

# **SWAZILAND 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion, including the right to worship and to change religion. Although the law requires new religious groups to register, unregistered groups were able to operate freely. Some traditional chiefs stated they would not allow the operation of businesses in their jurisdictions by individuals who appeared to be associated with Islam. Non-Christian groups reported the government provided some benefits to Christians, such as free transportation to religious activities for Zionists and airtime on state television and radio for Christians, which it did not make available to them.

Religious leaders and media reports stated members of larger Christian groups sometimes discriminated against non-Christian religious groups, especially in rural areas where people generally held negative views on Islam. Many non-Muslims declined to patronize Muslim-owned businesses such as eateries. Two university graduates reported they were denied employment opportunities because of their religious beliefs and affiliation as Rastafarians.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged the promotion and protection of religious freedom in meetings with government officials. The embassy also met with religious groups and routinely engaged with religious leaders to discuss their religious freedom concerns.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (July 2015 estimate). Religious leaders estimate 90 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 2 percent is Muslim (of which most are not ethnically Swazi), and the remainder belongs to other religious groups, including those with native African beliefs. According to anecdotal reports, approximately 40 percent of the population practices what is locally known as Zionism, a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship, (some adherents of which self-identify as evangelicals), while another 20 percent is Roman Catholic. There are also Anglicans, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and small Jewish and Bahai communities. Zionism is widely practiced in rural areas.

## SWAZILAND

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

#### Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to worship, alone or in community with others, and to change religion or belief. These rights may be limited by laws that are “reasonably required” in the interest of defense, public safety, order, morality, or health; or protecting the rights of others.

The constitution affords unwritten traditional laws and customs, which are interpreted by traditional courts, equal status with codified laws, and prohibits the parliament and national courts from changing or regulating them.

The law requires religious groups to register with the government. In order to register, Christian groups must apply through one of the country’s three umbrella religious bodies (the League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches, or Council of Swaziland Churches) for a recommendation, which is routinely granted. The application process requires the group to present its constitution, membership, and the physical location of the organization, along with the umbrella body’s recommendation, to the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, which registers the organization. For indigenous religious groups and non-Christian religious organizations, authorities consider proof of a religious leader, a congregation, and a place of worship as sufficient grounds to grant registration. Registered religious groups are exempt from taxation, but contributions to these groups are not tax deductible.

Religious groups are required to obtain government permission for the construction of new religious buildings in urban areas, and must obtain the appropriate chief’s and the chief’s advisory council’s permission for new buildings in rural areas.

Religious instruction is mandatory in primary school and an elective subject in secondary school. Although schools teach religion predominantly from a Christian perspective, the Ministry of Education includes a multi-religion component in the religious curriculum. The constitution provides religious groups the right to establish and operate private schools and to provide religious instruction for their students without interference from government.

#### Government Practices

## SWAZILAND

Unregistered religious groups reported they were able to operate freely.

The government allowed members of the Muslim and Bahai communities to take time off work as needed to fulfill religious requirements. For example, religious leaders said the government protected the right of Muslim workers to close businesses in order to attend Friday afternoon prayers at mosques. They also stated, however, that some schools did not allow Muslim pupils early departure to attend Friday prayers.

According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, the only organized religious youth clubs permitted to operate in schools were Christian. Voluntary Christian school clubs conducted daily prayer services in many public schools and were permitted to raise funds for their clubs and at times received funding from the schools.

According to local religious leaders, unwritten traditional laws and customs allowed approximately 360 chiefs working with their traditional councilors to restrict some rights of minority religious groups within their jurisdictions if the chiefs determined the groups' practices conflicted with tradition and culture. Some chiefs stated they would not allow the operation of businesses in their jurisdictions by individuals who appeared to be associated with Islam.

The monarchy, and by extension the government, aligned itself with Christian faith-based groups and also supported many Christian activities. The government provided free transportation to Christians attending certain religious activities. Such benefits were generally provided only to indigenous Zionists. The king, the queen mother, and other members of the royal family commonly attended Zionist programs, including Good Friday and Easter weekend services, where the host church usually invited the king to preach. Official government programs generally opened with a Christian prayer and several ministers held Christian prayer vigils, which civil servants were expected to attend, to address social issues such as crime and increases in traffic accidents.

Government-owned television and radio stations carried Christian programming. Minority religious groups stated non-Christian religious groups did not receive airtime despite their repeated calls for inclusion in state television and radio programs.

## SWAZILAND

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

Religious leaders and the media reported instances when members of the larger Christian groups discriminated against non-Christians, particularly in rural areas. Some Christians reportedly declined to patronize Muslim-owned businesses.

Two university graduates stated they were denied employment opportunities because of their religious beliefs. They were told by potential employers to shave or cut off their dreadlocks before they could be employed. The individuals were members of the Nyahbinghi group of Rastafarians who stated they believed dreadlocks are sacred.

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

The U.S. embassy encouraged the promotion and protection of religious freedom in its interactions with the government, particularly in regard to providing religious groups access to electronic media. Embassy officers also met with leaders of different faith-based organizations to discuss their concerns with respect to religious freedom.