



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **64.0%**
- Hindus : **27.6%**
- Muslims : **6.2%**
- Agnostics : **1.0%**
- Others : **1.2%**

898.000

18.272 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

In Fiji, religious belief is closely linked with ethnic identity. Figures from the 2007 census show that the majority of indigenous citizens are Christians, while the majority of Fijians of Asian descent are either Hindu or Muslim. Around a third of the population are Methodists.

Under the constitution of 2013, religion and the state are separate and freedom of religion is a founding principle of the secular state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion and incitement to religious hatred has been criminalised. Under the constitution, “no person shall assert any religious belief as a legal reason to disregard this Constitution or any other law”.[1]

Religious instruction is not required by law, but religious groups may establish their own places of education provided that they maintain any standard prescribed by law. Property is held by religious groups through trustees, after registration with the government.

The principle of religious freedom is generally respected in practice.

## Incidents

The Prime Minister has consistently accused the Methodist Church of being a campaigning organ for the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), and the Church has expressed its disappointment at such comments[2] In August 2017, the Methodist Church stated that it wanted all heads at its schools to be Methodists. In response, the Permanent Secretary for Education stated that this was not constitutionally possible.[3]

In September 2016, the Parliament suspended an opposition lawmaker who had allegedly incited racial antagonism towards the country's Muslim minority. In December 2017, the former Acting Director of Public Prosecutions questioned whether appropriate action was being taken against people who were inciting antagonism on social media against Muslims in Fiji.<sup>[4]</sup>

A trial of three staff members of the *Fiji Times* newspaper was set for June 2018.<sup>[5]</sup> They are charged with inciting communal antagonism towards Muslims in Fiji by publishing a letter which contained the following statements: "Muslims are not the owners of this country. These are people that have invaded other nations [...] where they killed and raped their women and abused their children."<sup>[6]</sup> The accused have entered not guilty pleas.

There is a recent history of attacks on Hindu property. On 16<sup>th</sup> December 2017, the Votualevu Tirath Dham Hindu Temple in the Nadi area was desecrated. Paint was poured over images, and there were other various acts of theft and vandalism. The Attorney-General said such acts would not be condoned.<sup>[7]</sup>

The Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, has continued to emphasise the bonds that unite all Fijians, whatever their religion. For instance, in a speech to the Canadian Society of Fijian Muslims, in April 2017, he observed: "Fiji Day is our chance to reflect on the ties that connect us as members of the same extended Fijian family. Let us all remember that those ties are not defined by our ethnicity, our religion, our gender or our status in society, but rather they are defined by the love we share for our great country."<sup>[8]</sup> At Easter 2017, the former Leader of the Opposition, Ro Teimumu Kepa, defended religious freedom as an "absolute, fundamental human right"<sup>[9]</sup>

The government has issued a \$2 banknote bearing the image of a Sikh man and this has been seen as a recognition of the contribution that Sikhs have made to the country.

## Prospects for freedom of religion

Religion, ethnicity and politics are closely intertwined in Fijian society and it is sometimes difficult to isolate the religious and cultural elements in discriminatory incidents. In the not too distant past, there have been discriminatory laws and policies in Fiji against ethnic Indians, as well as cultural tensions within society. Now society appears to have largely moved on from these problems. Despite periodic incidents, the principle of religious freedom is regularly articulated in the public sphere in Fiji. There is little to indicate change in the immediate future.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Fiji Constitution of 2013, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org), [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Fiji\\_2013.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Fiji_2013.pdf?lang=en), (accessed 17 February 2018).

[2] Nasik Swami, 'PM upsets Church', *Fiji Times*, 25 April 2013, <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=39800>, (accessed 17 February 2018).

[3] Nemani Delaibatik, 'Constitution Protects Religious Freedom', *Fiji Sun*, 21 August 2017, <http://fijisun.com.fj/2017/08/21/editorial-constitution-protects-religious-freedom/>, (accessed 17 February 2018).

[4] Jyoti Pratibha, 'Rayawa questions comments against Muslim communities', *Fiji Sun*, 12 December 2017, <http://fijisun.com.fj/2017/12/10/rayawa-questions-comments-against-muslim-community/>, (accessed 17 February 2018).

[5] Dhanjay Deo, 'Judge Outlines what the prosecution has to prove in sedition trial of Fiji Times', *Fiji Village*, 12

December 2017, <http://fijivillage.com/t/Judge-outlines-what-the-prosecution-has-to-prove-in-sedition-trial-of-Fiji-Times-and-others-9sk52r/>, (accessed 17 February 2018).

[6] Fonua Talei Suva, 'High Court Judge Dismisses Defence Objections In Fiji Times Case,' 30 November 2017, <http://fijisun.com.fj/2017/11/30/high-court-judge-dismisses-defence-objections-in-fiji-times-case/>, (accessed 8 March 2018).

[7] 'Hindus Angry at Attack on Temple', Current Triggers, 23 December 2017, <http://www.currenttriggers.com/world/fiji-temple-terror/>, (accessed 17 February 2018).

[8] 'Bainimarama speech to Canadian Society of Fijian Muslims', The Fijian Government, 10 April 2017 <http://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Center/Speeches/HON-PM-BAINIMARAMA-FIJI-DAY-SPEECH-TO-CANADIAN-SO.aspx> (accessed 17 February 2018).

[9] Tevita Vuibau, 'Religious Freedom is absolute', Fiji Times, 15 April 2017, <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=396783> (accessed 17 February 2018).