

KIRIBATI 2017 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. In July the president hosted a national dialogue with religious organizations to promote cooperation among the different churches and the protection of religious freedom in the country.

Two islands in the southern part of the country continued to uphold a “one-church-only” policy due to a 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 tolerance and practices with the government and religious groups when visiting the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 108,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2015 census, approximately 57 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 31 percent belongs to the Kiribati Uniting Church (formerly known as the Kiribati Protestant Church), 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 states its membership exceeds 12 percent of the population. 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.

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 regarding proof of the number of adherents and the religious denomination and name under which the group wishes to be registered. Although the law requires a religious organization representing 2 percent of the population to register, there are no legal consequences for not registering.

There is no mandated religious education in public schools. Public schools in the country allow a variety of religious groups, including Catholics, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Mormons, to provide religious education in schools. Students who opt out of religious education must participate in a supervised study period.

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

Government Practices

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

In July the president hosted a national dialogue, including religious organizations in addition to the two largest groups, the Catholic and Kiribati Uniting Churches, to promote cooperation among the different churches and the protection of religious freedom in the country.

The government continued to administer a small grants program for development projects administered by nongovernmental organizations and registered religious organizations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The population of two islands – Arorae and Tamana – remained largely members of the Protestant Kiribati Uniting Church, at 98 percent and 96 percent respectively, according to the 2015 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 who came to the islands in the 1800s, according to government reports. On these islands, residents of other religions worshipped in their own homes. Religious groups outside the Kiribati Uniting Church were discouraged by villagers from proselytizing or holding meetings. The Ministry of Women, Youth, and Social Affairs reported receiving no complaints from other groups regarding the tradition.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji was accredited to the government. Representatives of the Embassy in Fiji also visited the country, contacted minority religious groups, and discussed religious tolerance and practices on the treatment of minority groups with government representatives and Mormon leaders. The embassy utilized social media to promote religious plurality and tolerance, such as posts highlighting diverse religious traditions.