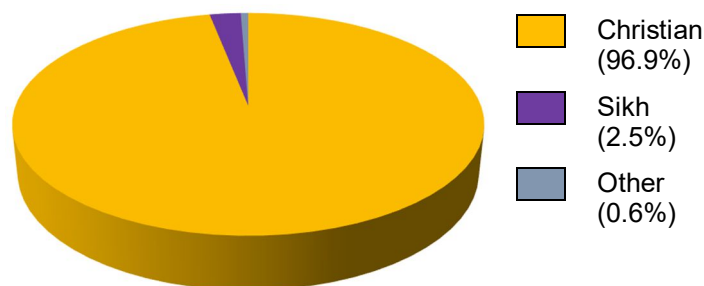
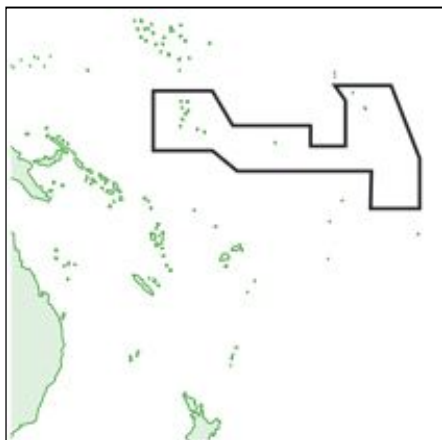


KIRIBATI



Area: 811 km ²	Population: 100,786	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): English, Gilbertese
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Republic of Kiribati, straddling the Equator in the central Pacific Ocean, encompasses the Gilbert, Line and Phoenix Islands. Collectively known as the Gilbert Islands under British rule, the country gained independence in 1979. With a population of little more than 100,000, Kiribati is a small nation spread over 800 square kilometres.

Many citizens in the northern islands converted to Christianity under the influence of the British and American missionaries who travelled there in the late 1800s. With the arrival of Europeans, Christianity became indigenised, and is now an integral part of the Kiribati culture. In 2010, the census showed that 56 per cent of the indigenous population were Catholic, with the majority living in the northern islands. The majority of residents of the southern islands are Protestant and make up 34 per cent of the population.

Although Christianity is predominant religion, there are some adherents of Baha'i faith and Islam. The country's ancient traditional religion built shrines to deities they believed descended in animal form. Pillars of coral limestone and other native material were erected to such beliefs. Despite Christianity's marked influence, there is no state religion and it is noted that spiritualists are probably practising in some areas.

Religious freedom is protected by the law and in the constitution. According to the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, there were some reports of "societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice".¹ As a result, some religious groups, viewed as unorthodox, avoided visiting certain towns where they felt threatened and unwelcome.

Although the government does not favour a particular faith, islanders are predominantly Christian and this is reflected in the constitution which begins "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..."² The government also observes traditional Christian celebrations, and Christmas, Easter and National Gospel Day are national holidays. Governmental assemblies are led by a priest or church official who offers a prayer at the start and end of each meeting.

Chapter II Section 11 declares the protection of freedom of conscience including the freedom of religion, belief and thought.³ The section also details how religious groups can conduct their organisations and asserts that religious communities can establish and manage their own places of education. Citizens also maintain “the right to observe and practise any religion without the unsolicited intervention of members of any other religion”.⁴ The government requires religious groups to officially register their organisation. In order to register a faith, group organisations must have a stipulated minimum membership, yet in practice are not penalised for not registering. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not registered according to the Institute of Religion and Public Policy, yet practises freely.

Incidents

No incidents were reported in the period.

Prospects for freedom of religion

South Tarawa, the capital and hub of Kiribati, comprises about half of the country’s population. Less populated regions are ministered to by local catechists, with intermittent visits by Kiribati clergy. An isolated nation, the priests and Sisters in Kiribati have limited access to religious material or fresh spiritual information. On some of the least populated islands, the ancient culture of Kiribati still thrives and many early structures still stand.

¹ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2013religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222137>

² <http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/Kiribati%20Constitution.pdf>

³ <http://parliament.gov.ki/content/constitution-kiribati>

⁴ Chapter II Section 11, 6b.