

# FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states no law may be passed to establish a state religion or impair the free exercise of religion. It states, “No law may deny or impair freedom of expression, peaceable assembly, association or petition” and “No law may be passed respecting an establishment of religion or impairing the free exercise of religion.”

Because of COVID-19-related border closures (and government restrictions to counter COVID-19), some foreign missionaries, church workers, and religious teachers from various churches departed the country. Multiple religious leaders reported many of their staff and congregation members were able to return to the country following the opening of the borders in August. The government continued to provide grants to private, church-affiliated schools for nonreligious activities, and stated it made no distinction between public and private schools in its grant programs. All private schools were either Catholic or Protestant.

In May, Ahmadi Muslim community organizers revived an Ahmadi community center in Pohnpei State when the organizers were able to return to the country via a repatriation flight. Ahmadi Muslims reported that the closure of the center, inactive since 2020, was related to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and was not related to any mistreatment of their community. The Interdenominational Council in Pohnpei stated it encouraged unity among religious groups by addressing local social problems and promoting cooperation among religious communities. Senior government officials regularly met with religious leaders to promote the government’s commitment to freedom of religion.

U.S. embassy officers held discussions with senior government officials and local religious leaders to promote religious inclusion and tolerance, including in Pohnpei, Yap, and Kosrae States.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 101,009 (midyear 2022). According to government statistics, approximately 99 percent of the population identifies as Christian. Several Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church are present in all four states. According to government statistics, 55 percent of residents are Catholic and 42 percent are Protestant. The United Church of Christ is the main Protestant denomination. Other Christian groups include Baptists, Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church, the Apostolic Church, the Salvation Army, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Church of Jesus Christ reports approximately 6,300 members. Jehovah's Witnesses state they have approximately 10,000 followers throughout the country. Other religious groups exist in small numbers, with a variable expatriate population of Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center report, the most recent published on religious groups in the country, 2.7 percent of the population followed folk religions. Informally, many in the country combine Christian beliefs with traditional Indigenous beliefs in spirits, magic, and communing with the dead. Funerals usually include some aspects incorporating traditional beliefs.

In Kosrae State, 90 percent of the population is Protestant, with the United Church of Christ the most prominent denomination. In Pohnpei State, the population is divided evenly between Protestants and Catholics, although more Protestants live on the western side and more Catholics live on the eastern side. In Chuuk State, an estimated 60 percent is Catholic and 40 percent Protestant. In Yap State, an estimated 80 percent of the population is Catholic and the remainder Protestant. Religious affiliation often follows clan lines.

The majority of foreign workers are Filipinos, who number more than 1,000 and are mostly Catholic. The Fijian community comprises around 100 individuals and is predominantly Christian.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution forbids the establishment of a state religion or of governmental restrictions on freedom of religion. The constitution provides for the free exercise

of religion. It states, “No law may deny or impair freedom of expression, peaceable assembly, association, or petition,” and “No law may be passed respecting an establishment of religion or impairing the free exercise of religion.” The constitution also says that the traditions of the country are protected by statute and that if a statute protecting a tradition is challenged as violating rights provided in the constitution, protection of the tradition “shall be considered a compelling social purpose warranting...governmental action.”

Religious entities are required to register as nonprofit organizations to be exempt from taxation.

While there is no religious education in public schools, private schools teach religion in addition to the curriculum established by the Department of Education. The government may fund nonreligious activities in religiously affiliated schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

Because of COVID-19-related border closures, some foreign missionaries, church workers, and religious teachers from the Church of Jesus Christ, United Church of Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists departed the country. The government reopened its borders in August, following which, multiple religious leaders reported many of their staff and congregation members had returned to the country.

The government continued to provide grants to private, church-affiliated schools and continued to state it made no distinction between public and private schools in its grant programs. All private schools were either Catholic or Protestant. There were no non-Christian religious schools in the country.

National and state government events routinely opened and closed with a prayer, invocation, or benediction from a Protestant or Catholic clergy member, and often two, one from each group.

Senior government officials regularly met with religious leaders to promote the government's commitment to freedom of religion.

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

The Ahmadi Muslim community that had previously been established at a community center in Pohnpei State was revived. This occurred once the community organizers who were out of the country during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to return in May via a repatriation flight. Ahmadi Muslims reported that the closure of the center was not the result of any mistreatment of their community. As of year's end, there were followers in two states, with 20 members in the Pohnpei community and 15 members in the Kosrae community, all local converts. Foreign Ahmadi leaders outside the country maintained contact with both groups.

The Interdenominational Council in Pohnpei stated it encouraged unity among religious groups by addressing local social problems, such as drug abuse and suicide, and by assisting the government's task force on efforts against human-trafficking as well as by promoting cooperation among religious communities. Council officials noted that the council met annually with other religious groups in the country to promote unity and cooperation, for example, by implementing measures to assure social distancing at church services.

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

U.S. embassy officials met with senior government officials and local religious leaders to stress the primacy of the constitution and its provisions regarding religious freedom over local laws or practices.

Embassy officials met in Pohnpei, Yap, and Kosrae States with representatives of the Kosrae United Church of Christ, Kosrae Seventh-Day Adventist Church, St. Mary's Catholic Church, Yap Catholic High School, Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, and Pacific Mission Fellowship to discuss religious tolerance, interdenominational cooperation, and ways their congregations could help support local shelters for victims of human trafficking and domestic violence.