

FIJI 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of religion and state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against any religious group a criminal offense. Religious groups must register with the government. In July, the government introduced a range of broad regulations that, among other things, permitted only fully vaccinated individuals to enter certain public spaces, including houses of worship; consequently, many religious bodies cancelled in-person meetings and, instead, conducted religious services on social media platforms. As a result of the regulations, approximately 10 unvaccinated ministers from the Christian Mission Fellowship Church (CMF Church) resigned to prevent the Church from paying fines. Other religious bodies, such as the Methodist Church, confirmed it advised its unvaccinated pastors and church workers to refrain from participating in any church services, but instead to “stay in their own homes as they were still being paid.” The government eased some restrictions in October, although regulations stipulated that churches and religious groups could allow only fully vaccinated members onto their premises for religious services and required that churches verify the vaccination status of their attendees using the government’s online tool. The government also capped attendance at services at 70 percent of maximum capacity.

In September, police investigated an incident involving a pastor who was recorded on video demolishing a statue of a Hindu god at a house in Wairabetia, Lautoka. Hindus in the country, including politicians and religious organizations such as the Sanatam Dharam Pratinibhi Saba, condemned the incident as an “act of sacrilege.” The Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission received at least three complaints regarding the incident. The commission said it would investigate the issue and called for religious leaders in the country to promote religious tolerance and respect.

On November 4, the Charge d’Affaires spoke about the importance of faith and protecting religious freedom at a Diwali commemoration and on social media. The embassy used social media posts and videos to highlight U.S. support of religious diversity in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 940,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2007 census (the most recent with a breakdown by religion), 64.5 percent of the population is Christian, 27.9 percent Hindu, and 6.3 percent Muslim. Protestants make up 45 percent of the population, of which 34.6 percent is Methodist, 5.7 percent Assembly of God, 3.9 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 0.8 percent Anglican. Roman Catholics make up 9.1 percent of the population, and other Christian groups 10.4 percent. There are small communities of Baha'is, Sikhs, and Jews.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most indigenous Fijians, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. The majority of the country's traditional chiefs belong to the Methodist Church, which remains influential among indigenous persons, particularly in rural areas, where 44 percent of the population lives, according to the 2017 census. Most Indian Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while an estimated 20 percent are Muslim and 6 percent Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The small community of mixed European and Fijian ancestry is predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The government may limit these rights by law to protect the freedoms of others or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, or nuisance. The constitution mandates separation of religion and state. Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or "disaffection" against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution provides that individuals may not assert religious belief as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions. Sacrilege is outlawed and is defined as committing any crime within a place of worship after breaking and entering or before exiting with force, or intentionally committing any act of disrespect in a place of worship. Penalties may include up to 14 years' imprisonment.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees, who may then hold land or property for the groups. To register, religious bodies must submit applications to the registrar of titles office. Applications must include the names and identification of the trustees signed by the head of the religious body seeking registration, a copy of the constitution of the proposed religious body, title documents for the land used by the religious body, and a registration fee of 2.30 Fiji dollars (\$1). Registered religious bodies receive exemption from taxes after approval from the national tax agency, on the condition they operate in a nonprofit and noncompetitive capacity. By law, religious bodies that hold land or property must register their houses of worship, including their land, and show proof of title. The law does not address conditions for religious organizations that do not hold land.

Permits are required for any public meeting on public property organized by religious groups, with the exception of regular religious services in houses of worship.

There is no required religious instruction for children or youth. Private or religious groups sometimes own or manage school properties, but the Ministry of Education administers and regulates the curriculum. The law allows religious groups the right to establish, maintain, and manage places of education, whether or not they receive financial assistance from the state, provided the institution maintains educational standards prescribed by law. The law permits noncompulsory religious instruction in all schools, enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations but receiving government support to offer religious instruction. Schools may incorporate religious elements, such as class prayer, as long as they do not require teachers to participate, and students may be excused if their parents request it. The government provides funding and education assistance to public schools, including schools owned and operated by religious organizations, on a per-pupil basis. Some schools maintain their religious and/or ethnic origin but must remain open to all students. According to the law, the government ensures free tuition for primary and secondary schools.

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

Government Practices

In July, the government imposed a national curfew, closed schools and nonessential services, and restricted travel and large gatherings (which included religious gatherings and services) to contain a COVID-19 outbreak that began in

April. In July, the government introduced a range of broad regulations that barred persons from employment and access to state allowances and benefits if they did not receive at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by August 14 and if not fully immunized by November 1. The regulations also permitted only fully vaccinated people to enter certain public spaces such as workplaces, tertiary institutions, houses of worship, hotels, restaurants, cafes, cinemas, gyms, pools, and tattoo parlors; consequently, many religious bodies cancelled in-person meetings and instead conducted religious services on social media platforms. In mid-September, approximately 10 ministers of the CMF Church resigned because of the government's official "no jab, no job" policy. CMF Church Media Director Jo Kurulo said, "Since the policy came into act, the Church was considered a workplace and, therefore, all Church officeholders need to be vaccinated or else the Church would cop heavy fines." The Methodist Church confirmed it advised its unvaccinated pastors and church workers "not to partake in any church services but to stay in their own homes as they were still being paid." The government eased some restrictions in October, although regulations stipulated that churches and religious groups could allow only fully vaccinated members onto their premises for religious services, and required that churches verify the vaccination status of their attendees using the government's online tool. The government also capped attendance at services at 70 percent of capacity.

Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama, other cabinet ministers, and members of parliament continued to emphasize religious tolerance during public addresses. The Prime Minister addressed the nation on multiple religious holidays, including Christmas and on October 18 for the Prophet Muhammed's birthday, when he shared a message of resilience emphasizing that Fijians could look forward entering and "being seated together in houses of worship."

A decision on an appeal against the 2018 acquittal of three staff members of the *Fiji Times* on sedition charges remained pending at year's end. The three, which included the editor in chief, were charged for the 2016 publication of a letter to the *Fiji Times*' indigenous-language newspaper *Nai Lalakai* that the government characterized as antagonistic toward the country's Muslim community.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On September 29, police investigated an alleged incident of criminal sacrilege involving Rajesh Goundar, a pastor of the El-Shaddai Assemblies of God Church, who was recorded on video demolishing a statue of a Hindu god at a house in Wairabetia, Lautoka. Hindus in the country, including politicians and those from

religious organizations such as the Sanatam Dharam Pratinibhi Saba who viewed the widely circulated video on social media, condemned the incident as an “act of sacrilege.” Veena Wati, the owner of the home where the alleged desecration occurred, later explained in local media that she had consented to the removal of the statue from her family’s property. Wati said that the “issue was blown out of proportion,” stating that parts of the video showing the family conducting what she called a peace mantra before removing the Hindu statue were edited out. Wati and her family, recent converts to Christianity, stated that they resorted to breaking the idol when they couldn’t remove it from its foundation. The Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission received at least three complaints regarding the incident and said it would investigate the issue and called for religious leaders in the country to promote religious tolerance and respect. A police investigation remained pending at year’s end.

The Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Hindu and Muslim groups operated numerous schools, including secondary schools, which were eligible for government subsidies based on the size of their student population.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On November 4, the Charge d’Affaires spoke about the importance of faith and protecting religious freedom at a Diwali commemoration and on social media. The Charge d’Affaires also attended an event on October 18, a public holiday commemorating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad.

The embassy used social media posts and videos that highlighted diverse religious traditions in the country and religious holidays including Eid al-Adha, Navratri, and Yom Kippur, to promote religious pluralism and tolerance.