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Panama

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, with some qualifications, 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 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. Baha'is, with an estimated 3,000 members, maintain one of the world's seven Baha'i 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. Evangelical Christians are becoming more prominent in society. 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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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

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.

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.

During the first half of 2010, Jehovah's Witnesses reported to the minister of education that the government had distributed ninth-grade geography textbooks that contained defamatory language about several religious groups. The Ministry of Education reported that the textbook was distributed in two versions, with and without the defamatory language. The defamatory version was limited to 1,000 copies, a small percentage of the total. The ministry reached an agreement with the publisher to provide replacement pages.

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 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 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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