



## **Panama**

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2004**

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, with some qualifications, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The country has an area of 30,193 square miles, and its population is approximately 2.9 million. According to a 1998 nationwide survey conducted by the Comptroller General's Office of Statistics and Census, 82 percent of the population identify themselves as Roman Catholic, 10 percent as evangelical, and 3 percent as unaffiliated with any religious group. Recent unofficial estimates indicate the evangelical population is closer to 15 to 20 percent, while Roman Catholic affiliation is declining. The remaining 5 percent of the population includes the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), with an estimated 15,000 members, Seventh-day Adventists, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Episcopalians with between 5,000 and 9,000 members, and other Christians. It also includes small but influential Jewish and Muslim communities, each with about 10,000 members; Baha'is, who maintain one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship; and recent Chinese immigrants practicing Buddhism.

Members of the Catholic faith are found throughout the country and at all levels of society. Evangelical Christians also are dispersed geographically but tend to be from the lower socio-economic stratum. The mainstream Protestant denominations, which include Lutheran, Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist, Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA), and Baptist congregations, derive their membership from the Antillean black and the expatriate communities, which are both concentrated in Panama and Colon Provinces. The Jewish community is largely concentrated in Panama City. Muslims live primarily in Panama City and Colon, with small but growing concentrations in David and other provincial cities. The vast majority of Muslims are of Lebanese, Palestinian, or Indian descent.

Many religious organizations have foreign religious workers in the country. The Mormon Church has the largest number (176). Lutherans, the Southern Baptist Convention and Seventh-day Adventists each have a much smaller number of missionaries; many are from other Central American countries.

### **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

#### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution recognizes Roman Catholicism as "the religion of the majority" of citizens, but it does not designate the Roman Catholic Church as the official state religion. Roman Catholicism's numerical predominance and the consideration given to it in the Constitution generally have not prejudiced other religions. However, Catholicism does enjoy certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths.

The Constitution provides that religious associations have "juridical capacity" and are free to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same as other "juridical persons." The Ministry of Government and Justice grants "juridical personality" through a relatively simple and transparent process that does not appear to prejudice any religious organizations. Juridical personality allows a religious group to apply for all tax benefits available to nonprofit organizations. There were no reported cases of religious organizations being denied juridical personality or the associated tax benefits.

Foreign missionaries are granted temporary 3-month religious worker visas upon submitting required paperwork, which includes an AIDS test and a police certificate of good conduct. A 1-year extension customarily is granted with the submission of additional documentation. Foreign religious workers who intend to remain longer than 15 months must repeat the entire application process. Such additional extensions usually are granted. Catholic religious workers from outside the country benefit from a streamlined administrative process that grants them 5-year work permits.

The Constitution dictates that Catholicism be taught in public schools, although parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Department of Immigration does not grant religious worker visas or work permits to members of the Unification Church. Officials based this decision on an alleged proliferation of deceptive religious worker visa applications, as well as certain Unification Church practices (such as mass marriages) that officials believed are contrary to the constitutional requirement that religious conduct respect Christian morality. The Unification Church has not appealed the decision.

The Constitution strictly limits the type of public offices that religious leaders may hold. The Constitution prohibits them from holding public office, except as related to social assistance, education, or scientific research.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. The Roman Catholic Church, despite losing membership through increasing conversions to evangelical and other Christian denominations, generally has not reacted defensively. Similarly, most Protestant groups are not strongly anti-Catholic. Aggressive evangelical Protestant criticism of "new" religions, such as of Mormons or of Jehovah's Witnesses, is not widespread. The Jewish community has generally harmonious relationships with other faiths.

Mainstream denominations, including the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Methodist churches, participate in a successful ecumenical movement directed by the nongovernmental Panamanian Ecumenical Committee. The committee sponsors inter-religious conferences to discuss matters of faith and practice and plans joint liturgical celebrations and charitable projects. In conjunction with the University of Santa Maria la Antigua, the committee sponsors the Institute for Ecumenism and Society, which conducts its own conferences and issues ecumenical publications. The committee also is a member of the Panamanian Civil Society Assembly, an umbrella group of civic organizations that conducts informal governmental oversight and has been the driving force behind ethical pacts on the treatment of women and youth, civil society, responsible journalism, and decentralization. The Ecumenical Committee is also part of a larger umbrella group of approximately three dozen business, political, religious, and civic groups forming the United Nations Development Program-sponsored Vision 2020 group. Vision 2020 seeks to develop consensus goals for addressing issues of pressing concern, such as democratic institutions, economic development, ethics, and environmental sustainability.

In August 2003, the Episcopal Church celebrated 150 years of Anglican presence in the country. The Church hosted a number of events throughout the year attended by government officials and religious leaders of all faiths.

Over the last decade, local religious leaders have become more outspoken in the ongoing debate on corruption. Religious leaders of all faiths urged the Government to continue efforts to ensure that the national elections, held in May, were fair and transparent. Evangelical leaders and adherents sought an increased role in the country's politics.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy increased its outreach efforts to both the evangelical and Muslim communities through activities such as inviting community leaders to Embassy events and attending religious meetings. Embassy officials also have met with religious leaders to discuss human rights and the promotion of democracy and civil society.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35549.htm)