government, and officials from the U.S. embassy in Fiji discussed religious freedom with the government and religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 106,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2010 census, approximately 56 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 34 percent is Kiribati Protestant (a Congregationalist denomination), and 5 percent belongs to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the Bahai Faith (2 percent), the Seventh-day Adventist Church (2 percent), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Assembly of God, and Muslims. The Mormon Church says it has a higher number of adherents, with membership exceeding 16,000. Persons with no religious affiliation account for less than 1 percent of the population. Members of the Catholic Church are concentrated in the northern islands, while Protestants constitute the majority in the southern islands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience (including religion), expression, assembly, and association. These rights may be limited by law “which is reasonably required” in the interests of public defense, safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights of others.

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By law any religious group with adult members representing no less than 2 percent of the total population (according to the most recent census) must register with the government. The religious organization submits a request to the Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs, signed by the head of the group and supported by five other members of the organization. Also required in the request is information and proof of the number of adherents, and the religious denomination and name under which it wishes to be registered.

There is no mandated religious education in public schools.

Government Practices

Most governmental meetings and events began and ended with an ordained minister or other church official delivering a Christian prayer.

Observers noted that although the law requires a religious organization representing 2 percent of the population to register, there were no legal consequences for not registering. The government continued to administer a small grants program for church projects from registered religious organizations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The population of two islands – Arorae and Tamana – remained largely Protestant, at 99 percent and 94 percent respectively, according to the 2010 census, although a small number of Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Mormon and Bahai adherents were also present. The residents of these islands continued their “one church only” tradition, which they stated was in deference to Protestant missionaries that came to the islands in the 1800s, according to government reports.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji was accredited to the government. Representatives of the embassy in Fiji visited the country and discussed religious tolerance with the Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs. Embassy representatives met with leaders from the Catholic, Protestant, Assembly of God, and Mormon Churches.