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Timor-Leste

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were isolated reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 5,406 square miles and a population of 1.1 million. According to a 2005 report from the World Bank, 98 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 1 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim. Protestant denominations include Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also a number of small, nondenominational Protestant congregations. Most citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices, which they do not see as incompatible with their formal religious affiliation.

The country had a significant Muslim population during the Indonesian occupation, composed mostly of ethnic Malay immigrants from Indonesian islands. There also were a few ethnic Timorese converts to Islam, as well as a small number of descendants of Arab Muslims living in the country while it was under Portuguese colonial rule prior to 1975. The latter group was well integrated into society, but ethnic Malay Muslims often were not, and only a few hundred remained in the country following independence in 2002.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no official state religion; however, Catholic values remain prominent in the political life of the country. Members of Protestant and Muslim communities also have some political influence and have held high positions in the executive and legislative branches of government and in the military.

Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and nondiscrimination, including religious nondiscrimination.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Christmas, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha.

Since 2007 the secretary of state for security has had authority to register religious organizations; however, this agency had not yet developed registration procedures by the end of the reporting period.

A 2003 law on immigration and asylum states that "foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the defense and security forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency." Based in part on this law, immigration authorities established residence and visa fees for foreigners residing in the country. Missionaries and other religious figures were exempt from paying these fees.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were several isolated reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities generally were friendly in the capital of Dili; however, outside of the capital, non-Catholic religious groups were sometimes viewed with suspicion.

During the reporting period, credible sources reported six incidents of societal abuses and discrimination in the country against a Protestant denomination established by foreign missionaries. No fatalities were reported.

There have been reports that in Los Palos, Viqueque, and Liquica, students have been discriminated against because they are Protestant. These reports have included allegations that school directors and teachers have forced students out of school and not allowed other students to take the end-of-the-year exams. In some cases, students have had to move to Dili to finish their education.

In July 2009 a Brazilian Protestant missionary was beaten in Maliana, reportedly by a group of young Catholics. A formal complaint was filed, but no arrests were made. Although the missionary continues to work in the area, he fears for his safety.

In March 2009 a Protestant missionary church in Ainaro reported their two churches were illegally locked to prevent services from being held. United Nations Police and the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL) reportedly spoke with the instigators who refused to remove the lock and said the Protestant church should leave. The case was brought before a local court. The judge sent three orders for both churches to be re-opened but the PNTL never executed the judge's

orders. The local district attorney reportedly sent a letter to the judge stating that he refused to accept the court orders to re-open the churches. The two churches remain locked at the end of the reporting period.

In 2008 a group of approximately 800 persons conducted a prayer vigil outside a Protestant missionary church in Aileu to press for its closure. The PNTL arrived at the scene and unsuccessfully attempted to disperse the crowd. On the following day, a contingent of the Portuguese Republican National Guard (GNR) arrived on the scene and dispersed the crowd peacefully. The GNR reminded the protestors that Timor-Leste is a democracy and that freedom of religion is protected and enshrined in its constitution. Protests at the missionary church in Aileu began the month before the prayer vigil when a group of local residents and youth appeared at the newly built Protestant church and threw stones at the building. The protestors insisted the country is a Catholic nation, demanded the missionaries leave, and then dispersed voluntarily after a couple of hours. Windows were broken, but no injuries were reported. Following the incident, local authorities asked the church to temporarily suspend its activities. The church reopened two weeks later after making repairs. At the end of the reporting period, the office of the prosecutor general was continuing to investigate the incidents.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. government regularly expresses support to government leaders for consolidation of constitutional democracy, including respect for basic human rights such as religious freedom.

In addition, the U.S. government maintained a dialogue with members of the parliament during their deliberations on legislation affecting religious freedom. The U.S. government encouraged the justice sector to develop institutions to promote the rule-of-law and ensure respect for religious freedom as provided for in the constitution.

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