

SEYCHELLES 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds as well as laws establishing any religion. It provides for freedom of religion, including the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religion. Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, some non-Catholic students in public schools providing Catholic instruction did not have access to alternative activities during those classes. The government regularly consulted with an interfaith group, the Seychelles Interfaith Council (SIFCO), on issues directly affecting religious groups such as a possible amendment to the Registration Act as well as broader issues such as prison reform, substance abuse, and national unity. Members of SIFCO were appointed to various government boards.

SIFCO organized its annual general meeting in October, with high participation by religious leaders. Following the meeting, SIFCO stated it wanted to be more involved in the government's discussions regarding modifications to the registration of religious groups. SIFCO expressed concern that the relatively easy registration process was attracting fraudulent religious groups to the country. The forum included Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Hindus, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Baha'is.

The U.S. embassy in Mauritius monitored religious freedom in Seychelles and engaged with SIFCO to promote freedom of religious expression.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 94,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2010 census conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, approximately 76 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups include Anglicans (6 percent), Hindus (2.4 percent), and Muslims (1.6 percent). Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Brahma Kumaris, and Christian groups including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, Nazarites, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds and forbids any laws establishing any religion or imposing any religious observance. The constitution permits limitations on freedom of religion only “as prescribed by a law and necessary in a democratic society” in the interest of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health, as well as to protect the rights and freedoms of other persons. It provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right of individuals to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate their religion in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community with others, in public or private. These rights may be subject to limitations stated in the constitution. The constitution stipulates individuals shall not be required to take a religious oath counter to their religious beliefs or profess any religion as a prerequisite for public office.

The law requires registration for all religious groups as either corporations or associations. To apply through the Registrar of Associations, a group must submit its name, location, rules, and list of assets; the name, occupation, and addresses of officers and at least seven members; and the resolution appointing its officers. A minimum of seven members is required to register an association. To receive tax benefits, notably tax exemptions on the importation of goods, and corporate social responsibility assistance, religious groups must also register with the Finance Ministry. The government recognizes the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, Islamic groups, and the Baha’i local spiritual assembly through individual acts of incorporation.

Although no penalties are prescribed for unregistered groups, only those registered as corporate bodies or associations have legal status and the right, for example, to petition the government for broadcast time for religious programming or permission to provide spiritual counsel in prisons.

The constitution prohibits compulsory religious education or participation in religious ceremonies in state schools but permits religious groups to provide religious instruction. Religious instruction is provided by the Catholic and Anglican Churches and offered during school hours. There are no faith-based schools.

The law prohibits religious groups from obtaining radio or television licenses. The state-funded Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation provides broadcast time to religious groups on national radio and for an early morning television program. Access to radio programming is granted based on the size of each group’s membership. Religious groups may publish newspapers.

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

Government Practices

The government began drafting a proposed amendment to the Registration Act, the law that regulates religions and associations, to make it stricter. SIFCO said it would like the amendment to impose new criteria for registering heads of religious groups and establish mechanisms to detect financial fraud and terrorism financing through religious groups. Discussion of the draft amendment continued at year's end.

The Office of the Vice President held the portfolio for religious affairs. The Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation continued to broadcast live religious programming for holidays such as Christmas, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation also broadcast 90-minute Catholic and Anglican services on the radio. The state-run broadcaster continued to review and approve all other religious programming to ensure hate speech was not broadcast. Other religious programming consisted of 15-minute prerecorded prayers by Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Seventh-day Adventist, Catholic, and Anglican groups every two weeks. Private radio and television stations did not feature religious programs.

SIFCO, composed of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, and other religious groups present in the country, commented publicly on national issues and actions taken by the National Assembly and the president. In its annual meeting, which was attended by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Hindus, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Baha'is, SIFCO called on the government to provide land to build an interfaith house of worship on Perseverance Island near Victoria. It also expressed concerns with the number of religious groups that have registered as nongovernmental organizations – more than 60 as of year's end. SIFCO said the relatively easy registration process could attract fraudulent religious groups to the country. SIFCO also expressed reservations about a statue of former president France-Albert Rene to be erected in a public park, especially at a time when the Truth, Reconciliation, and National Unity Commission was exposing information about possible human rights abuses during Rene's rise to power and his rule. Members of SIFCO were appointed to various government boards, such as the National AIDS Council and the Agency for Prevention of Drug Abuse and Rehabilitation. SIFCO continued its presence at official events. For example, SIFCO provided interfaith prayers at the National Day event celebrating the

country's independence. On March 27, SIFCO hosted a drug awareness forum with teachers and counselors from educational institutions.

Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, non-Catholic students in some public schools providing Catholic instruction did not offer alternative activities during those classes, according to parents.

Various religious groups stated they continued to engage and participate actively with prison authorities to carry out spiritual and religious activities in prisons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

SIFCO members organized visits to their respective houses of worship for other SIFCO members. For example, the Islamic Society of Victoria hosted SIFCO members at the main mosque in Victoria, and the Hindu temple hosted an interfaith visit as well.

In his remarks to Muslim worshippers during the celebration of Eid al-Fitr, Imam Ibrahim Lebon of the Islamic Society of Seychelles called for more love among “the people,” especially within Muslim communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. embassy in Mauritius engaged with SIFCO throughout the year to discuss the importance of freedom of religious expression, the registration process, and possible amendment of the Registration Act.

The U.S. Embassy in Mauritius posted several articles that discussed religious freedom on social media.