

TUVALU 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom to change religion or belief and the freedom to show and spread religious belief through worship, teaching, observance, or practice. The law designates the Ekalesia A Kelisiano Tuvalu (Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu, or EKT) as the state church and allows it to conduct “special services on major national events.” The powers of the ombudsman include oversight of a national human rights institution to promote and protect human rights, including religious freedom, and labor law prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. Traditional island councils, including on Nanumanga, Nukufetau, and Vaitupu, reportedly continued to discourage public meetings of several minority religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, and informal religious bans on such groups by traditional leaders remained in place. Missionaries continued to practice without government restrictions on some islands, such as Funafuti. The government imposed a 15-minute pause on all public activities in the capital Funafuti every evening so that EKT members could observe evening prayers, although prayer was not mandatory.

On smaller islands, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other minority religious groups were reportedly perceived by residents as being outside of traditional norms. Local traditional leaders of the island of Vaitupu sometimes discouraged groups from proselytizing and withheld approval for meetings other than the EKT and Seventh-day Adventists. Local minority religious leaders said the EKT continued to exert considerable influence in the social, cultural, and political life of the country. For example, the Church continued to limit social and sports activities on Sunday and encouraged a modest dress code in local villages.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to discuss religious freedom and the role of religion in society. The embassy used social media platforms to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, posting messages during major Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim celebrations in support of religious tolerance and practices.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11,500 (midyear 2021). Approximately 86 percent of the population belongs to the EKT, which has historical ties to the Congregational Christian Church and other churches in

Samoa; 3 percent belong to the Seventh-day Adventist Church; and 3 percent to the Brethren Church. There are small numbers of Catholics, Muslims, Baha'is, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Assemblies of God, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to Boston University's World Religion Database, approximately 95 percent of the population is Christian, 3 percent is atheist or agnostic, and 2 percent is Baha'i.

The nine island groups have traditional chiefs, all of whom are members of the EKT. Most members of other religious groups are found in Funafuti, the capital, and some Baha'is live on Nanumea Island.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The EKT is by law the state church, and the law affords its followers “the privilege of performing special services on major national events.” The constitution otherwise provides for separation of religion and state. The constitution provides for “freedom of thought, religion, and belief,” and the freedom to show and spread religious belief through worship, teaching, observance, or practice. These freedoms may be limited by law for reasons such as avoiding divisiveness; protecting the rights of others; defense; and public order, safety, morality, and health. The preamble of the constitution states the country is “an independent State based on Christian principles, the Rule of Law, and Tuvaluan custom and tradition.”

By law, any new religious group with adult members representing not less than 2 percent of the country's total population (according to the most recent census in 2017) must register with the government; failure to register could result in prosecution. The Ministry of Local Government requires religious groups seeking registration to submit a request signed by the head and supported by five other members of the organization. Information on and proof of the number of adherents, the name of the religious organization, and approval from the traditional elder councils, known as *falekaupule*, are also required in the request. Under the law, all religious groups, regardless of size, must register with and obtain approval from the *falekaupule* of any island on which they conduct services. The law prohibits joint or public worship by religious groups not approved by these councils. The law also allows the *falekaupule* to withhold permission from certain religious groups to meet publicly, should they be judged locally to “directly threaten the values and culture of the island community.” The law provides for

unapproved groups to be fined up to 500 Australian dollars (\$360) if they engage in public meetings in violation of the law.

The powers of the ombudsman include oversight of a national human rights institution to promote and protect human rights, including religious freedom. Labor law prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.

The law guarantees the right of individuals to worship freely within their own residences.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Missionaries continued to practice without government restrictions on some islands, such as Funafuti. According to sources, on other islands, including Nanumanga, Nukufetau, and Vaitupu, formal and informal bans issued by the falekaupule remained in effect on proselytizing and public worship by Jehovah's Witnesses, who were perceived to challenge traditional cultural norms.

Government ceremonies at the national level, such as the opening of the parliamentary year, and at the island council level continued to include Christian prayers and clergy.

The government imposed a 15-minute pause on all public activities in the capital Funafuti every evening so that EKT members could observe evening prayers, although prayer was not mandatory.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On smaller islands, including Nukufetau, Nanumanga, and Vaitupu, Jehovah's Witnesses said they and other minority religious groups were perceived by residents as being outside of traditional norms. Local traditional leaders of the island of Vaitupu sometimes discouraged groups from proselytizing and withheld approval for meetings, stating nontraditional religious groups other than the EKT and the Seventh-day Adventists might disrupt traditional societal structures. Jehovah's Witnesses stated they conducted meetings online during the year without interference. In the outer islands, many religious groups continued to

operate out of individual homes without formal approval as their members were few and from the same family.

Local minority religious leaders said the EKT continued to exert considerable influence in the social, cultural, and political life of the country. For example, the Church continued to limit social and sports activities on Sunday, encouraged a modest dress code in local villages, and supported the government's daily 15-minute restriction on public activity in the capital Funafuti so that so that Church members could observe evening prayers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador to Fiji is accredited to the government. During the year, embassy officials met with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss religious freedom and the role of religion in society.

The embassy used its social media platforms to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, posting messages commemorating major Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim celebrations, including Easter, Christmas, Eid al-Fitr, Ganesh Chaturthi, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Navratri.