

VANUATU 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for individual freedom of “religious or traditional beliefs,” with the preamble to the constitution referring to “traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles.” There is no official state religion. The law makes discrimination a crime, including on the basis of religion. On penalty of a fine, the law requires religious groups to register. The penal code criminalizes defamation that exposes another individual to “public hatred, contempt, or ridicule” on any public platform, including the internet.

The interdenominational Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC), an umbrella religious organization representing the largest religious groups in the country, continued to organize prayer sessions in almost all government ministries. In September, the government announced the second of two grants to the VCC of 25 million vatu (\$209,000), with half disbursed during the year in furtherance of the “Government Church Partnership Program” initiated in prior years. Religious minorities continued to criticize the government for not including non-Christian faith groups in celebrations of national events.

According to the VCC, religious minorities were respected within society, and any tension between groups was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues. Some members of minority faith groups, however, stated members of dominant religious denominations ridiculed their beliefs. In most rural areas, in accordance with traditional customs, the establishment of a new religious group generally required agreement by the chief along with community consensus. In June, the Ecclesiastical District of Australia East opened three new local worship spaces in the country to cater to the growing number of Church of Christ members. In December, the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu held a worship service dedicated to a VCC-led campaign against gender-based violence.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country, but officials from the U.S. embassy in Papua, New Guinea, were dual-accredited to Vanuatu. Representatives from the embassy discussed with government officials the importance of interfaith dialogue and the inclusion of religious minorities in national events and programs. Embassy representatives discussed religious

freedom issues with leaders of the VCC, religious minority groups, and civil society organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 308,043 (midyear 2022). According to Boston University's 2020 World Religion Database, approximately 93 percent of the population are Christian. Among these, an estimated 32 percent are Presbyterian, 13 percent Anglican, 13 percent Roman Catholic, and 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian groups, cumulatively comprising 14 percent of the population, include the Church of Christ, Apostolic Church, Assemblies of God, other Protestant denominations, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The John Frum Movement, an indigenous religious group with its own political party, is centered on the island of Tanna and includes approximately 5 percent of the population. There are also small numbers of Baha'is and Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The preamble of the constitution refers to a commitment to "traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles," but there is no state religion. The constitution provides for individual freedom of "religious or traditional beliefs," including the freedoms of conscience and worship, subject "to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defense, safety, public order, welfare, and health." Any individual who believes these rights have been violated may apply "independently of any other possible legal remedy...to the Supreme Court to enforce that right." The Supreme Court may issue orders it considers appropriate to enforce these rights if it finds they have been violated and may order financial compensation.

The penal code provides a penalty of up to two years in prison for discrimination, including on the basis of religion. Defamation is also a criminal offense, carrying a penalty of up to three years' imprisonment for false representations that expose another individual to "public hatred, contempt, or ridicule" on any public platform, including internet and social networking sites.

The law requires every religious group to apply to the government for a certificate of registration, pay 1,000 vatu (\$8), and obtain final approval of the Minister for Internal Affairs to operate. Registration allows the religious group to maintain a bank account. The penalty for not registering is a fine not exceeding 50,000 vatu (\$417).

The Department of Education prohibits religious discrimination. By law, children may not be refused admission to government or nongovernment schools or be treated unfavorably because of their religion. The government provides grants to schools operated by religious groups and pays the salaries of teachers at church-operated schools in existence since independence in 1980. Government schools schedule time each week for religious education conducted by VCC representatives using their own materials. The standard curriculum requires that students in grades seven through 12 receive at least one hour of religious instruction per week, but there is no uniform standard amount of time dedicated to religious instruction across all schools. Parents may request that students be excused from religious education classes in both private and public schools.

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

Government Practices

The VCC reported it continued to conduct prayer sessions, instituted in 2021, in almost all government ministries. As of year's end, the government had not implemented a plan, which then Prime Minister Bob Loughman suggested in 2020, to appoint a chaplain to work with the VCC to facilitate the prayer sessions and give new Bibles to all members of parliament.

The government reported it continued to interact with religious groups primarily through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the VCC, the latter composed of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of Christ, and Apostolic Church, with Seventh-day Adventists and the Assemblies of God having observer status. Government officials said they respected smaller religious minorities but preferred to work with a coordinated body such as the VCC, which represented churches with the largest number of followers, noting that religious minorities had different expectations and protocols.

The *Daily Post* reported that in September, the government announced the second of two 25 million vatu (\$209,000) grants to the VCC, with half disbursed during the year in furtherance of the “Government Church Partnership Program” initiated in prior years. According to the *Daily Post*, Pastor Collin Keleb, VCC Chair and Clerk of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, said, “On behalf of the VCC, I want to thank the Vanuatu government for recognizing and for choosing to be a part of the support towards the ‘two important pillars’ that will stand with the government to further walk and develop this nation.” Keleb also said the initiative showed the government “believes in God.”

Officials customarily took government oaths of office with a hand on the Bible.

The VCC organized ceremonial prayers at national events, such as Father Walter Lini Day in February and Vanuatu Independence Day in July. Religious minorities, including officials representing the Muslim and Baha’i communities, continued to criticize the government for not including non-Christian faith groups in celebrations of national events.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the main leader of the VCC, religious minorities were respected, and if there was tension between groups, it was mostly due to tribal and ethnic issues. According to a leader in the Muslim community, Islam and the mainline Christian churches were equally respected. Some members of minority faith groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, and Baha’is, however, stated that members of dominant religious groups ridiculed their beliefs.

In most rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decision making predominated. In general, whenever a community member proposed a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new religious group, the action required agreement by the chief along with community consensus. Sources stated the number of new religious groups being established at the village level increased during the year.

The Church of Christ reported that in June, its Ecclesiastical District of Australia East opened three new group worship spaces in Seaside, Rentapao, and Radio Station villages to cater to the increasing number of Church of Christ members. A

congregant from the Rentapao location said, "I'm very happy that we now have a place of worship in our own place."

On December 4, the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu posted a video on Facebook of a worship service dedicated to a VCC-led campaign against gender-based violence entitled, "Break the Silence: 16 Days of Activism."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Ambassador and officials at the U.S. Embassy in Papua, New Guinea, were accredited to the government. Embassy representatives exchanged ideas with government agencies, Christian leaders of various denominations, and civil society organizations on the importance of interfaith dialogue regardless of religious affiliation. Embassy representatives discussed with religious minorities, including Catholics, Baha'is, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses, their perceptions of religious freedom and tolerance in the country.