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Panama

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, with some qualifications; however, 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 in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total 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 evangelicals, and 3 percent as unaffiliated with any religious group. There are also small but statistically identifiable congregations--approximately 34,000--of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Episcopalians (approximately 9,000 members), and other Christians. Many recent Chinese immigrants still practice Buddhism. The country has small but influential Jewish (approximately 10,000 members) and Muslim (approximately 5,000 adherents) communities, and is home to 1 of the world's 7 Baha'i Houses of Worship.

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 a lower socio-economic stratum. The mainstream Protestant denominations derive their membership from the Antillean black and expatriate communities, both concentrated in Panama and Colon provinces. The wealthy, relatively large, and influential Jewish community is largely concentrated in Panama City. Muslims live primarily in Panama City and Colon, with smaller concentrations in David and other provincial cities.

Many religious organizations have foreign religious workers in the country. For example, as of May the Mormons had about 105 missionaries in the country, and the Lutheran Church had 7. As of 1999, the latest

figure available), the Southern Baptist Convention had 22 foreign missionaries. The Seventh-day Adventists had 8 foreign missionaries, all from neighboring Central American nations.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for free exercise of all religious beliefs, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected; however, despite the qualified nature of this right, the Government generally respects religious freedom 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 Panamanians" but 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 Roman Catholic Archbishop of Panama enjoys privileges and immunities not afforded to other religious leaders, and usually reserved for government officials.

The Constitution provides that religious associations have "juridical capacity" and are free to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by the law, the same as other "juridical persons." The Ministry of Government and Justice grants "juridical personality" through a relatively simple, transparent process that does not appear to prejudice religious institutions. Juridical personality allows a religion to apply for the full array of tax benefits available to nonprofit organizations. There were no reports of cases in which religious organizations were 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, less onerous, documentation. Foreign religious workers who intend to remain in Panama more than 15 months must repeat the entire 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.

During 2001-2002, the Government reached agreement with a number of religious organizations over the acquisition of title to properties that these groups occupied in the former Panama Canal Zone. These agreements enabled several of the religious organizations to move ahead with new plans for these properties, including the construction of a temple by the Mormons.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Department of Immigration no longer grants religious worker visas or work permits to members of the Unification Church. Officials based their decision on allegedly deceptive religious worker visa applications, as well as certain Unification Church practices (such as mass marriages) that officials believed ran contrary to the constitutional requirement that religious conduct respect Christian morality. The Unification Church has not

The Constitution strictly limits the type of public offices that ministers of religious faiths may hold. The Constitution prohibits clerics 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 the 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

Relations among the different, mostly Christian, faiths are generally harmonious. The Roman Catholic Church, despite losing membership through growing defections to evangelical and other Christian churches, generally has not reacted defensively. Similarly, most Protestant groups active in the country are not militantly anti-Catholic. Aggressive evangelical Protestant criticism of "new" religions, such as Mormons and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses) is not widespread.

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 Ecumenicism and Society, which conducts its own conferences and issues ecumenical publications. The Ecumenical 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 some 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 May 2001, the Jewish congregation Kol Shearith celebrated its 125th anniversary. Government officials and members of the Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, Buddhist, and more than 30 other religious communities attended the commemoration, which was billed as a celebration of religious freedom.

Over the last decade, local religious leaders have become more outspoken in the ongoing debate on corruption. Panama City Catholic Archbishop Jose Dimas Cedenio has spoken out several times in the past two years, asking that the Government investigate and remedy corruption. Episcopalian Bishop Julio Murray maintained a high profile as a member of the Government's Truth Commission, which investigated deaths and disappearances during the period of military rule.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog

human rights and the promotion of democracy and civil society.

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