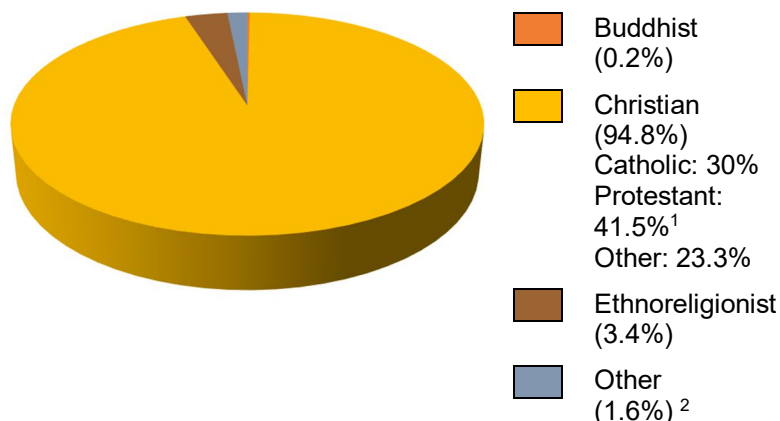


PAPUA NEW GUINEA



Area: 462,840 km ²	Population: 7.2 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Hiri Motu, Tok Pisin, Papua New Guinean Sign Language, English
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Independent State of Papua New Guinea occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea and its offshore islands in Melanesia. The capital, Port Moresby, is located along its south-eastern coast. The country is one of the most culturally diverse in the world, with 848 languages listed. The majority of its seven million inhabitants live in diverse traditional communities in rural areas. Only 18 percent of the population live in urban areas. Papua New Guinea gained independence in 1975, establishing its sovereignty after almost 60 years of Australian rule. The country became a member of the Commonwealth of Nations in its own right as a separate Commonwealth realm with Queen Elizabeth II as its head of state.

There is no state religion and citizens are free to publicly practise any faith they choose providing it does not interfere with the freedom of others. According to the most recent census in 2000, 98 percent of citizens identified themselves as Christian. There are about 5,000 Muslims in the country. Followers of the Baha'i faith constitute less than one percent of the population while the rest hold indigenous beliefs. It is thought that some 34 percent of people who identify as Christian also hold some traditional beliefs.³

During the period under review, the government did not subsidise the practice of religion, instead providing support for institutions such as schools and health services run by the Church. Following independence, the government did not have the funds to take over such institutions and agreed to support their managements on a per-person basis. The government also continued to pay the salaries of teachers and health professionals who were employed by Church-run organisations. The Department of Education continued to allocate one hour per week for religious instruction in all public schools. These lessons were carried out by representatives of the Church and students were not obligated to attend. Children whose parents objected to the classes were excused. Members of non-Christian organisations gave religious instruction during group gatherings outside of school hours.

Although the increase of new missionaries, both Christian and non-Christian, has led some public figures to question the desirability of the establishment of such groups, the government in general has been accepting of new faiths. In December 2014, thousands from various Christian denominations marched through Port Moresby in celebration of religious freedom.⁴ The march was organised by the Adventist Church, capping a major conference on the subject of religious freedom

hosted by the Adventist-affiliated International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) on the campus of Pacific Adventist University. The event was attended by government officials and the leaders of a number of religious faiths in an effort to promote interfaith dialogue. The president of the Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea, Leigh Rice, said the march was a way to acknowledge the freedom that many countries don't have. She said: "We know many of our members around the world live under enormous pressure. How wonderful that this nation grants freedom to us, and not just to us, but to a broad range of religious practices." The government approved a grant of 10,000 kina (\$3,900) for a new local chapter of the IRLA to expand the religious liberty movement in Papua New Guinea. Delilah Gore, Papua New Guinea's minister for community, youth and religion, said the grant and the new chapter of the IRLA would "help us peacefully and sustainably manage our growing religious diversity."

The constitution allows for the right to the "freedom of conscience, thought and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs." This has long been considered to mean that a religion may be practiced or propagated as long as it does not infringe on another person's rights or violate "defence, public safety, public order, public welfare, public health, the protection of children and persons under disability, or the development of under-privileged or less advanced groups or areas." The opening of the constitution highlights the country's connection to Christianity as it ties itself to Christian traditions and principles despite there being no official state religion. It is necessary for religious organisations to register their existence with the government in order to hold a bank account but there have been no reports of groups being denied registration. Non-citizens are free to practise their faith while foreign clergy are permitted to engage in missionary activities while visiting the country.

Incidents

Although Christianity is the prevailing religion, indigenous religious beliefs continue to be widely held. Many people believe in sorcery or witchcraft and according to the website *Every Culture*, within some chief-led societies, hereditary chiefs and their henchmen act as religious specialists.⁵ Men often claim to be in possession of special powers and act as spirit mediums while witches are seen as harmful creatures and are marginalised. In October, a video emerged online of four young women accused of witchcraft being tortured by villagers.⁶ One of the women reportedly died in the attack which took place in the remote Enga province in Papua New Guinea's highlands. The government in Papua New Guinea have reportedly developed an action plan to combat such attacks on women however such incidents have continued to occur. Groups such as the Seed Theatre Group use drama as a communication tool to address current issues affecting Papua New Guinea. In February 2015, two men rescued an elderly woman accused of witchcraft from being tortured just days after receiving training from the Seeds Theatre Group in combatting so-called sorcery killings. The men were able to intervene after they found the woman being tormented by a group of youths for resting near a cemetery so soon after a funeral had finished. The theatre group runs the month-long Women not Witches campaign which gathered support from Church and community groups in the country.⁷

Evidence of increasing intolerance of non-Christian groups has also increased during the time under review. In July 2013, parliament passed a motion to carry out a nationwide consultation on the question of religious freedom and decide whether to ban faiths that are non-Christian. Anderson Agiru, governor of Hela Province, said he believed that all other religions should be banned from the country in a statement that drew widespread criticism and was condemned by the spokesman for Papua New Guinea's bishops. On the bishops' website, Father Giorgio Licini said: "It is not by banning other faiths that we become more Christian. Christianity may well define some sort of cultural identity for modern Papua New Guinea and its 850 tribes; but never forget that true faith is something much beyond constitutional provisions, legal books, and even daily practices. And nobody can be prevented from professing his or her own beliefs both in a private and a public manner."

The government's decision to approve the motion drew concerns from international parties when former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd set out an overhaul of asylum policy in 2013 whereby refugees and asylum seekers looking to settle in Australia would be sent to Papua New Guinea instead. The deal between the two countries - called the Regional Settlement Arrangement – was met with criticism by those who argued that refugees with diverse religious beliefs could not be sent to live in a country which was planning new laws on non-Christians.

In 2013, the speaker of parliament Theo Zurenuoc infuriated the commonwealth state after he destroyed a number of culturally important wooden panels and artefacts within parliament. In what many described as an “evangelical Christian purge”, Mr Zurenuoc removed traditional carvings which he claimed were non-Christian, and said he hoped to replace a thirty-foot high, four-ton totem pole from the parliament's Grand Hall with a more Christian-style pillar.⁸ In order to defend his actions, Mr Zurenuoc took out a four-page newspaper advertisement, however public outcry and an online petition calling for “stronger intervention to protect PNG's cultural heritage from wilful destruction by religious extremists” forced the speaker to delay his plans.⁹ In 2015, the Catholic Professionals' Society announced it would mount a court challenge against Mr Zurenuoc's plans to reform Parliament House's traditional cultural objects and referred him to the Ombudsman Commission for investigation. Mr Zurenuoc's actions have also drawn criticism from other politicians. The former Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Sir Michael Somare, said he believed the speaker may be in breach of section 45 of the constitution by forcing his personal views on religion because Parliamentary approval had not been sought, and the Bulolo MP Sam Basil invited Mr Zurenuoc to “go back to the seminary and become a pastor”.¹⁰ The Trade Union Congress general secretary John Paska also filed a Supreme Court reference to determine whether the speaker's behaviour breached the constitution.

Prospects for freedom of religion

Freedom House's Freedom in the World report for 2015 describes Papua New Guinea as “partly free” receiving a score of four for political rights, three for civil rights and 3.5 as its overall freedom rating on a scale from one (most free) to seven (least free).¹¹ The decrease in ratings from last year's report is in part due to Prime Minister Peter O'Neill's increasingly oppressive leadership style. The report also notes that, although the freedom of religious worship was generally respected in practice, some locals were apprehensive about the recent rapid increase in the Muslim community in the predominantly Christian country.

However according to the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour's International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, there were no reports of significant societal or governmental actions affecting religious freedom.

¹ Protestant Evangelical Lutheran: 20%, United Church: 11.5 %, Seventh-day Adventist: 10%

² http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_175_2.asp

³ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>

⁴ <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/adventists-lead-major-celebration-of-religious-freedom-in-papua-new-guinea>

⁵ <http://www.everyculture.com/No-Sa/Papua-New-Guinea.html?Comments%5Bdo%5D=mod&Comments%5Bid%5D=21>

⁶ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/papua-new-guinea-witches-stripped-naked-tortured-horrific-video-1525394>

⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-11/png-men-rescue-tortured-woman-accused-of-sorcery/6084106>

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/papuanewguinea/10534323/Evangelical-Christian-speaker-of-Papua-New-Guineas-parliament-destroys-evil-pagan-carvings.html>

⁹ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-18/an-png-totem/5166086>

¹⁰ <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/283492/png-s-reformationist-speaker-urged-to-become-a-pastor>

¹¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/papua-new-guinea>