

VANUATU 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or traditional belief. The preamble to the constitution refers to traditional Christian values, but there is no state religion. In April the minister of internal affairs suggested amending the constitution to state the country is a Christian nation, but no action was taken in parliament on the proposal. On penalty of a fine, the law requires religious groups to register, but the government has not enforced this requirement. In April the minister of internal affairs said the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) was not fully representative of all Christian churches and should be replaced with a more inclusive umbrella organization. In August Prime Minister Charlot Salwai announced the government would start paying a 10 million vatu (\$89,000) annual grant to the VCC. The media reported the prime minister, in remarks after the signing, said his government recognized the role the churches play in praying for peace and unity in the country. In July a police officer and others reportedly drove a police vehicle into a church conference venue and made “verbal assaults.” No one was injured.

In October Pastor Allan Nafuki, chairman of the VCC, stated the VCC would not support an international reconciliation ceremony that included Muslim groups. According to media reports, Nafuki also stated a review of the constitution was essential to restrict religious freedom to only include Christian churches which “preach the truth in the Bible.” In rural areas, chiefs and traditional leaders exercised influence over communal decision making, including regarding the establishment of new religious groups.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. In visits to the country, officials from the U.S. Embassy in Papua New Guinea periodically discussed religious freedom with representatives of the government, including proposed restrictions on new religious movements entering the country. Embassy representatives also met and discussed religious freedom with the VCC and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 278,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2009 census, approximately 82 percent is Christian. An estimated 28 percent of the population is Presbyterian; 12 percent, Roman

Catholic; 15 percent, Anglican; and 12 percent, Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups comprising 15 percent of the population include the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, other Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Six percent of the population is Jewish. Other religious groups include Bahais and Muslims. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group with its own political party, is centered on the island of Tanna and constitutes less than 1 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees individual freedom of "religious or traditional beliefs," including the freedom of conscience and worship subject "to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defense, safety, public order, welfare, and health." Any individual who believes these rights have been violated may apply "independently of any other possible legal remedy... to the Supreme Court to enforce that right." The Supreme Court is empowered to issue orders that it considers appropriate to enforce these rights if found violated, and to order payment of compensation. The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to "traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles." There is no state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government. The law requires every religious body apply for a certificate of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$9), and obtain the final approval of the minister for internal affairs to operate in the country. Registration allows the religious group to maintain a bank account. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$447), but the law is not enforced.

According to law, children may not be refused school admission or be treated unfavorably because of their religion.

The Department of Education prohibits discrimination, including on religious grounds. Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of the VCC using their own materials. The government provides grants to church-operated schools and pays the salaries of teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. There is no uniform standard amount of time dedicated to religious instruction

across all schools; however, the standard curriculum requires that students in years seven through 12 receive one hour of religious instruction per week. Parents may request that students be excused from religious education classes in both private and public schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In April the minister of internal affairs suggested during an official engagement that the country should consider reviewing the constitution to provide more “control on religious movements entering the country.” He said the country was a Christian nation and the constitution should reflect that. He stated he would call for parliamentary action or a national referendum on the matter, but did not take further action. The minister also called on the government to “tithe” 10 percent of its budget to the Christian church.

In July a police officer and several young men reportedly disturbed a conference held by an evangelical Protestant church by driving a police vehicle into the conference venue and making “verbal attacks.” No one was injured, and according to media reports, the police officer had a personal dispute with the pastor of the church.

The government interacted with religious groups through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the VCC, composed of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of Christ, and the Apostolic Church, with the Seventh-day Adventist and Assemblies of God Churches having observer status. In April the minister of internal affairs said the VCC was not fully representative of all Christian churches and should be replaced with a more inclusive umbrella organization.

In August Prime Minister Charlot Salwai announced that the government would start paying a 10 million vatu (\$89,000) annual grant to the VCC. The media reported the prime minister said, in remarks after the signing, his government recognized the role the churches play in praying for peace and unity in the country. The VCC chairman said the funds would be “used for the benefit of each member of each church,” but did not elaborate further.

The chairman and secretary general of the VCC were named as members of the Constitutional Review Committee established by the parliament in June.

Government oaths of office customarily were taken on the Bible.

Ceremonial prayers at national events were organized through the VCC.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were incidents of discrimination against Christian groups not in the VCC.

In October Pastor Allan Nafuki, Chairman of the VCC, stated the VCC would not support an international reconciliation ceremony that included Muslim groups. He stated instead the VCC would host a march to send the message to the people of the country that it is a Christian country. According to media reports, Nafuki also stated a review of the constitution was essential to restrict religious freedom to Christian churches which “preach the truth in the Bible.”

In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision-making predominated. In general, if a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action required agreement by the chief and the rest of the community. Religious tensions were generally resolved through appeals from traditional leaders to uphold individual rights.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea was accredited to the government and officials from the embassy periodically visited the country and discussed religious freedom with representatives of the government, including proposed restrictions on new religious movements entering the country. Embassy representatives also met and discussed religious freedom with the VCC and NGOs.