

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely. In September police filed a defamation suit against Catholic Bishop of Alotau-Sideia Rolando Crisostomo Santos after he denounced what he said was police abuse of power. The Constitutional and Law Reform Commission (CLRC) and the Department for Community Development and Religion (DfCDR) continued consultations on a proposed constitutional amendment defining the country as Christian. Parliamentary sessions and most government meetings began and ended with Christian prayers. During the year authorities moved more than 300 refugees, primarily Muslims, from detention facilities on Manus Island to detention facilities in Port Moresby, where according to media reports, they were kept in extremely poor conditions, with many suffering from mental and physical illnesses. Work on the Citizenship and Christian Values Education syllabus that made Christian life studies a compulsory subject in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide was not finalized at year's end. The government continued to fund churches to deliver health and education services through the Church-State Partnership Program, with additional funding from international partners. In October Prime Minister James Marape announced that by 2020 all state-owned companies would pay 10 percent of profits annually to churches to manage social services. In July Prime Minister Marape said he wanted to make the country "the richest black Christian nation on earth." Political opponents and civil society groups objected to the statement, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation.

In January assailants killed a pastor and attacked members of his church in East Sepik Province. In March *The National*, the country's leading newspaper, reported the Lutheran Church Education Agency criticized the role of new Christian and missionary groups providing education services. The Papua New Guinea Council of Churches (PNGCC) organized dialogues among its members and fostered cooperation on social welfare projects. Some participants proposed limiting cooperation in the Church-State Partnership Program to only "mainline" Christian churches.

U.S. embassy officials engaged government and civil society contacts to ensure any moves to declare the country a Christian nation do not conflict with the freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution. Embassy officials discussed the

importance of equitable distribution of government support for religious groups. The Ambassador and other officials discussed religious tolerance and religious groups' roles as health and educational service providers in regular meetings with the PNGCC and local religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.1 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 98 percent of citizens identified 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 (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Kwato Church, and the Salvation Army, together constitute 9 percent. There are approximately 60,000 Baha'is, 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 increasing, and there is a growing, almost exclusively expatriate, Jewish community in Port Moresby. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with indigenous beliefs and practices. The Muslim community numbers approximately 5,500 and includes an estimated 2,220 local converts as well as 300 refugees and asylum seekers residing at the transit accommodation in Port Moresby. Most Muslim expatriate workers live in Port Moresby, and Muslim 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 public laws, safety, and welfare of marginalized groups. The preamble of the constitution 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. To register, groups must provide documentation including a list of board or executive committee members and a constitution.

According to the law, religious instruction in public schools is noncompulsory, but Christian education is offered in most public schools. Students of non-Christian religious groups may opt out with approval of the school principal. Religious organizations are free to establish private schools, but students deciding to opt out of religious instruction might be asked to transfer to public schools.

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 a 100 kina (\$30) fee.

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

Government Practices

During the year, authorities moved more than 300 refugees, primarily Muslims, from detention facilities on Manus Island to detention facilities in Port Moresby. Media reported the refugees were kept in extremely poor conditions, with many suffering from mental and physical illnesses. Some of the detainees had been in detention for six years, and at year's end all were awaiting status determinations. Since religion, national origin, and refugee status are often closely linked, it was difficult to characterize their treatment as being based solely on religious identity.

In September police filed a defamation suit against Catholic Bishop of Alotau-Sideia Rolando Crisostomo Santos after he denounced what he said was police abuse of power. Santos posted on Facebook that police officers burned down 19 houses in Alotau after a night of drinking. The bishop stated this was the second time police had burned down homes in the area. On September 4, police arrested Santos and local Catholic education secretary Gregory Nimagale but soon released them on bail. Member of Parliament Charles Abel publicly apologized to Santos, said he would make changes to police personnel, and stated he asked police to drop charges against Santos.

The CLRC continued consultations with government agencies and churches at the national level on a proposed constitutional amendment defining the country as Christian, but funding and capacity shortfalls delayed the countrywide consultations. In November a CLRC lawyer reported progress had stalled because leaders at the DfCDR did not issue instructions on how the CLRC should implement its mandate. The lawyer further stated the National Executive Council, the country's national cabinet, did not authorize the department to proceed with the consultations. The DfCDR stated that consultations were on hold due to lack of funding and capacity.

Parliament sessions and most government meetings began and ended with Christian prayers, but persons of different faiths were able to opt out with no repercussion. The speaker of the house selected a member of parliament to start the sessions with a Christian prayer. *The National* newspaper reported government authorities in Southern Highlands Province and some national government agencies continued to tell public servants they had to attend weekly morning devotions for 10 to 20 minutes; the specific day of the devotion varied by region and agency. Individuals choosing to opt out could do so without negative consequence. Pastors from different Christian denominations led the morning devotional sessions.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools. Such instruction remained legally noncompulsory, although almost all students attended. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and there was no standard curriculum. According to law, children whose parents did not wish them to attend the classes could opt out with approval of the school principal.

The Citizenship and Christian Values Education syllabus, making Christian life studies compulsory in elementary and secondary public, private, and church-run schools nationwide, was not finalized at year's end.

The government continued to fund churches to deliver health and education services through the Church-State Partnership Program with additional funding from international partners. Mainline churches continued to operate approximately 60 percent of schools and health services in the country, and the government provided financial support for these institutions. The government subsidized their operation using a formula based on the number of schools and health centers run by each church. 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. The facilities provided services to the general population irrespective of religious beliefs, and operations were not religious in nature.

In October Prime Minister Marape announced that by 2020, all state-owned companies would pay 10 percent of profits annually to churches to run social services.

Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituencies to carry out religious activities. Nearly all of these institutions were Christian. In November the *Post Courier* newspaper reported one member of parliament procured a grant of 40,000 kina (\$12,100) for the United Church in his constituency to implement local church programs. In previous years, there were reports of complaints from minority Christian churches because they had not received similar funding, but there were no such reports during the year.

The Church Partnership database, announced in 2018 by the DfCDR with the stated goal of providing more support to churches, was nonoperational at year's end because technical issues made it inaccessible to the public, according to a statement from a DfCDR official.

In July Prime Minister Marape stated he wanted to make the country “the richest black Christian nation on earth.” Political opponents and civil society groups objected to the statement, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation. In a September *Post Courier* editorial, the editorial board said the country prospered from a more diverse population and was not solely a “black Christian country.”

In August during National Prayer and Repentance Day, jointly organized by the PNGCC and the DfCDR, Prime Minister Marape said the country was declared a Christian country during Independence in 1975 and that status would remain unchanged.

The PNGCC continued to work with provincial governments to establish provincial church councils. According to the chairman of the PNGCC, the provincial church councils would “bring churches closer to the government.” The PNGCC included the Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist Union, Roman

Catholic, United, and Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Salvation Army, as well as other churches and organizations as associate members.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January assailants killed a pastor and attacked members of his church in East Sepik Province. According to *The National* newspaper, the pastor was killed for encouraging his church members not to attend a land dispute negotiation with a neighboring village, while the church members were attacked for not participating in customary land mediation. Police arrested and charged five persons for the killing of the pastor and the attack on the church members.

Media continued to report that established churches criticized the role of new Christian and missionary groups. In March *The National* reported the Lutheran Education Agency questioned the quality and commitment of smaller churches in providing education services. The Lutheran Education Agency disqualified adherents of non-mainline church denominations from teaching in Lutheran schools but accepted teachers affiliated with mainline churches.

The PNGCC continued dialogue among its members. 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.

Through the Church-State Partnership Program, religious leaders discussed working together to address social issues that affected congregation members such as education, health, gender equality, fragmentation of family values, and sorcery-related violence. Some participants proposed limiting cooperation in the Church-State Partnership Program to only mainline Christian churches. Participants discussed limiting the role of non-mainline churches, in particular Pentecostal churches, because they said these smaller denominations could not offer the same level of education and health services.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officers discussed with government officials, including those from the DfCDR, the importance of equitable distribution of government support for religious groups.

Embassy representatives attended church-organized activities and participated in discussions on the role of churches in development and the importance of including a broad spectrum of religious groups. Embassy officials asked attendees, including government officials, to ensure any moves to declare the country a Christian nation do not conflict with the freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution. In October the embassy hosted a roundtable discussion with representatives of the Baha'i community, Islamic community, and the Church of Jesus Christ. Roundtable participants discussed freedom of religion, the relationship between churches and the state, and avenues for future collaboration across faith communities and with civil society partners.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious tolerance, and religious groups' role as health and educational service providers, in regular meetings with the PNGCC and local religious leaders.