

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Report on Religious Freedom in Kiribati

Executive Summary

(1) The Republic of Kiribati is an island nation in the Pacific that is home to a population derived from an amalgamation of South Pacific ethnicities including Micronesian, Polynesian, Fijians, and Tongans. Kiribati was first discovered by British and American seafarers in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the British moved quickly to bring Kiribati within the fold of the British Empire. As a colonial possession, the mixed Polynesian cultures were introduced not only to modern weaponry and disease, but also to western religious traditions. When the Republic of Kiribati was formed in 1979, the government enacted a constitution that provides extensive protections for religious freedom. The Kiribati government generally adheres to their constitutional mandate to protect religious liberty, and Kiribati's religious groups report few problems.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

(2) Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Historical and Legal Framework

(3) Early Polynesians spread out among the islands of the Pacific, thus spreading and assimilating their culture with others. In this process, tensions did, at times, arise, but on islands with a significant amount of flat land, tensions were minimal. Flatter land enabled increased communication between tribes, and allowed for a greater level of assimilation. Kiribati, a nation primarily consisting of low level atolls benefited from this phenomenon.

(4) When the British arrived to bring Kiribati into the British empire, first as a protectorate then as a full-fledged colony, the religions of Western Europe were also easily assimilated. Now, a vast majority of the population is Christian. Roman Catholics predominantly live in the northern islands where they constitute

well over 50% of the population. The Kiribati Protestant Church is dominant in the southern islands, and constitutes approximately 35% of the total population. Other minority Christian faiths include Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other minority faiths, including Bahai, also maintain small populations.

(5) The influence of Christianity is visible in the Kiribati Constitution, whose preamble states that "the people of Kiribati, acknowledging God as the Almighty Father in whom we put trust, and with faith in the enduring value of our tradition and heritage, do now grant ourselves this Constitution..." Despite this overt religious reference, the Constitution does not establish a state religion. Chapter II of the Constitution contains explicit provisions protecting the rights and freedoms of the individual:

(6) "Whereas every person in Kiribati is entitled to the fundamental rights and freedom of the individual, that is to say, the right, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, but subject to the respect for the rights and freedoms of other or to the public interest, to each and all of the following, namely – (b) freedom of conscience, of expression and of assembly and association..."

(7) Chapter II goes into further detail in Section 11 where the full details of the protection of freedom of conscience are laid out. Section 11(1) explains that the freedom of conscience cannot be violated and that conscience includes thought and religion. This provision contains language almost identical to that set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

(8) However, Section 11 provides additional details for the ways in which religious organizations may operate and how religious instruction may be conducted. Kiribati does operate a registration system for religious groups, but in practice, religious groups are not hindered in their operations if they do not register. In fact the constitution explicitly grants religious communities the power to maintain educational facilities as a constitutionally granted entitlement.

(9) The legal roots for the government's policy of not interfering with the operations of a non-registered religious group can also be found in Section 11(1). The language of this section is broad and sweeping. It states that the freedom of conscience must necessarily include, "freedom, either alone or in community with others, and both in public and in private, to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance." Based on their actions, it appears that the government in Tarawa has given this provision its broadest possible interpretation. Thus, religious communities are allowed, without being required to register, to "manifest and propagate" their "religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance."

Specific Instances of Religious Discrimination

(10) Early tensions between religious groups in Kiribati were more a remnant of its colonial past rather than an example of Kiribati politics. Visible tensions existed in the 1960s and 1970s between Protestants and Catholics living on the islands, but these would prove to be a vestigial element of European colonialism. There is scant information about whether any rivalry between Protestants and Catholics persists today.

(11) When the nation originally gained independence it was expected that politics in Kiribati would follow religious lines. However, by looking at voting records and following national political sentiments, scholars have proven this early expectation wrong.

(12) Now, most religious groups report that the government maintains a neutral role and provides adequate protections for religious freedom. There have been isolated societal problems between mainstream, established churches and new religions or church groups. In a few cases, traditional leaders such as chiefs prevented groups from proselytizing or holding meetings. Not wanting to invite conflict, some non-mainstream groups did not attempt to proselytize in unwelcoming villages. Most governmental and social functions begin and end with an interdenominational Christian prayer delivered by an ordained minister or other church official.

(13) Kiribati's most pressing humanitarian concern is global warming. With increased global temperatures, the sea level has been rising and threatens the existence of all the islands that constitute the Republic of Kiribati. Kiribati natives are inclined to seek refuge in neighboring countries such as Australia and New Zealand, but strict immigration laws are hampering their efforts. Recently, Kiribati President Anote Tong requested that Australia and New Zealand give special refugee status to Kiribati natives who are fleeing the rising tides.

Conclusion

Since its formation in 1979, the Republic of Kiribati has provided constitutional protection for religious freedom. According to virtually all sources, the government upholds its commitment to religious liberty and refrains from actively discriminating against any religious groups. Likewise, there exist few reports of social discrimination based on religious affiliation. Overall, the Republic of Kiribati respects religious freedom and ensures this right for its citizens.