



## Panama

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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 3.2 million. According to the most recent official government estimate (1998), 82 percent of the population identifies itself as Roman Catholic and 10 percent as evangelical Christian. A 2003 Cid-Gallup poll indicated that approximately 24 percent of the adult population was evangelical Christian. Smaller religious groups include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) with an estimated 16,000 members, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Episcopalians with between 5,000 and 9,000 members, Jewish and Muslim communities with approximately 10,000 members each, Hindus, Buddhists, and other Christians. The Baha'is maintain one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship in the country. Indigenous religions include Ibeorgun (among Kuna) and Mamatata (among Ngobe).

Members of the Catholic faith are found throughout the country and at all levels of society. Evangelical Christians also are dispersed geographically and are becoming more prominent in society. The mainstream Protestant denominations, which include Southern Baptist Convention and other Baptist congregations, United Methodist, Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas, and Lutheran, derive their membership from the Antillean black and the expatriate communities, both of which are concentrated in Panama and Colon provinces. The Jewish community is concentrated largely 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 (155). Lutherans, the Southern Baptist Convention, and Seventh-day Adventists each have a much smaller number of missionaries; many are from other Latin 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.

Catholicism enjoys certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths. 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. The Constitution dictates that Catholicism be taught in public schools; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction. The numerical predominance of Catholicism and the consideration given to it in the Constitution generally have not prejudiced other religions.

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.

Most foreign religious workers are granted temporary 3-month missionary 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, but one religious group complained that the extension can take up to 4 months. Foreign missionaries who intend to remain longer than 15 months must repeat the entire application process. Such additional extensions usually are granted. Catholic priests and nuns and Jewish rabbis are eligible for a special 5-year visa.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Constitution limits the type of public offices that religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, or scientific research.

In March 2005, the Ombudsman's Office began mediating the complaint of a Rastafari child denied access to public school because he refused to cut his hair.

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.

#### Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

#### Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. The 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. The Jewish community has generally harmonious relationships with other faiths.

Christian denominations, including the Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Salvation Army churches, participate in a successful ecumenical movement directed by the nongovernmental Panamanian Ecumenical Committee. The committee members also have an interreligious committee that includes Jewish Reform, Islamic, Buddhist, Baha'i, Hindu, and Ibeorgun faiths. The Ecumenical Committee sponsors interreligious conferences to discuss matters of faith and practice, and it plans joint liturgical celebrations and charitable projects. 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.

Over the last decade, local religious leaders have become more outspoken in the ongoing debate on corruption. Evangelical leaders and adherents have 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 the Muslim community by visiting community leaders outside of Panama City. The Embassy also increased its outreach to indigenous religious groups by meeting with the Kuna Cultural Congress in Kuna Yala.

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