

# **PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely. In October the new speaker of parliament announced that he would implement a 2016 national court order to reinstall indigenous cultural artifacts to the parliament house. The reinstallation did not occur during the year. The previous speaker had planned to replace the artifacts with Christian symbols. The Constitutional Review Commission considered the possibility of defining Papua New Guinea as a Christian country, although it acknowledged that the constitution allows for freedom of religion. In October the new minister of religion, youth, and community development said he would introduce legislation to create provincial church councils to “bring churches closer to the government.” Most official government meetings and parliament sessions began and ended with Christian prayer. In January the chief secretary to government announced a plan to make religious education compulsory in public schools, but as of the end of the year, no action had been taken on his proposal, and religious education remained legally noncompulsory.

According to media reports, several hundred, but not all, Muslim refugees in the country refused to move to less secure facilities, and at least three were attacked by knifepoint. Since religion and refugee status are often closely linked, it was difficult to characterize many incidents as being based solely on religious identity. There continued to be reports that established churches criticized the role of new Christian and missionary groups.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom and government funding of religious groups with the government, including with the Office of Religion. The Ambassador and other officials met with local religious leaders and U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations. The Ambassador hosted an interfaith breakfast that convened representatives from eight religious groups and highlighted the importance of religious tolerance and cooperation.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.9 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 98 percent of citizens identified themselves as Christian. Approximately 26 percent of the population is Roman

Catholic; 18 percent, Evangelical Lutheran; 13 percent, Seventh-day Adventist; 10 percent, Pentecostal; 10 percent, United Church (an offspring of the London Missionary Society, Australian Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand); 6 percent, Evangelical Alliance; 3 percent, Anglican; and 3 percent, Baptist. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Kwato Church, and the Salvation Army together constitute 9 percent. There are approximately 60,000 Bahais, making up less than 1 percent of the population, and 2 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Newer self-identified fundamentalist Christian religious groups are growing. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with indigenous beliefs and practices. The Muslim community numbers approximately 5,500 and includes approximately 2,220 local converts and 500 refugees and asylum seekers at the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre and Manus Island refugee processing center. The rest are expatriate workers primarily centered in Port Moresby. Most local converts live in Port Moresby or villages in the Highlands.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides the individual the right to “freedom of conscience, thought and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs” except where that practice infringes on another person's rights or where it violates a public interest in “defence, public safety, public order, public welfare, public health, the protection of children and persons under disability, or the development of under-privileged or less advanced groups or areas.” The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the constitution, which refers to “our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours.” There is no state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government in order to hold a bank account, own properties in the religious group's name, have limited individual liability, and apply to the Internal Revenue Commission for exemption on income tax and to the Department of Treasury for exemption of import duty. In order to register, groups must provide documentation including a list of board or executive committee members and a constitution.

Foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. Religious workers receive a three-year special exemption visa from the government. Applications for the visa require a sponsor letter from a

religious group in the country, an approved work permit from the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, and 100 Kina (\$32) fee, which is less than other visa categories.

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

### **Government Practices**

In October the newly elected speaker of parliament said he would comply with a 2016 national court order to reinstall indigenous cultural artifacts that his predecessor had ordered removed from the parliament house in 2013. The reinstallation did not occur by the end of the year. The former speaker, an evangelical Christian, had removed or in many cases destroyed these artifacts, including 19 traditional masks that formed the lintel over the entrance, saying they were demonic and “ungodly images and idols.” Former Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare, who helped author the country’s constitution, lauded the new speaker’s decision to reinstall the artifacts. He told the press “this group of Christian evangelicals cannot impose their views on the freedom of thought, religion, and conscience of the rest of Papua New Guinea.” Many Christian groups stated they supported the national court decision when it was handed down in 2016.

The former speaker had also proposed reinstalling a “pillar of unity” in parliament, but with the modification of the pillar resembling a large candle, with a flame at the top and “The Word of God” inscribed in the base. As of the end of the year, the new speaker said he was still considering whether this proposal was viable and “how much taxpayer money would be needed to install it.”

The Constitutional Review Commission considered the possibility of defining Papua New Guinea as a Christian country, although it acknowledged that the constitution allows for freedom of religion. These discussions were still in the initial phases as of the end of the year, and no details were made public. Media reports said such a measure could potentially slow down or stop current growth of non-Christian religions in the country.

Parliament sessions and most official government meetings began and ended with Christian prayers.

Churches continued to operate approximately half of schools and health services in the country, and the government provided financial support for these institutions.

The government subsidized their operation on a per-pupil or per-patient basis. In addition, the government continued to pay the salary and provide benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff (generally members of the civil service) who worked at these church-administered institutions, as it did for teachers and health staff of national institutions. Services were provided to the general population irrespective of their religious beliefs, and operations were not religious in nature. The education and health sectors continued to rely heavily on church-run institutions. Individual members of parliament continued to give grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituency to carry out development projects or religious activities. Nearly all of these institutions were Christian.

In April the former minister of religion, youth, and community development announced the government had allocated 20 million Kina (\$6.38 million) for the Church-State Partnership Program, but as of the end of the year, the Office of Religion had not received planned funding. In 2016, the government budgeted the same amount to the program but released only 2.5 million Kina (\$797,000), citing revenue shortfalls. The former minister of planning said allocations were made to churches according to how much they contributed to education in the country.

In October the new minister of religion, youth, and community development said that churches would be given more emphasis under his leadership, and that he would introduce legislation to create provincial church councils. These councils would “bring churches closer to the government.” The governor of Gulf Province also said he would create a provincial council of churches that would include the heads of mainline churches in the province. He said the council would receive 5 percent of the provincial budget to assist with education and health service delivery.

In January the chief secretary to government announced a plan to make religious education compulsory in public schools, but as of the end of the year, no action had been taken on his proposal. The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools, but such instruction remained legally noncompulsory, although almost all students attended. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and students attended the class administered by the church of their parents’ choice. Children whose parents did not wish them to attend the classes were excused. Members of non-Christian groups used family and group gatherings before and after school for religious lessons.

In June immigration authorities ordered the immediate deportation of a Catholic missionary, stating he breached his visa conditions. According to immigration authorities, he abused the conditions of his visa by engaging in sensitive landowner issues. The missionary responded that providing legal advice to landowners through the archbishop was a large component of his job, and that he was helping landowners advocate for a fair and just lease agreement with a well-known multinational company. The Catholic Church undertook legal action against the government. In August immigration authorities issued the missionary a new visa, and the Church agreed to drop legal action.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to media reports, hundreds of Muslim refugees and asylum seekers initially refused to leave the Manus Island Regional Processing Center (RPC) despite its official closure at the end of October. The men repeatedly communicated that they feared for their safety from the local community and opposed relocating to less secure facilities on Manus Island. After a three-week standoff, all refugees and asylum seekers were removed from the RPC on November 24. After restrictions on movement were eased while the RPC was open, tensions increased between its inhabitants and the local inhabitants. In July local residents attacked Sudanese, Iranian, and Afghan asylum seekers individually at knifepoint, and the victims required medical attention for stab wounds. Since religion and refugee status are often closely linked, it was difficult to characterize many incidents as being based solely on religious identity.

The Council of Churches continued its efforts at interfaith dialogue among its members. The council members included the Anglican, Gutnius Lutheran, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and United Churches and the Salvation Army, but not Seventh-day Adventists or Pentecostals. In addition, 16 church-affiliated organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participated in its activities. The council concentrated primarily on cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects. It also issued a press statement ahead of national parliamentary elections, asking religious leaders to speak out against election-related violence and to encourage their congregations "to safeguard our democracy."

There were reports that established churches, either through the Council of Churches or on their own, continued to criticize new missionary movements and new Christian groups for what established churches said they perceived as the increasingly important role they played in society.

Leaders of eight religious groups stated that the various religious groups in the country were generally able to practice their faith freely without barriers. Religious leaders discussed working together to address social issues that affect congregation members such as education, health, gender equality, fragmentation of family values, and sorcery-related violence.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials discussed the issue of ensuring that diverse religious groups received public funding from the government with government officials, including those with the Office of Religion.

The Ambassador and embassy officials discussed religious tolerance, gender equality, and churches' role as health and educational service providers in regular meetings with the Council of Churches, local religious leaders, as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations.

On October 27, International Religious Freedom Day, the embassy utilized social media to highlight support to persecuted religious minority groups around the world.

In November the Ambassador hosted an interfaith breakfast at her residence in Port Moresby and invited leaders of eight religious groups to attend, including the Bahai, Mormon, and Muslim communities. Media coverage of the event highlighted the importance of religious freedom, shared values among a range of religious groups, and the criticality of religious tolerance.