

# SEYCHELLES 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds as well as laws establishing any religion. It provides for freedom of religion, including the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religion. The government bars religious groups from owning radio or television stations, however, it continued to grant larger religious groups programming time on state radio, subject in most cases to advance review and approval. Smaller religious groups did not have access to dedicated broadcast time. Christian religious leaders criticized the government's decision to decriminalize sodomy on the grounds that it violated Catholic beliefs. Although the constitution prohibits compulsory religious education, non-Catholic students in public schools providing Catholic instruction did not have access to alternative activities during those classes.

An interfaith grouping, the Seychelles Interfaith Council (SIFCO), commented publicly on national issues including the decriminalization of sodomy, drugs, and HIV/AIDS. Ruling party supporters criticized the Anglican bishop when he said there were a number of irregularities in the second round of the Presidential elections.

The U.S. embassy in Mauritius monitored religious freedom through regular engagement with representatives of different religious groups.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 93,000 (July 2016 estimate). Approximately 76 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other religious groups include Anglicans (6 percent), Hindus (2.4 percent), and Muslims (1.6 percent). Smaller religious groups include Bahais and Christian groups such as Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, Nazarites, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

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

### Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds, except "as necessary in a democratic society," as well as laws making provisions for the establishment of

any religion or imposing any religious observance. It provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right of individuals to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate their religion in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community with others, in public or private. These rights may be subject to limitations to protect public order, safety, morality, or health, the rights of others, or other reasons listed in the constitution. The constitution stipulates individuals shall not be required to take a religious oath counter to their religious beliefs or profess any religion as a prerequisite for public office.

The law requires registration for all religious groups either as corporations or associations. To apply through the Registrar of Associations, a group must submit its name, location, rules, and list of assets; the name, occupation, and addresses of officers and at least seven members; and the resolution appointing its officers. A minimum of seven members is required to register an association. To receive tax privileges, notably tax exemptions on the importation of goods for the organization, religious groups must also register with the finance ministry. The government recognizes the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, Islam, and the Bahai local spiritual assembly through individual acts of incorporation.

Although no penalties are prescribed for unregistered groups, only those registered as corporate bodies or associations have legal status and the right, for example, to petition the government for broadcast time for religious programming or provide spiritual counsel in prisons.

The constitution prohibits compulsory religious education or participation in religious ceremonies in state schools, but permits religious groups to provide religious instruction. Religious instruction is provided by the Catholic and Anglican churches and offered during school hours. There are no faith-based schools.

The law prohibits religious groups from obtaining radio or television licenses. The government provides broadcast time to religious groups on the national radio broadcasting service. Access is granted based on the size of each group's membership. Religious groups may publish newspapers.

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

## **Government Practices**

Religious groups with fewer assets continued to opt out of recognition as corporate bodies and continued to be registered as associations with the Registrar of Associations.

In May Christian religious leaders criticized the government's decision to decriminalize sodomy and stated "the proposed bill went against beliefs in the overwhelmingly Catholic country."

The government continued to prohibit live broadcasts of all religious programming, with the exception of radio broadcasts, lasting up to 90 minutes each, of Catholic masses and Anglican worship services on alternate Sundays. The government-owned Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation continued to review and approve all other religious programming to ensure hate speech was not broadcast. There were no incidents reported. Other religious programming consisted of 15-minute, prerecorded prayer broadcasts, permitted to Muslim, Hindu, Bahai, Seventh-day Adventist, Catholic, and Anglican groups every two weeks. Smaller religious groups continued to protest that the government did not grant them their own dedicated radio broadcast time.

Most state schools continued to operate on land leased by the Catholic Church. Catholic instruction was part of the curriculum, although not compulsory. Non-Catholic students reportedly were often relegated to the back of the classroom during religious instruction and were not offered any alternative activities.

The government continued to offer financial assistance to religious groups from the state budget in the form of grants for repairs of places of worship. All religious groups could apply for grants.

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

The SIFCO, composed of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Bahais, and other religious groups present in the country, continued its presence at national official events. For example, the SIFCO provided interfaith prayers or blessings at the National Day event celebrating Seychelles independence. The SIFCO commented publicly on national issues, including the decriminalization of sodomy, drugs, HIV/AIDS, and the timing of the Carnival International of Victoria, which in the past coincided with other religious events. In January ruling party supporters criticized Anglican Bishop James Wong when he said there were a number of irregularities

such as voter intimidation and vote buying in the second round of the Presidential elections. In October upon assuming office, President Danny Faure met with members of SIFCO and announced that SIFCO would be consulted on issues of national interest through the office of the vice president.

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

The U.S. embassy in Mauritius promoted religious freedom through regular engagement with representatives of different religious groups.