



2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - South Africa

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with numerous religious leaders and groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The 2011 census estimates the population to be 51.8 million. The census did not include statistics on religious demography. According to 2001 census figures, 80 percent of the population is Christian. Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and adherents of traditional African beliefs together constitute slightly less than 5 percent of the population. Approximately 15 percent of the population adheres to no particular religion or declines to indicate an affiliation; some of these individuals probably adhere to unaffiliated indigenous religions. Many combine Christian and indigenous religious practices. The Church of Scientology has a small following.

The African Independent Churches constitute the largest group of Christian churches, including the Zion Christian Church (approximately 11 percent of the population), the Apostolic Church (approximately 10 percent), and a number of Pentecostal and charismatic groups. Other Christian groups include Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Greek Orthodox, Dutch Reformed, and Congregational churches.

Ethnic Indian/Asian South Africans account for 2.5 percent of the total population. Roughly half of the ethnic Indian population is Hindu, and the majority resides in KwaZulu-Natal. The small Muslim community includes Cape Malays of Malayan-Indonesian descent, individuals of Indian or Pakistani origin, and some 70,000 Somali nationals and refugees.

The small Jewish community is concentrated in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The bill of rights states that the government may not discriminate directly or indirectly against any individual based on religion; in addition, no one may deny members of a religious group either the right to practice their religion, or to form, join, and maintain religious associations with other members of that group. Cases of discrimination against persons on the grounds of religious freedom may be taken to the Constitutional Court.

The law prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion.

The government does not require religious groups to be licensed or registered. Religious groups may qualify as public benefit organizations, which are exempt from paying income tax.

The government allows, but does not require, religious education in public schools and prohibits advocating the tenets of a particular religion in public schools. The government accommodates religious groups' holy days in scheduling national examinations.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Prisoners and detainees were permitted religious observances.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On August 6, two white Afrikaners harassed and assaulted two Muslims at a fast food outlet in Magaliesburg, North West Province. The two Afrikaners mocked one of the Muslims for his beard and referred to him as Osama Bin Laden. They severely beat one of the Muslims, who died later in the hospital. Police arrested both Afrikaners, who appeared in court on November 29 on charges of murder. The authorities dropped the charges against one suspect due to lack of evidence. At year's end, the remaining suspect had not yet appeared in court.

The Jewish Council of Deputies (a nongovernmental organization) reported 50 incidents of hostile, anti-Semitic acts against the Jewish community, roughly the same number as in previous years. The incidents included 23 cases of abusive hate mail, 12 cases of verbal abuse, three incidents involving assault, and two instances of vandalism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy and consulate general representatives discussed religious freedom with numerous religious leaders and groups. The deputy chief of mission hosted an iftar in Pretoria for leading religious, academic, and business leaders, as did the consuls general in Johannesburg and Durban.

On September 28, the United Muslim National Association held an authorized demonstration at the consulate general in Johannesburg to protest an anti-Islamic video. An estimated 700 people participated, representing a broad coalition of Muslim organizations and affiliated support groups. The demonstration's leader called for a forum for dialogue to address concerns and stated that the protesters were defending the character of the Prophet Mohammed. Representatives from the consulate met with leaders of the protest, accepted their petition, and agreed to maintain a dialogue. Consulate staff members met with these groups after the demonstration. Representatives of the consulate general in Johannesburg also organized a meeting with senior Muslim leaders in the wake of the protest to discuss such issues as the tension between freedom of expression and sensitivity to religious beliefs and the perception that Muslims are disadvantaged in the process of applying for visas to visit the United States. All participants expressed a willingness to continue to engage on these and other matters of interest.

The consulate general in Cape Town continued its support for the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative by hosting an August 14 iftar attended by more than 70 members of the interfaith community. The event brought together leaders of the Muslim community in Cape Town, as well as representatives from Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Bahai, Buddhist, and African traditionalist communities. Representatives from the Cape Town consulate attended interfaith dialogues at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre and the Claremont mosque. Consulate Cape Town staff met regularly with leaders of all faith communities. The leading Muslim radio station interviewed the consul general twice on interfaith issues and U.S. policy.

The consul general in Durban engaged with representatives of a broad spectrum of religious faiths, including Muslim, Christian and interfaith communities. The consulate continued to maintain a relationship with communities of faith in KwaZulu-Natal Province, including the Diakonia Council of Churches, a coalition of Christian groups. The consulate used these relationships with faith-based communities to respond to potentially volatile situations. Consulate officials maintained a dialogue with Muslim groups protesting against movies made in the United States that were perceived to be anti-Islamic.

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