



# New Guinea

## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **94.9%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **3.3%**
- Others : **1.8%**

7.776.000

462.840 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Independent State of Papua New Guinea includes the eastern half of the island of New Guinea and some offshore islands in Melanesia. It is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world with 848 languages. Most of its nearly eight million inhabitants live in traditional rural communities. Only 18 percent of the population live in urban areas.

There is no official state religion in Papua New Guinea. However, the preamble to the constitution pledges “to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now.”<sup>[1]</sup> Under article 55 of the constitution, all citizens have “the same rights, privileges, obligations and duties” regardless of their religion. According to article 45, section 1, the individual’s right to freedom of religion includes the “freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs in such a way as not to interfere with the freedom of others”. Article 45 also states: “No person is entitled to intervene unsolicited into the religious affairs of a person of a different belief, or to attempt to force his or any religion (or irreligion) on another.” The right to religious freedom may under article 303 be qualified by law in the interests of “defence”, “public safety”, “public order”, “public welfare”, “public health”, “the protection of children and persons under disability” or “the development of underprivileged or less advanced groups or areas”. It is not subject to derogation under emergency laws.

Under article 42, section 2 of the constitution, no one is compelled “to receive religious instruction or to take part in a religious ceremony,” but this excludes religious instruction given to children with the consent of a parent or a guardian. Currently, it is Department of Education policy to allow an hour of religious instruction per week. Although these sessions are not mandatory, most students attend.<sup>[3]</sup> In January 2017, the Chief Secretary to Government, Issac Lupari, brought forward a proposal to add Bible Studies to school curricula.<sup>[3]</sup> In November 2017, he announced that the government would make religious education a compulsory subject in 2019. He believes that this is necessary to help address some of

the social ills in Papua New Guinean society and to assist personal development.<sup>[4]</sup>

Churches provide around half of the country's health and education services.<sup>[5]</sup> The government subsidises these services on a pro rata basis. It also pays the salaries and employment benefits of staff at these institutions, as it does for staff at public institutions. At Church-run organisations, healthcare and education are provided to patients and students regardless of the religious beliefs.<sup>[6]</sup> In 2016 the government cut funding to Church-run health centres by 50 million kina (US\$ 20 million), a move Churches attribute to the government seeking to shift the financial burden onto them.<sup>[7]</sup> At the end of 2017 Christian Health Services reported that they had not received salaries for their employees for four months and announced that, as a consequence, the services were threatened with closure.<sup>[8]</sup>

In order to obtain corporate legal status, religious groups must register with the authorities. This enables them to own properties, benefit from limited liability and also to qualify for certain tax exemptions. The government is not reported to have refused registration to any group that has submitted an application.<sup>[9]</sup>

Foreign missionaries and other religious workers may apply for visas to enter the country under the "special exemption category" provided they are not engaged in "business activities" on behalf of the Church (which require a different type of visa).<sup>[10]</sup> Applicants need a letter of sponsorship from a religious organisation within Papua New Guinea and must pay a small application fee. These visas are valid for three years. There are no reports of visa applications being refused.

Papua New Guinea celebrates the following days of the Christian calendar as national holidays: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, Easter Monday and Christmas. There is a National Day of Repentance on 26th August, also a public holiday.<sup>[11]</sup> Official public events often open and close with Christian prayer.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Incidents

Near the end of 2013, a controversy broke out in Papua New Guinea when the speaker of the Parliament, Theodore Zurenuoc, removed or destroyed indigenous artefacts from Parliament House. He described the latter as "ungodly images and idols" and planned to replace them with Christian symbols. On 31st May 2016, the Supreme Court ordered that the artefacts be reinstated.<sup>[13]</sup> While leaders from the Lutheran Renewal Church and the Assemblies of God supported the speaker's actions, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomons criticised him.<sup>[14]</sup>

The Papua New Guinea Council of Churches (PNGCC) is an ecumenical movement founded in 1965. Its members include the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the United Church, the Anglican Church, the Baptist Union, the Salvation Army and the Gutnius Lutheran Church. It also has a large number of associate members.<sup>[15]</sup> Papua New Guinea's Seventh Day Adventists and Pentecostals are not members. The PNGCC promotes dialogue between members and social welfare projects, and occasionally intervenes in public debates.

By far the worst social incidents are violent attacks inspired by belief in sorcery (sanguma). This belief has its roots in traditional Melanesian understandings of the workings of spirits and is still relatively widespread. The 1971 Sorcery Act, which allowed sorcery as a defence to a murder charge, was not repealed until 2013. Attacks on those accused of sorcery remain commonplace.<sup>[16]</sup>

In November 2017, a six-year-old girl accused of sorcery was attacked in Enga province. She was rescued by a small group of people, including an American missionary, and was treated for multiple burns sustained from heated bush knives. In 2013, the girl's mother had been stripped, bound and set on fire with petrol before a large crowd of people in Papua New Guinea's third-biggest city, Mount Hagen. The mother, named Keparari Leniata, had also been accused of sorcery.<sup>[17]</sup>

In January 2018 alone, there were two high-profile incidents. In early January, the country's Chief Justice, Sir Salamo Injia, was ambushed because his tribe had failed to pay compensation for a man's death, apparently due to sorcery. The

incident followed the kidnapping and torture of two women from the judge's tribe, who had been accused of sanguma.<sup>[18]</sup> In a separate incident the same month, residents from a village north of Port Moresby attacked a man they thought had used witchcraft to cause the death of rugby star Kato Ottio during a training session.<sup>[19]</sup>

The Papua New Guinean justice system has struggled to hold those accused of sorcery-inspired attacks to account, mainly because communities protect the perpetrators and are unwilling to give evidence against them. However, in January 2018 almost 100 people in Madang were convicted for the sorcery-related killings of seven people in 2014.<sup>[20]</sup> The police commission has launched an anti-sorcery taskforce, but it reportedly lacks the resources it needs to operate effectively.<sup>[21]</sup> There are also grass-roots initiatives to try to tackle the problem of attacks.

The Australian immigration detention centre on Manus Island has attracted international attention. In October 2017, the Australian government said it would fund "transit centres" as an alternative arrangement for migrants, and provide healthcare, benefits and security. Refugees on the island have been the victims of a spate of robberies and assaults. In February 2018, three men from Iraq, Iran and Pakistan were transferred to hospital with multiple injuries.<sup>[22]</sup> These attacks have sometimes been construed as anti-Muslim; however, criminal violence is a major challenge in Papua New Guinea and this often has a tribal and ethnic, rather than religious, connotation. Certain areas are also plagued by so-called "rascalism" (the local term for street criminality).

## Prospects for freedom of religion

In July 2013, Parliament passed a motion to carry out a nationwide consultation on the question of religious freedom to decide whether to prohibit non-Christian religions.<sup>[23]</sup><sup>[23]</sup> At that time, some feared that this would result in intolerance towards other beliefs. In fact, the proposed consultation never took place after the Constitutional Review Commission reported that such a ban would violate religious freedom.<sup>[24]</sup> The latter is generally respected in Papua New Guinea, and there is little reason to believe that the situation will deteriorate in the foreseeable future.

## Endnotes / Sources

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