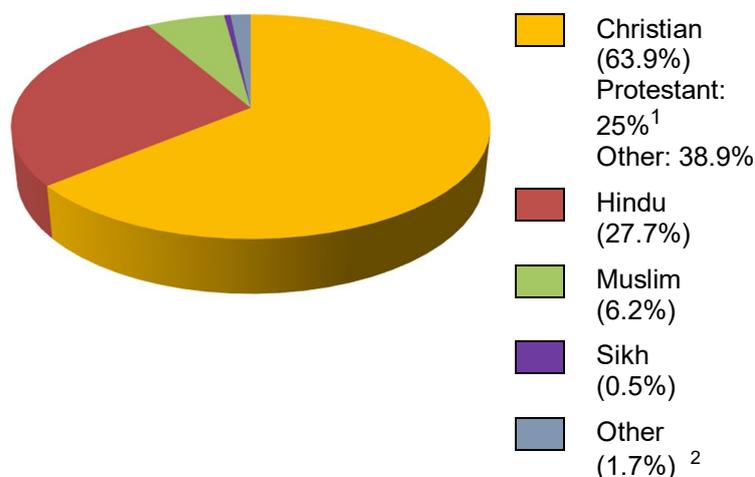
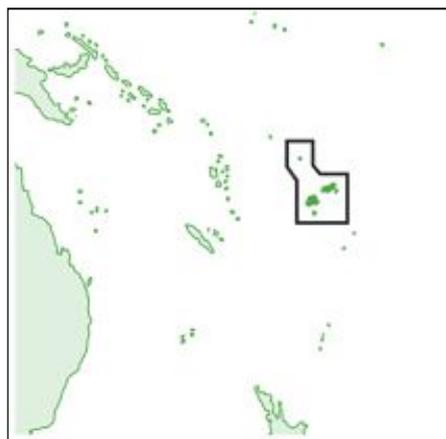


FIJI



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
18,274 km ²	874,742	Democracy	English, Fijian, Hindi

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Since independence from Britain in 1970, Fiji has witnessed considerable political upheaval as rivalries continue between indigenous Fijian and the ethnic Indian communities. Political instability has threatened democracy, with four military coups in 20 years.

In Fiji, religious beliefs are closely linked with racial identity and so directly affect the island's politics. The majority of indigenous Fijians are Christian. Of the total population, according to the 2007 census, 64 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, six percent Muslim and two percent are other faiths or none.

Fiji's former President, Epeli Nailatikau, signed the country's fourth constitution into law in September 2013, implementing a number of changes. These included eliminating race-based and seat quotas, district-based representation, the unelected upper chamber, and the role of the hereditary Council of Chiefs. The constitution declares Fiji a secular state yet it guarantees citizens the right to demonstrate their religion through worship, observance, practice or teaching.

Incidents

The state's distrust of the Church has influenced the constitution to the extent that none of its articles can be disregarded for religious reasons. The largest and most influential of the Christian denominations is the Methodist Church with about 290,000 members, or about one-third of the population. In 2014, the government lifted restrictions which had prevented the Methodist Church from holding its annual conference from 2009 to 2011 after allegations that the Church had become too political.³ Methodist ministers had been accused of being on the payroll of the ousted Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua government (SDL) and of spying on the military before the 2006 coup. The ban was lifted following an announcement by Church leaders that stated the Church was apolitical. Clergy who wished to contest the elections were required to resign and were banned from endorsing a particular political party or candidate.

In 2013, the government accused the Catholic Church of spreading misinformation. Prime Minister Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama said that the Church risked aggravating public opinion by making remarks criticising the new constitution. Archbishop Peter Loy Chong of Suva was reported

by Fides news agency in 2013 as voicing his misgivings about the constitution, saying: “We are concerned about whether a secularist state wants to reduce faith to a purely individualistic matter.”

Many religious organisations including Anglican, Catholic, Hindu, Methodist and Muslim groups operate numerous schools, and several missionary groups are involved in social welfare, health, and education projects. Non-governmental organisations brought together different religious groups to promote respect and understanding of traditions.

Prospects for Freedom

During the period under review, there were reports of harassment of religious groups viewed by some as outside the mainstream. Religious groups are required to register with the government under the Religious Bodies Registration Act and permits for church meetings are required. Some religious groups reported that they found it difficult to operate in some villages and smaller islands. Authorities also investigated the vandalism of a Hindu prayer hall at the Nadi Arya Samaj Primary School in April 2014.

¹ Methodist

² <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2014/eap/238296.htm>

³ <http://fijilive.com/news/2013/06/methodist-conference-to-go-on-as-planned/54122>.Fijilive