

# **SWAZILAND 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. Although the law requires new religious groups to register, unregistered groups were able to operate freely. In January the cabinet issued a decree requiring public schools to teach only Christianity and excluding the teaching of other religions. While some Christian groups welcomed the decree, other religious groups, civil society representatives, and educators criticized the government's order preventing the study of non-Christian faiths as an unconstitutional act that infringed on religious and educational freedoms. Muslim leaders reported disparate treatment from government inspectors who visited the Islamic Center to verify documentary requirements for animals awaiting slaughter. The Muslim community and media reported that plainclothes police officers attended and monitored Friday prayer sessions in mosques. The government protected the right of Muslim workers to close businesses in order to attend Friday afternoon prayer sessions, despite government-mandated business operating hours.

Muslim communities continued to report about negative and/or suspicious views of Islam in society and reported that Christians discriminated against non-Christians, particularly in rural areas.

The Ambassador and other U.S. government representatives met with government officials to discuss the January order banning the teaching of non-Christian religions and the importance of developing and maintaining interfaith dialogue in the country. The embassy facilitated the creation of an Interfaith Working Group (IWG) in February to develop and strengthen interfaith dialogue.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.1 million (July 2017 estimate). Religious leaders estimate that 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent Muslim (of which most are not ethnic Swazi), and the remainder belongs to other religious groups, including those with indigenous African beliefs. According to anecdotal reports, approximately 40 percent of the population practices Zionism, a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship (some adherents of which self-identify as evangelical Christians), while

another 20 percent is Roman Catholic. There are also Anglicans, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and very small Jewish and Bahai communities. Zionism is widely practiced in rural areas.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. These rights may be limited by laws that are "reasonably required" in the interest of defense, public safety, order, morality, health, or protecting the rights of others. The constitution provides religious groups the right to establish and operate private schools and to provide religious instruction for their students without interference from the government.

The constitution recognizes unwritten traditional laws and customs, which are interpreted by traditional courts, granted equal status with codified laws, and protected from amendment or regulation by the parliament and/or national courts. The law requires religious groups to register with the government. In 2016 the government designated the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) to be the government agency responsible for monitoring religious affairs in the country. In order to register as a religious group, Christian groups must apply through one of the country's three umbrella religious bodies – the League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches – for a recommendation, which is routinely granted and does not impede registration, according to church leaders. The application process requires a group to provide its constitution, membership, and physical location, along with the umbrella body's recommendation, to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Trade, which then registers the organization. For indigenous religious groups and non-Christian religious organizations, authorities consider proof of a religious leader, a congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant registration. Registered religious groups are exempt from taxation, but contributions to these groups are not tax deductible.

Religious groups must obtain government permission for the construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and permission from the appropriate chief and chief's advisory council for new religious buildings in rural areas. In some rural

communities, chiefs have designated special committees to allocate land to religious groups for a minimal fee.

Christian religious instruction is mandatory in public primary schools and incorporated into the daily morning assembly. Christian education is also compulsory in public secondary schools. There are no opt-out procedures. Religious education is neither prohibited nor mandated in private schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

In January the cabinet issued a directive that declared Christianity the only religion in the school curriculum and banned the teaching of other religions in public schools. While the Swaziland Conference of Churches and some other Christian groups praised the order, other religious groups, including several Christian groups, educators, and civil society groups stated they believed that imposition of Christian-only education violated the constitution and infringed on religious and educational freedoms.

Muslim communities and the media reported that plainclothes police officers sometimes attended and monitored Friday prayer sessions in mosques. Swazi Muslims also said that they were required to submit to prolonged searches by immigration officials at borders. There were no reports of arrests of Swazi Muslims.

Religious leaders said the government continued to protect the right of Muslim workers to close businesses in order to attend Friday afternoon prayer sessions at mosques despite the government-mandated business operating hours. Businesses owned by members of the Bahai community were allowed to close shops in observance of Bahai religious holidays. Public schools, however, did not allow early departure for Muslim students to attend Friday prayers.

According to local religious leaders, unwritten traditional laws and customs allowed approximately 360 chiefs and their councilors to continue to restrict some rights of minority religious groups within their jurisdictions if the chiefs determined the groups' practices conflicted with tradition and culture. Some chiefs continued to state they would not allow the operation of businesses in their jurisdictions by individuals who appeared to be associated with Islam.

According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, only voluntary Christian religious youth clubs were permitted to operate in public schools by the schools' administration while non-Christian religious clubs were prohibited from meeting in the schools. Christian clubs conducted daily prayer services in many public schools. The schools' administration permitted the Christian clubs to raise funds, and at times the clubs received funding from the school or from the general public. Christian clubs' activities are normally conducted during lunch breaks, weekends, and school holidays.

Non-Christian groups reported that the government continued to provide some preferential benefits to Christians, such as free transportation to religious activities and free airtime on state television and radio. Government-owned television and radio stations broadcast daily morning and evening Christian programming. The government continued to provide each of the three Christian umbrella religious bodies and their affiliates with free airtime to broadcast daily religious services on the state-run radio station. Non-Christian religious groups stated the government continued to deny them airtime despite their repeated calls for inclusion in state-run television and radio programs.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, aligned itself with Christian faith-based groups and supported many Christian activities. The king, the queen mother, and other members of the royal family commonly attended Zionist programs, including Good Friday and Easter weekend services, where the host church usually invited the king to preach. Official government programs generally opened with a Christian prayer, and several government ministers held Christian prayer vigils (which civil servants were expected to attend) to address social issues such as crime and increases in traffic accidents.

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

Muslim communities continued to report negative views of Islam in society. Some members of society reportedly associated Islam with terrorist organizations such as ISIS or Boko Haram; therefore, activity conducted by Muslims was often viewed with suspicion. In February religious representatives from more than 15 groups established the IWG in order to promote interfaith dialogue and religious freedom in society.

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

Throughout the year the Ambassador and other U.S. government officials engaged with the government on issues such as the January order banning the teaching of non-Christian religions and the importance of developing and maintaining interfaith dialogue in the country.

In February a representative from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom met with religious, government, and civil society representatives to discuss the government's education order and interfaith relations. In February the embassy hosted a religious discussion with 15 representatives of various religious groups and government representatives in a roundtable to discuss religious freedom in the country. This led to the formation of the IWG. Religious groups participating in the roundtable included the Bahai, Christian, Rastafarian, and traditional religious communities. Throughout the year the IWG and government officials met at the embassy to discuss religious freedom issues.

Embassy representatives also met with leaders of different faith-based organizations, educators, and the civil society organization Lawyers for Human Rights to discuss their concerns with respect to religious freedom, particularly the ban on teaching about non-Christian religions in public schools.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy personnel attended a seminar organized by the Bahai community and engaged in discussions on religious tolerance. The Bahai community hosted the event to foster a positive relationship with the embassy, government, and faith-based organizations, and also to encourage more interaction. The discussion focused on the challenges Bahais and other non-Christian groups encounter in local society.