

# **LESOTHO 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. The government continued to provide extensive support for schools operated by religious groups, including paying and certifying all teachers.

In February the Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL), an umbrella organization of seven Christian churches, said in a statement that the government should include the group in efforts to resolve ongoing teacher strikes. The CCL continued to participate in a national forum aimed at future reforms in key national sectors.

The U.S. embassy continued to discuss religious freedom with the government and maintained regular contact with religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.0 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the CCL, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. An Afrobarometer December 2017 survey estimated the Christian population to be 94 percent or higher. The survey found that Protestants, including Anglicans, evangelical Christians, Methodists, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Pentecostals, Christian Zionists, Baptists, and members of the Church of Christ represent 52 percent of the population, and Roman Catholics 42 percent. The rest of the country's residents are Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, belong to indigenous or other religious groups, or are nonbelievers. Many Christians practice traditional indigenous rituals in conjunction with Christianity. There is a small number of Jews, most of whom are not citizens, and a small number of Muslims, who live primarily in the northern area of the country. There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity, political, or socioeconomic status.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief, and to manifest and propagate one's religion. These rights may be limited by laws in the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or protecting the rights of other persons, provided the limitations are the minimum necessary.

The government has no established requirements for recognition of religious groups. By law, any group, religious or otherwise, may register as a legal entity with the government, regardless of its purpose, as long as it has a constitution and a leadership committee. Most religious groups register, but there is no penalty for those that do not. Registration gives a group legal standing, formalizes its structure under the law, and provides exemption from income tax. In the absence of registration, religious organizations may operate freely, but without legal standing or any of the protections of registered organizations.

The education ministry pays and certifies all teachers at government-funded schools, including religious schools, and requires a standard curriculum for both secular and religious schools. The government permits but does not mandate religious education in schools, and the constitution exempts students at any educational institution from requirements to receive instruction or attend any ceremony or observance associated with a religion that is not their own. The minister of education must approve all curricula, including for religious education classes. The law does not prohibit or restrict schools run by religious organizations. Other than the constitutional provision barring discrimination, there is no specific law requiring religious schools to accept children not of the school's denomination.

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

### **Government Practices**

During the year, churches owned and operated 83 percent of all primary and 66 percent of all secondary schools. The Roman Catholic Church, Lesotho Evangelical Church, Anglican Church, and, to a lesser extent, Methodist Church were the primary operators of religious schools, which were publicly funded. In February the CCL released a statement stating the government should include the group in its efforts to resolve recurring teacher strikes over salaries and working conditions.

In practice, in any school offering religious education – including all religious schools and some secular schools – the subject was mandatory. Despite the constitution granting the ability for students to opt out, there were no reports of students electing to do so.

The government continued to permit families to send their children to schools run by a religious group other than their own, and some families chose this option. Others went to public schools or secular private schools.

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

In a February statement, the CCL, which represents the majority of Christians, expressed concern about the political situation and said the government did not respond to requests to meet. In July the CCL participated in the National Leaders Forum, a body bringing together political and civil society leaders to debate government reform proposals. The CCL was involved in political mediation in the past, and it continued to play a role in the country's national reform process.

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

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government, typically in the context of broader discussions about human rights. Embassy staff also maintained regular contact with religious leaders.