



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **70.5%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **28.0%**
- Others : **1.5%**

2,304,000

581,730 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Constitution of the Republic of Botswana^[1] of 1966, amended in 1994 and 1997, guarantees “freedom of conscience”, which includes “freedom of thought and of religion, freedom to change his or her religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and both in public and in private, to manifest and propagate his or her religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance” (article 11). In section 2, it continues: “Every religious community shall be entitled, at its own expense, to establish and maintain places of education and to manage any place of education which it wholly maintains; and no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community in the course of any education provided at any place of education which it wholly maintains or in the course of any education which it otherwise provides.” It finally states (section 3) that “Except with his or her own consent (or, if he or she is a minor, the consent of his or her guardian) no person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if that instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his or her own.”

Religious groups must register with the Registrar of Societies at the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, but the process is usually simple and only takes a few months. There are no particular legal benefits for registered organisations. That said, unregistered religious groups cannot sign contracts, conduct business or open bank accounts.

In March 2015, the government raised the minimum membership threshold for registration for new religious groups from 10 to 250 members. Previously registered groups were not affected by the amendment^[2]

The government observes the following religious holy days as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, and Christmas Day. Although the country only recognises Christian holidays, members of other religious groups are allowed to observe their feasts without government interference.

Botswana is predominantly Christian, but it is home to important religious minorities such as Baha'is, Muslims (mostly of South Asian origin) and Hindus, usually migrant foreign workers. A growing percentage of the population that is nominally Christian appears to adhere to no religious beliefs. The government acknowledges religious pluralism and encourages inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

Incidents

During the reporting period, no serious incidents or acts of intolerance, discrimination or persecution against any religious group were observed. This notwithstanding, on 10th January 2018 the media reported that the government had withdrawn registration for the Enlightened Christian Gathering Church International. The government issued a public statement that the Church had failed to respond to an official letter asking Church leaders to explain why they solicit “miracle money”, regarded as illegal by the state authorities. Likewise, other groups linked to the Church were also ordered to cease their operations. Local and international media reported that the Church is led by Pastor Bushiri, a renowned religious leader in southern Africa famous for his preaching style involving make-believe miracles.^[3]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Botswana is one of the few African countries which have had a well-established democracy since independence, where there is a strong tradition of rule of law and respect for basic human rights, including religious freedom. The country is likely to continue along this path. Similarly, there are no signs of a breakdown in respect for religious minorities and continuing peaceful relations between faith groups. The aforementioned incident involving the Enlightened Christian Gathering Church International appears to be primarily an issue of fraud and law enforcement.

Endnotes / Sources

1 Constitution of Botswana, World Intellectual Property Organization, www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/bw/bw008en.pdf (accessed 8th February 2018).

2 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, ‘Botswana’, Report on International Religious Freedom for 2016, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 8th February 2018).

3 ‘Botswana shuts controversial pastor’s church’, BBC Africa Highlights, 10th January 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-africa-42461278> (accessed 8th February 2018).