

FIJI 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of religion and state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation and inciting hatred or “disaffection” against any religious group. Religious groups must register with the government. A law on education permits noncompulsory religious instruction in schools owned and operated by various religious denominations. Church leaders reiterated their stance of political neutrality after the military cautioned Methodist Church leaders to desist from making calls for a Christian state. The trial of the senior management of a leading newspaper that published a letter to the editor that the government characterized as antagonistic towards the country’s Muslim community continued at year’s end.

In December vandals damaged a Hindu temple; a police investigation continued at year’s end. According to the daily newspaper, the *Fiji Sun*, a proliferation of anti-Muslim comments in December generated nationwide controversy after an Indian cleric posted on Facebook how he was celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday in the country. Bahais celebrated the faith’s bicentennial in October with several interfaith gatherings across the islands.

Embassy officials held meetings with senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, in addition to Christian, Hindu, and Muslim religious leaders, with the aim of encouraging and maintaining an active interfaith dialogue. The embassy used social media to highlight the Ambassador’s actions respecting the country’s religious diversity.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 921,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2007 census, approximately 64.5 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, and 6.3 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist church, which comprises approximately 34.6 percent of the population. Other Protestant denominations account for 10.4 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 9.1 percent, and other Christian groups 10.4 percent. There are small communities of Bahais and Sikhs.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijian) citizens, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. The majority of the country's traditional chiefs belong to the Methodist church, which remains influential among indigenous people, particularly in rural areas where 49 percent of the population lives. Most Indian Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while roughly 20 percent are Muslim and 6 percent Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The small community of mixed European and Fijian ancestry is predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The government may limit these rights by law to protect the freedoms of others, or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, or nuisance. The constitution also mandates the separation of religion and state. Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution provides that individuals may not assert religious belief as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees who may then hold land or property for the groups. To register, religious bodies must submit applications to the registrar of titles office. Applications must include names and identification of the trustees, signed by the head of the religious body to be registered, a copy of the constitution of the proposed religious body, land title documents for the land used by the religious body, and a registration fee of 2.30 Fiji dollars (\$1.14). Registered religious bodies may receive an exemption from taxes after approval from the national tax agency, on the condition they operate in a nonprofit and noncompetitive capacity. By law, religious bodies that hold land or property must register their houses of worship, including their land, and show proof of title. There is no mention in the law of religious organizations that do not hold land.

Permits are required for any public meeting on public property, outside of regular religious services and houses of worship, organized by religious groups.

There is no required religious instruction under the law. Private or religious groups sometimes own or manage school properties but the Ministry of Education administers and regulates the curriculum. The law allows religious groups the right to establish, maintain, and manage places of education, whether or not they receive financial assistance from the state, provided the institution maintains educational standards prescribed by law. The law permits noncompulsory religious instruction in schools, enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations but receiving government support to offer religious instruction. Schools may incorporate religious elements, such as class prayer, as long as they do not force teachers to participate, and students may be excused should their parents request it. The government provides funding and education assistance to public schools, including schools owned and operated by religious organizations, on a per pupil basis. Some schools maintain their religious and/or ethnic origin, but they remain open to all students. According to the law, the government ensures free tuition for primary and secondary schools.

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

Government Practices

While senior Methodist church leaders reported improved relations with the government over the past two years, at times the prime minister continued to criticize the church in parliament for what he characterized as support for the majority opposition political party. Since religion, ethnicity, and politics are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize the government's actions as being solely based on religious identity.

On April 27, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces issued a media statement warning the Methodist church that an April 22 report by church administrators to the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs calling for the country to become a Christian state, could spark societal tension. Shortly thereafter, senior church leaders, including the Methodist church president, distanced themselves from the report and reassured the prime minister of the church's political neutrality. Heads of other Christian faiths and the head of an interreligious organization comprised of Christians, Muslims, and Hindus also publicly affirmed their nonpolitical stance.

The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions amended the charges against three staff members of the *Fiji Times* newspaper and the author of a letter to the editor, from violating the decree that prohibits publishing articles that incite and cause dislike, hatred, and antagonism toward any community, to sedition. Sedition carries a lower maximum imprisonment term of seven years. The charges stemmed from a letter to the editor published in 2016 in the *Fiji Times*' indigenous language edition that prosecutors originally said incited communal antagonism against the Muslim community. The trial, postponed from December 5, is scheduled for April 2018. The court granted the postponement to allow the two accused men the opportunity to seek legal counsel after they were left without representation when the state subpoenaed their counsel to become a state witness.

Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama continued to emphasize religious tolerance during public addresses at home and overseas, stating the country is a multifaith nation with religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On December 16, vandals broke into a Hindu temple in Nadi and desecrated the property with graffiti and painted racial slurs. Police officers were still investigating the case at year's end.

In December a proliferation of anti-Muslim comments generated nationwide controversy after an Indian cleric posted on Facebook how he was celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday in the country. On Facebook, people stated concerns about the perceived increase of Muslim influence in the country. According to the *Fiji Sun*, a former acting director of public prosecutions criticized such anti-Muslim discourse during an annual attorney general's conference.

Bahais celebrated the faith's bicentennial in October by hosting several interfaith gatherings.

The Catholic Church, Anglican and Methodist churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) and Seventh-day Adventist Church, as well as Hindu and Muslim groups operated numerous schools, including secondary schools, which were eligible for government subsidies based on the size of the student population.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials emphasized the importance of religious tolerance in meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Embassy officials met with Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious leaders to discuss the importance of respect for religious freedom as a universal human right. For example, embassy officials met with the Methodist church's head of communications in June to discuss the importance of religious pluralism.

The embassy used social media to highlight the Ambassador's actions respecting the country's religious diversity.