



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **93.5%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **4.5%**
- Baha'is : **1.4%**
- Others : **0.6%**

270.000

12.189 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Vanuatu is a group of over 80 islands in the South Pacific. Around 65 of these are inhabited.

The preamble to the constitution states that Vanuatu is “founded on traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles”.<sup>[1]</sup> The constitution recognises that “subject to any restrictions imposed by law on non-citizens, all persons are entitled to [...] freedom of conscience and worship”. This right is “subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in defence, safety, public order, welfare and health”. A person who believes that this constitutional right has been infringed is entitled to apply to the Supreme Court. This judicial remedy exists “independently of any other possible legal remedy”. The Supreme Court may make any order that it considers appropriate, including an order for damages.

There is no established church. The largest Christian denominations are Presbyterians (27.9 percent), Anglicans (15.1 percent), Seventh Day Adventists (12.5 percent) and Catholics (12.4 percent)<sup>[2]</sup>. Smaller Christian groups include Assemblies of God, the Church of Christ and the Neil Thomas Ministry. There are also a number of Jews, Baha'is and Muslims. The Jon Frum cargo cult is a politico-religious group which has a small number of adherents on Tanna island.

The Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) is a non-governmental organisation comprising the Presbyterian Church, the Catholic Church, the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church and the Church of Melanesia; the Assemblies of God and the Seventh Day Adventists are observer members.<sup>[3]</sup> Events of national significance are celebrated with Christian prayer, led by the member Churches of the VCC.

Under the Education Act of 2014, children may not be refused admission to a school or treated less favourably because of their religion. Secondary state schools provide religious education for an hour a week, which is overseen by the VCC<sup>[4]</sup>

The government pays the salaries of teachers at Church schools which were opened before 1980 and makes grants to Church schools.<sup>[5]</sup> Under the Education Act of 2014, parents may excuse their children from religious education.

Registration of religions with the government was introduced in 1995 but the law was repealed two years later. The reintroduction of compulsory religious registration at the state level has been considered at various points since then. Religious groups may register as charitable organisations.

The Government of Vanuatu generally respects the religious freedoms set out in the law.

## Incidents

In August 2016, the government announced that, for the first time, it would start paying 10 million vatu (£66,000) per annum to the VCC. The Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Vanuatu and New Caledonia stated that the funds would be used to support the Churches in their work in local communities.<sup>[6]</sup>

On 21<sup>st</sup> October 2016, the VCC organised a march through Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu. The Chairman of the VCC, Pastor Nafuki, is reported to have said: "It is timely to let other religions know that the Republic of Vanuatu is built on Christian principles and faith in God."<sup>[7]</sup> He also said that the constitution should be amended to state: "Vanuatu is a Christian Country that believes in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit." Although the VCC is a member of the Constitutional Review Committee, there is no sign that this constitutional change has made any progress. Pastor Nafuki expressed concern about the presence of Islam in Vanuatu and this is an ongoing issue in the media in Vanuatu.

MPs and ministers did not take part in the march in October 2016. In April 2016, however, the Minister of Internal Affairs had also spoken about the need for the constitution to express more clearly the Christian identity of Vanuatu, in the context of concerns about freedom of worship and "control on religious movements entering the country"<sup>[8]</sup>

In December 2016, more than 50 churches within the region came together in Vanuatu for a meeting of the Pacific Islands Evangelical and Missionary Network.<sup>[9]</sup> In March 2017, the University of South Pacific in Vanuatu announced that, for the first time, religious groups would need to register and obtain approval before being allowed to operate on its campus.<sup>[10]</sup> In July 2017, the newly sworn-in president, Obed Moses Tallis, pledged to uphold the constitution and to seek to maintain unity within the cultural and religious diversity of the country.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

There is little to indicate imminent changes to the situation of religious freedom in Vanuatu, but the preservation of the Christian identity of the country is a matter of some public concern.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Vanuatu's Constitution of 1980 with Amendments through 1983, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org), [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Vanuatu\\_1983.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Vanuatu_1983.pdf?lang=en), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[2] 'Vanuatu', The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nh.html>, (Accessed 11th March 2018).

[3] 'Vanuatu Christian Council', Member churches, World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/pacific/vanuatu/vcc>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[4] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Vanuatu', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jonas Cullwick, 'Bishop Ligo Supports Government Grant to VCC', Vanuatu Daily Post, 8 September 2016, [http://dailypost.vu/news/bishop-ligo-supports-government-grant-to-vcc/article\\_3e719f14-374e-5af4-9a28-0e74392eac61.html](http://dailypost.vu/news/bishop-ligo-supports-government-grant-to-vcc/article_3e719f14-374e-5af4-9a28-0e74392eac61.html), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[7] Len Garae, 'VCC proclaims Vanuatu for God', Vanuatu Daily Post, 22 October 2016, [http://dailypost.vu/news/vcc-proclaims-vanuatu-for-god/article\\_e445a762-ee1c-5269-8f01-4374a65217a1.html](http://dailypost.vu/news/vcc-proclaims-vanuatu-for-god/article_e445a762-ee1c-5269-8f01-4374a65217a1.html), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[8] Godwin Ligo, 'Change needed to Freedom of Worship in Constitution', Vanuatu Daily Post, 26th April 2016, [http://dailypost.vu/news/change-needed-to-freedom-of-worship-in-constitution-maoh/article\\_6368a352-5876-5928-89f5-27ae503eaad3.html](http://dailypost.vu/news/change-needed-to-freedom-of-worship-in-constitution-maoh/article_6368a352-5876-5928-89f5-27ae503eaad3.html), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[9] Harrison Selmen, 'Over 50 churches uniting in Vanuatu for PIEMN', Vanuatu Daily Post, 1st December 2016, [http://dailypost.vu/news/over-churches-uniting-in-vanuatu-for-piemn/article\\_68d83788-c597-528b-bfa5-5e57944479f9.html](http://dailypost.vu/news/over-churches-uniting-in-vanuatu-for-piemn/article_68d83788-c597-528b-bfa5-5e57944479f9.html), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[10] Ruben Bakeo Markward, 'Restriction of Sharing Faith at Emalus Campus', Vanuatu Daily Post, 25th March 2017, [http://dailypost.vu/opinion/letters\\_to\\_editor/re-restriction-on-sharing-faith-at-emalus-campus/article\\_dec61baa-ebcc-5688-880b-aa82134e65ad.html](http://dailypost.vu/opinion/letters_to_editor/re-restriction-on-sharing-faith-at-emalus-campus/article_dec61baa-ebcc-5688-880b-aa82134e65ad.html), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[11] Godwin Ligo, 'President's speech', Vanuatu Daily Post, 8th July 2017, [http://dailypost.vu/news/president-s-speech/article\\_5a7b11d1-cfa2-5efd-bb83-b43594360f2c.html](http://dailypost.vu/news/president-s-speech/article_5a7b11d1-cfa2-5efd-bb83-b43594360f2c.html), (accessed 17th February 2018).