

LESOTHO 2017 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 provided extensive support for schools operated by religious groups, including paying and certifying all teachers.

At a Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL) event in May, all major political parties signed a pledge to honor the constitution and laws of the country, observe the electoral code of conduct, honor governance institutions, uphold peace and harmony during campaigns, and accept the June 3 general election outcome.

The U.S. government 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 (July 2017 estimate). According to the CCL, which is an umbrella organization of five Christian churches, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. Other sources estimate the Christian population to be 95 percent or higher. Protestants, including Anglicans, evangelical Christians, Methodists, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Pentecostals, represent 45 percent of the population, and Roman Catholics represent 45 percent. The remaining 10 percent is Muslim, Hindu and Bahai, belongs to indigenous or other religious groups, or is atheist. Many Christians practice traditional indigenous rituals in conjunction with Christianity. There is a small number of Jews, most of whom are not citizens. Muslims live primarily in the northern area of the country. There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity.

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 and tend to business as they see fit, but without any of the legal standing or 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 does not officially 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 country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Churches owned and operated approximately 80 percent of all primary and 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 practice, in any school offering religious education – including all religious schools and some secular schools – the subject was mandatory. Children continued to be permitted to attend 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.

The government continued to invite the CCL regularly to open government ceremonies and meetings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The CCL initiated a dialogue that culminated in May, with all major political parties signing a pledge to honor the constitution and laws of the country, observe the electoral code of conduct, honor governance institutions, uphold peace and harmony during campaigns, and accept the June 3 general election outcome.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government, typically in the context of broader discussions about human rights. The embassy also maintained regular contact with religious leaders, including with representatives of the CCL, to engage on a number of human rights topics.