

NAMIBIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of belief and the right to practice, profess, and promote any religion. Some newly converted Muslim inmates lodged a complaint with the government's Office of the Ombudsman that they were not allowed to update their religious affiliation in prison records nor meet with Muslim clergy. Some religious groups again noted the difficulty of obtaining work visas for foreign religious workers and volunteers; however, they continued to say all organizations were subject to strict visa enforcement and the policy was not targeted at religious groups.

In April a nongovernmental interfaith council consisting of members of various Christian and Muslim groups, as well as representatives of the Jewish and Baha'i faiths, was established.

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with the government-run Office of the Ombudsman about complaints regarding religious freedom. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, engaged with religious groups, leaders, and the newly created interfaith council to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, approximately 97 percent of the population identifies as Christian. According to church statistics and the government's 2013 Demographic and Health Survey, approximately 50 percent identify as Lutheran and 20 percent as Catholic. Other groups, including Anglican, various Reformed denominations, Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, evangelicals, charismatics, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, make up the remaining 27 percent of the population that is Christian. The number of Pentecostal and charismatic churches is growing. Some Zionist churches combine Christianity and traditional African beliefs. Muslims, Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, atheists, and other non-Christians together constitute approximately 3 percent of the population and reside primarily in urban areas.

Many members of the Himba and San ethnic groups combine indigenous religious beliefs with Christianity. Muslims are mostly Sunni and are predominantly immigrants from elsewhere in Africa, South Asia, or recent converts.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution specifies the country is a secular state, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the right to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain, and promote any religion. These rights may be subject to “reasonable restrictions” justified by interests such as “the sovereignty and integrity of Namibia, national security, public order, decency, or morality.”

The law allows recognition of any religious group as a voluntary association, without the need to register with the government. Religious groups may also register as nonprofit organizations (an “association without gain”) with the Ministry of Industrialization, Trade, and SME (small to medium enterprise) Development. Both religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations and religious groups formed as voluntary associations are exempt from paying taxes. A welfare organization may apply to the Department of Inland Revenue to receive tax-exempt status. Once registered as a welfare organization, a religious group may seek to obtain land at a reduced rate, which is at the discretion of traditional authorities or town councils, based on whether they believe the organization’s use of the land will benefit the community.

The constitution permits religious groups to establish private schools provided no student is denied admission based on creed. The government school curriculum contains a nonsectarian “religious and moral education” component that includes education on moral principles and human rights and introduces students to a variety of African traditions and religions, as well as world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Baha’i Faith, and Rastafarianism.

Similar to other foreigners seeking to work in the country, religious workers must obtain a work visa. There is no separate religious worker visa.

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

Government Practices

The government Office of the Ombudsman received religion-related complaints during the year from convicted inmates at a Windhoek correctional facility who stated that the Namibian Correction Services did not allow them to update their religious affiliation and meet with Muslim clergy after they converted to Islam. A Muslim member of the interfaith council said that prison officials denied access to the leadership of his mosque to Muslim prisoners during Ramadan. He said Namibian Correctional Services had not allowed recent converts to update their religious affiliation in prison records, which was the reason for the denial of access. The Office of the Ombudsman received complaints from two inmates who stated they were denied access to Muslim clergy. Additionally, a Muslim Egyptian citizen complained to the Office of the Ombudsman about being denied halal meals during his pretrial detention.

The government periodically included religious leaders in discussions regarding issues affecting the country and in national events. President Hage Geingob held both formal and ad hoc consultations with leaders from major religious groups in the country, including the interfaith council, the Council of Churches that represented Christian denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Dutch Reformed Church, and Roman Catholic Church, and from the Muslim community, to discuss opportunities for collaboration in fighting poverty.

Religious leaders continued to state that they occasionally faced problems with the government regarding visas. The interfaith council's Baha'i representative said that religious volunteers had difficulty obtaining visas due to their work not clearly falling into any of the country's visa categories. The religious leaders stated nonreligious organizations also had difficulty obtaining visas and did not believe they were targeted by the government based on religion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In April a nongovernmental interfaith council consisting of members of various Christian and Muslim groups, as well as representatives of the Jewish and Baha'i faiths, was created. This group had been meeting on an ad hoc basis in previous years but committed to holding regular meetings and petitioning the government together to have a stronger collective voice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives engaged with the Office of the Ombudsman about complaints regarding religious freedom.

Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, met with religious leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, and Muslim communities to better understand the country's religious landscape and any potential problems of discrimination such as difficulties in obtaining visas for religious workers.

Embassy representatives also met with the newly formed interfaith council to discuss government corruption, the lack of a religious worker visa category, the lack of a religious organization registration category, and the general state of faith and morality in the country.