



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **88.4%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **9.1%**
- Agnostics : **1.2%**
- Others : **1.3%**

1,304,000

17,363 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Officially renamed the “Kingdom of eSwatini” in April 2018 by King Mswati III, Africa’s last absolute monarch, the small, landlocked country of Swaziland has increasingly become a haven for refugees from other parts of the continent^[1] Most of the displaced persons come from East Africa.^[2] Swaziland has also become a temporary – or even permanent – home for people from the neighbouring countries of Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Because of its proximity to the large and economically strong South Africa, Swaziland is a favourite destination for waves of refugees waiting for a chance to cross the border. At the same time, the situation of immigrants in Swaziland worsened considerably following an extreme drought in 2015-2016. Almost all of the countries of southern Africa were hit by the drought and in some regions suffered poor or failed harvests. The negative consequences of the natural disaster are still noticeable.

Swaziland has great religious diversity but the vast majority of the population are Christians. As well as Protestant, Anglican and Catholic communities, there are independent African Churches. These are organised in the Council of Swaziland Churches (CSC).^[3] Around 40 percent of the population are believed to profess a mix of Christian and traditional African religious rites. In Swaziland, this hybrid form is referred to as African Zionism^[4]

The 2005 constitution of Swaziland recognises and protects freedom of religion. Section 20 (Sub-section 2) of the constitution states: “[...] a person shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, tribe, birth, creed or religion, or social or economic standing, political opinion, age or disability.”^[5] As Sub-section 3 clarifies: to “discriminate” means to give different treatment to different persons.” Section 23 (Sub-section 1) includes the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The constitution also protects the “freedom of worship either alone or in community with others”.

The right to practise non-Christian religions is protected by traditional laws and customs as interpreted by the traditional courts and the 360 village chiefs. In their communities, the chiefs are empowered to advocate on behalf of a particular form of belief if this is linked to local traditions.^[6]

Religious groups seeking to build new places of worship in cities are required to obtain the approval of the authorities. In rural areas, this is subject to the permission of the village chiefs.^[7] Communities that define themselves as Christian must register with one of the three national, non-denominational associations: League of Churches, Swaziland Conference of Churches or Council of Swaziland Churches. The communities can subsequently receive a recommendation for state registration and register with the Ministry of Justice.^[8] The Council of Swaziland Churches comprises Anglicans, Catholics (as observers), Mennonites, Episcopalians and Methodists.^[9] The League of Churches represents the Zionist Church and the other independent, African churches.^[10] The Swaziland Conference of Churches represents the Evangelicals.^[11] The three organisations work together in rural development projects and general mission matters.

Religious education is a compulsory subject in the primary schools of Swaziland and an elective in secondary schools.^[12] The curriculum provides for the inclusion of all faiths. However, all religious instruction taught in schools is from a Christian perspective. Muslims have complained about this.^[13] The only religious youth groups permitted in schools are Christian. In many state-run schools, groups of volunteers conduct public prayers and liturgical celebrations. Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day and Christmas Day are among the country’s official holidays.^[14]

Many of the organised Christian religious activities are supported by the government and the country’s royal family. State radio and television broadcast Christian religious programming. Non-Christian groups have protested as they are not granted any airtime.^[15]

Incidents

There have been isolated reports of religious discrimination in Swaziland. These particularly affect non-Christian groups in rural areas. The country’s two major newspapers – the state-owned Swazi Observer and the independent Times of Swaziland – have repeatedly published comments calling for the abolition of Muslim-run businesses operating in rural areas by people who are relatively recent immigrants, in order to make room for local ethnic Swazis.^[16] Relations between different faith groups has come under strain in times of economic hardship.

The role of the royal family of Swaziland has not gone unchallenged. King Mswati III has been criticised for promoting the construction of a large church in the traditional capital city of Lobamba (large-scale religious observances in Swaziland were previously celebrated in stadiums).^[17] The newsweekly African Independent estimates the cost of building the cathedral, which would provide seating for 30,000 worshippers, at the equivalent of around US\$157 million.^[18] Activists are critical of calls for local fund-raising to support the project. According to Sibusiso Nhlabatsi, of Swaziland Lawyers for Human Rights, a majority of the population of Swaziland rely on foreign aid.

Prospects for freedom of religion

There is no current threat to religious freedom but tension is resulting from political and economic factors. The government’s increasingly repressive policies towards the opposition and the country’s continuing economic difficulties do

give cause for concern. The human rights situation in the country, which has been the object of international criticism, includes disproportionate use of force by state security operatives, extrajudicial killings, and inadequate state protection for vulnerable groups such as women, children, and people with disabilities.^[19] It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that these developments will undermine relations between religious communities which hitherto have been largely peaceful.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Cf. UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Swaziland, 13th July 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/57cd691f4.html>, (accessed on 13th February 2018); UNHCR, Statement by the Minister of Home Affairs of the Kingdom of Swaziland, 3rd October 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/excom/announce/57f39a3d7/statement-of-swaziland.html?query=Swaziland>, (accessed 12th April 2018).

[2] Data for 2016. See 'Refugees in Swaziland', WorldData.info, <https://www.worlddata.info/africa/swaziland/asylum.php>, (accessed 13th February 2018).

[3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Swaziland', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 2nd April 2018).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Swaziland's Constitution of 2005, constituteproject.org, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Swaziland_2005.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 13th February 2018).

[6] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2016), op. cit.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] 'Council of Swaziland Churches', World Council of Churches, <http://archived.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/regions/africa/swaziland/csc.html>, (accessed on 13th February 2018).

[10] League of African Churches, Wikipedia (Swedish), https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/League_of_African_Churches, (accessed 13th February 2018).

[11] 'Homepage', The Swaziland Conference of Churches, <http://scc.org.sz/>, (accessed 13th February 2018).

[12] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2016), op. cit.

[13] Mark Babatunde, 'Swaziland Criticized for New Education Religion Ban', Face2Face Africa, 26th January 2017, <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/swaziland-religion-ban>, (accessed 17th April 2018).

[14] 'Public holidays in Swaziland', Wikipedia (English), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_holidays_in_Swaziland, (accessed 13th February 2018).

[15] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2016), op. cit.

[16] Cf. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Swaziland', International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2014religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 2nd April 2018); Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2016), op. cit.

[17] Katholische Nachrichtenagentur (KNA), 'Großkirche statt Stadionnutzung', domradio.de, 3rd March 2016,

<https://www.domradio.de/themen/weltkirche/2016-03-03/koenig-von-swasiland-plant-umstrittenen-kirchenbau>, (accessed 13th February 2018).

[18] Musa Ndlangamandla, 'Mswati's \$157m church', African Independent, 26th February 2016, <https://www.africanindy.com/southern-africa/saved-from-a-life-of-crime-1630109>, (accessed 17th April 2018).

[19] 'Swaziland 2016/2017', Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/swaziland/report-swaziland/>, (accessed 13th February 2018).