

# **PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely. Political, civil society, and faith leaders continued to criticize the speaker of parliament's plans to remove indigenous artifacts from parliament and replace them with Christian symbols and a Bible. The Catholic Professionals Society referred the speaker to the Ombudsman Commission in October for misuse of office related to the plans. Limited discussions continued under the nationwide consultation, approved by parliament in 2013, on the question of whether to ban non-Christian religions.

A Catholic bishop was hit with stones during an altercation with an evangelical street preacher. Possible resettlement of Muslim refugees generated some anti-Muslim sentiment among the population. Public controversy continued over the parliamentary proposal to ban non-Christian religions.

The U.S. Ambassador met with the minister for religion, youth, and community development and with leaders of a variety of faiths on several occasions and discussed religious freedom and their work in service delivery. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and met regularly with local religious leaders as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.7 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2000 census (the most recent available), 98 percent of citizens identified themselves as Christian. Approximately 27 percent of the population is Roman Catholic; 20 percent, Evangelical Lutheran; 12 percent, United Church; 10 percent, Seventh-day Adventist; 9 percent, Pentecostal; 5 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, and the Salvation Army, together constitute 9 percent. Bahais make up less than percent of the population, and 2 percent hold indigenous or other beliefs. Many citizens integrate Christian faith with some indigenous beliefs and practices. The Muslim community numbers about 5,000 and consists of a mix of local converts and expatriate workers primarily centered in Port Moresby.

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

#### Legal Framework

The constitution provides the individual the right to the “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.”

Religious groups are required to register with the government in order to hold a bank account. Benefits of registration include the ability to own properties in the religious group’s name, limited individual liability, the ability to open bank accounts with the incorporation certificate as the support document, and the ability to apply to the Internal Revenue Commission for exemption on income tax and to the treasury for exemption of import duty. There were no reports of groups being denied registration.

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 church in the country, an approved work permit from the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, and 100 Kina (\$34) fee, which is less than for other visa categories. The government routinely approved religious worker applications.

#### Government Practices

In October the Catholic Professional Society referred the speaker of parliament to the Ombudsman Commission for misuse of office related to the attempted removal of a totem pole from parliament’s main hall in 2013, and for using government funds to travel to the United States with a large delegation to accept an antique Bible for placement at parliament. The speaker planned to replace the totem pole with a “Christian unity pole” with the Bible at the base. The Catholic Bishops Conference condemned the removal attempt and issued warnings about the rise of

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religious fundamentalism as a risk to the country's traditional identity.

Controversy continued over whether to ban non-Christian religions. Starting in July 2013, parliament tasked the minister for religion, youth and community development and the Constitutional Review Commission to set up a bipartisan team to consult with the public to determine whether or not the government should "prohibit the worship of non-Christian faiths." The argument was that the national pledge and the constitution specifically state the country shall be a Christian country. Several church conferences and religious associations spoke out against the proposed ban as a violation of religious freedom, declaring that it was against Christian principles. There were no significant developments during the year and the issue had not been resolved by year's end.

The Department of Community Development pursued its policy objectives by cooperating with many religious groups that, in addition to proselytizing, continued to provide education and health services.

Churches operated approximately half of schools and health services, 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. The education and health sectors continued to rely heavily on church-run institutions.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and students attended the class operated 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.

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

The proliferation of new missionary movements—especially charismatic Christian groups— and the growth in the Muslim community, led some established churches and public figures to question whether such developments were desirable. In September a crowd threw stones at a Catholic bishop who attempted to disrupt

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evangelical street preachers who reportedly made accusations about the Catholic Church. Police responded and asked the preachers to avoid defamatory remarks. The Catholic Professionals Society publicly condemned the attack and called on the government to ban street preaching directed against other churches, which they called a “clear case of people abusing freedom of speech and a breach of the right to freedom of religion of others.” The deputy prime minister released a statement on the attack calling for mutual respect between churches.

The resettlement of Muslim refugees from the Australian-funded Manus Island Regional Detention Center was accompanied by nascent anti-Muslim sentiment among some religious and community leaders.

The Council of Churches continued its efforts at interfaith dialogue. The council members included the Anglican, Gutnius Lutheran, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and United Churches, and the Salvation Army. In addition, 16 church-affiliated organizations, including the Young Women’s Christian Association, participated in its activities. The ecumenical work of the Council of Churches was confined primarily to cooperation among Christian groups on social welfare projects. The Council of Churches does not include Seventh-day Adventists or Pentecostals.

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

The U.S. Ambassador met with the minister for religion, youth, and community development and faith leaders on a number of occasions and discussed religious freedom, education, and social issues in the country. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government and met regularly with local religious leaders, as well as U.S. citizen missionaries of many denominations. Embassy officials also met with members of the Muslim community to discuss religious freedom.