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Panama

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and 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 societal abuses or 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 30,193 square miles and a population of 3.3 million. The government does not collect statistics on religious affiliation, but various sources estimate that 75 to 85 percent of the population identifies itself as Roman Catholic and 15 to 25 percent as evangelical Christian. Smaller religious groups include Episcopalians, who number between 7,000 and 10,000 members; Seventh-day Adventists; other Christians; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), with an estimated 36,000 to 38,000 members; Jehovah's Witnesses; Jewish and Muslim communities, with approximately 10,000 members each; and Hindus, Buddhists, and Rastafarians. Bahais, with an estimated 3,000 members, maintain one of the world's seven Bahai houses of worship. Indigenous religions include Ibeorgun (among Kuna), Mamatata and Mamachi (among Ngobe Bugle), and Embera (among Embera).

Catholics are found throughout the country and at all levels of society. Evangelical Christians also are dispersed geographically, and 30 percent of the population in the metropolitan areas of Panama City and Colón identifies itself as evangelical Christian. According to a 2009 Gallup poll, 24 percent of the population identifies itself as evangelical

Christian. 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 Afro-Antillean and the expatriate communities, both of which are concentrated in Panama and Colón provinces. The Jewish community is centered largely in Panama City. Muslims live primarily in Panama City and Colón, with a smaller but growing presence in David and other provincial cities. The vast majority of Muslims are of Lebanese, Palestinian, or Indian descent, of which 80 percent identify as Sunni.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected.

Catholicism enjoys certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as "the religion of the majority" of citizens but does not designate it as the official state religion.

The constitution grants religious associations "juridical capacity," meaning they 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. 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 associated tax benefits.

Under immigration law most foreign religious workers are granted temporary missionary worker visas that must be renewed every two years for up to six years total. Catholic priests and nuns and Jewish rabbis are eligible for a special, automatic six-year visa.

The constitution dictates Catholicism be taught in public schools; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction. The numerical predominance of Catholics and the consideration given to Catholicism in the constitution generally have not prejudiced other religious groups.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday and Christmas Day.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The constitution limits public offices that religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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. Representatives of the U.S. embassy met regularly with various religious groups to engage in dialogue as well as to implement special programs.

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